

## Final Evaluation Report

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Your Details	
<b>Full Name</b>	Marko Nikolić
<b>Project Title</b>	Fighting Negative Impacts of Tradition on Biodiversity by Education III – raising awareness
<b>Application ID</b>	34161-D
<b>Date of this Report</b>	22.08.2023.

**1. Indicate the level of achievement of the project's original objectives and include any relevant comments on factors affecting this.**

Objective	Not achieved	Partially achieved	Fully achieved	Comments
Creating "Folk beliefs and wildlife" film series				<p>The phase encompassed planning and scenario development, team organisation for movie production, stakeholder engagement, and extensive video filming to comprehensively cover crucial aspects. The strategic planning of filming activities held paramount importance, including the formulation of conservation-centric messages, formulating the interview questions, refining visual and auditory components, selecting locations and scenes, and refining narrative elements such as design, text, tone, and dialogue.</p> <p>The footage was captured across more than 20 protected areas in Serbia, with whom collaborative partnerships were fostered during project execution. The resulting film has been tailored to cater to all age groups and can be accessed through the following <a href="#">link</a>.</p>
Monitoring programs and research fieldwork				<p>The planned monitoring programmes, i.e., research activities, were effectively started in 2021, with the majority of these initiatives continuing into 2022 and 2023, accompanied by contractual adaptations and the incorporation of supplementary endeavours.</p> <p>The ornithological monitoring programme and sociological research within the confines of Nature Park "Radan" were executed seamlessly, perpetuating the collection of avian-related data and identifying potential threats to the avifauna in this designated area. Simultaneously, a comprehensive survey involving 50 local residents was undertaken. Employing our prior questionnaire, the objective was to comprehend and mitigate the</p>

			<p>detrimental influence of conventional beliefs and cultural heritage on the bird population within this nature park. Protected area managers provided co-funding support for the research activities.</p> <p>Book promotions were conducted at the premises of the SE "Srbijašume", "Toplica" Regional Unit, in Kuršumljia. The entire circulation of the book given to the protected area managers was disseminated to park visitors and during professional gatherings where our team showcased project results and advancements. Our collaboration within the project piqued the interest of SE "Srbijašume", a public enterprise in charge of 52.8% of protected areas in Serbia. This collaboration resulted in a joint publication titled "Birds of Radan". Additionally, ornithofauna monitoring was initiated in the regions of NP Stara Planina and SP Lazarev Kanjon, both managed by this organisation. 2024 is earmarked for the inception of sociological research, following the model set by the Radan Nature Park.</p> <p>Exploration of bat fauna at the Natural Monument "Resavska Cave" and Natural Monument "Lisine" was undertaken in 2021. Collaborating with chiropterologist, Dr. Ivana Budinski, our research team initiated a monitoring programme for bat fauna within these protected areas. In collaboration with the Biological Society "Dr. Sava Petrović," the research contract was expanded in accordance with the protected area management to encompass research on flora and other faunal groups in these locations. The partnership was continued during 2022 and 2023, accompanied by a promotional event for our project deliverables, including a documentary and a new publication. These sites are esteemed tourist destinations within Serbia, further enhancing our outreach. Sociological research, conducted as an auxiliary activity, involved surveying 50</p>
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			<p>participants from neighbouring settlements. Similar to other areas, book promotions and distributions occurred here, while the film created by our team was provided to, the protected area managers and is being screened every weekend at the visitor centre adjacent to the area.</p> <p>Regarding tortoise research, a longstanding monitoring programme was initiated at the Kunovica site in 2010, spearheaded by the Department of Biology and Ecology of the Faculty of Science and Mathematics in Niš. Funding stemmed from the Serbian Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, as well as the Forest Management "Niš." From 2016 to 2019, this monitoring effort received additional support from my preceding RSG projects.</p>
Making a publication (a book) about negative impact of various local beliefs that may constitute grounds for over-harvesting of wildlife.			<p>In collaboration with the members of Biological Society "Dr. Sava Petrović," we successfully produced the Serbian-language book addressing traditional beliefs as influential factors in wildlife endangerment. This comprehensive publication not only delves into the intricate realm of traditional beliefs but also incorporates crucial details regarding the IUCN species status and the legal safeguards outlined within national and international legislation. The success of this book is exemplified by the fact that the entire print run (all 100 copies) was disseminated to partner organisations, protected area managers, institutions, visitors of protected sites, schools, as well as students and pupils.</p>
News and social media promotion			<p>This activity was consistently implemented throughout the entire duration of the project.</p>
Education in primary and secondary schools			<p>Our collaboration with primary and secondary schools persisted, encompassing the dissemination of information to students regarding our ongoing initiatives and new insights into the impact of local beliefs on wildlife.</p>

			<p>Furthermore, our strategy entailed expanding the school network to foster enhanced cooperation. Lectures were conducted at schools in various locations, including Niš, Kragujevac, Despotovac, Šabac, Majdanpek, Grdelica, Vlasotince, Leskovac, Prahovo, Vršac, Boljevac, Merošina, Užice, Čajetina, Vranje, Belgrade, and others, amounting to a total of more than 30 schools.</p>
<p>Holding a lectures through our projects' "micro grant" system</p>			<p>Regarding this matter, we consulted with The Rufford Foundation and reached an agreement to make changes in the initial plan. During the project drafting phase in our country, there existed the opportunity to provide tax-exempt grants to volunteers. However, recent legislative alterations have rendered it unfeasible for legal entities to offer such grants to volunteers without subjecting them to taxes (such disbursements are now classified as personal income outside the context of employment). The tax on each grant could reach 40-50%, significantly diminishing the amount allocated for volunteers.</p> <p>During a team meeting, an innovative solution emerged: redirecting this budget towards lectures in selected schools. Project team members could utilize the funds for travel expenses and sustenance through official travel arrangements. Collaborating with volunteers, they would then deliver lectures at nearby schools. With the RF's consent, this aspect was revised. Volunteers and team members subsequently conducted over 40 presentations at schools throughout Serbia, where collaborations between volunteers, members of the Society, and partner organisations were mutually agreed upon.</p>
<p>Making and printing of promotional material</p>			<p>As planned, we successfully prepared and developed promotional materials including t-shirts, three-fold brochures, printed pencils, stickers, and calendars. Almost all of the promotional materials</p>

			<p>were distributed to schools, protected area managers, collaborating public entities, survey participants, and students from local universities.</p>
<p>Movie and book promotion</p>			<p>We showcased our outcomes, unveiled our new book, and presented the documentary at the annual conferences hosted by the State Enterprise for Forest Management "Srbijašume" in Ivanjica (2021) and in Boljevac (2022). Additionally, adhering to our plans, we coordinated the promotional event for the documentary and new book alongside the Protected Area Managers at JP "Resavska pećina." However, our promotion efforts extended to collaborations with SE "Srbijašume" in Knjaževac, Boljevac, and Kuršumljica. Moreover, we orchestrated a promotional event at the "Natural History Center of Serbia" located in Svilajnac.</p>
<p>Promotion at universities</p>			<p>Following the publication of the book, the project team arranged its promotional activities, commencing at the Faculty of Sciences and Mathematics at the University of Niš, and subsequently extending to universities in Novi Sad, Belgrade, and Kragujevac. Subsequently, a promotional event was held at the "Natural History Center of Serbia" in Svilajnac.</p>

**2. Describe the three most important outcomes of your project.**

**a). Educational Media Creation:** Through the collaborative efforts of our team and partner organisations, we successfully developed a groundbreaking book and an educational film. These multimedia resources serve the purpose of raising awareness about the persistence of traditional beliefs among the citizens of Serbia, which have historically contributed to wildlife harvesting, harm, and displacement. By presenting these issues to a broad audience, we aim to address these threats by fostering greater understanding and knowledge.

**b). Monitoring Programmes:** Our project saw the expansion of monitoring initiatives, building upon the foundation of previous RF projects. We continued our participation in the Hermann's tortoise monitoring programme in Kunovica within Nature Park "Sićevačka Klisura." Furthermore, we initiated additional monitoring programmes: ornithological and sociological research in Nature Park "Radan", National Park "Stara planina", Natural Monument "Lazarev kanjon" and bat fauna research at Natural Monuments "Lisine" and "Resavska Cave." These monitoring

efforts allowed us to gather vital data and insights for informed conservation strategies.

**c). Education and Community Engagement:** Our project focused on educating local communities about wildlife and dispelling misconceptions related to its protection. Through discussions held at various locations, we successfully shifted perspectives and fostered an understanding of Serbian wildlife vulnerability and legal safeguards. Collaborating with 50 schools and four universities, our team conducted over 70 lectures that disseminated knowledge and raised awareness among students, locals, and officials. This comprehensive educational approach aimed to cultivate appreciation for species conservation and positively influence attitudes and behaviours, thereby limiting human impact on endangered species and habitats.

### **3. Explain any unforeseen difficulties that arose during the project and how these were tackled.**

During the course of our project, an unexpected challenge surfaced, prompting us to devise a creative solution. Initially, our project had allocated funds for tax-exempt grants to volunteers, which was a viable option based on the prevailing regulations. However, we encountered a significant obstacle when legislative modifications were enacted, causing these grants to be subject to substantial taxation (up to 40-50% of the grant amount). This change threatened to curtail the financial support we intended for our volunteers.

In response to this unanticipated hurdle, our team convened and brainstormed potential remedies. During these discussions, an innovative alternative emerged: redirecting the budget designated for grants towards organising educational lectures within schools. This solution entailed utilising the funds for travel expenses and other logistical necessities linked to delivering lectures. This reimagined approach not only circumvented the tax-related issue but also provided an avenue for greater outreach and engagement with local communities.

Upon receiving approval from the RF, we swiftly implemented this adjusted strategy. Subsequently, our team, alongside dedicated volunteers, successfully conducted more than 40 educational presentations at schools across Serbia. These sessions not only disseminated valuable knowledge about wildlife conservation but also fostered collaborative relationships between volunteers, our organisation, and partner institutions.

In essence, this unforeseen challenge prompted us to pivot our approach and leverage the obstacle as an opportunity for expanded community engagement and education. The flexibility and adaptability of our team were instrumental in turning this difficulty into a positive outcome, aligning with our overarching goal of raising awareness and contributing to effective conservation efforts.

#### **4. Describe the involvement of local communities and how they have benefited from the project.**

The local communities played an integral role in our project, offering valuable insights and unique perspectives. Through data collection and surveys conducted within the protected areas of Nature Park "Radan," Natural Monument "Resavska Cave," and Natural Monument "Lisine," we engaged with a total of 100 individuals. These interactions provided us with previously inaccessible information, allowing us to tap into local folklore and its connection to wildlife. The community members willingly shared stories, anecdotes, superstitions, and historical myths related to animal harvesting and traditional beliefs, enriching our understanding of the subject.

Field research and sociological investigations were carried out by a dedicated team of 11 BSDSP members. Our collaboration extended to educational institutions as well, where we interacted with students from various primary and secondary schools, promoting awareness about local beliefs and their impact on wildlife. Across approximately 50 schools, we delivered around 70 lectures, each lasting a school period. The scale of these lectures, attended by classes ranging from 11 to 26 students, reached a substantial number of both primary and secondary school students.

Lectures at prestigious universities, including the University of Niš, Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Kragujevac, garnered significant attendance—approximately 200 students and professors combined. These lectures shed light on our activities, the conservation status of wildlife, and the legal obligations and regulations pertaining to nature conservation.

Our engagement extended to the creation and dissemination of educational and promotional materials. The complete range of promotional materials was distributed across the aforementioned activities, including the circulation of 100 copies of the book.

The documentary film we produced was showcased at all conducted school and university lectures, as well as during presentations at the offices of protected area managers. Moreover, visitors to these areas have the opportunity to view the film daily at the visitor centre. A portion of our promotional materials is also available at the Center and the premises of the State Enterprise "Srbijašume."

We extend our sincere gratitude to all collaborating institutions for their support and partnership. Moving forward, we are committed to sustaining our educational endeavours by collaborating with biology teachers. The positive rapport established with local residents in our research areas fuels our motivation to further enhance our educational program. By continuing these efforts, we aspire to achieve even greater success in raising awareness about the critical importance of biodiversity preservation.

## **5. Are there any plans to continue this work?**

Yes, our team has pioneered systematic research on the influence of local beliefs on biodiversity in Serbia, marking a unique effort in the country. We are among the few groups actively engaged in educating and raising awareness among the local population. Our accomplishments are substantial; we have gathered extensive data on the impact of myths and legends within local communities. These insights have laid a strong foundation for understanding beliefs and attitudes, especially concerning wildlife. The significance of this collected data extends to combating illegal poaching and conserving species facing decline in Europe.

Our dedication to this cause will continue. Our future efforts involve expanding our research dataset across the entire country to provide a comprehensive understanding. Collaborations with stakeholders, NGOs, schools, government institutions, protected area managers, and the Institute for Nature Protection of Serbia have proven fruitful, yet we aim to broaden this network further. Partner organisations possess valuable resources, making them pivotal to our ongoing work. Maintaining these relationships and intensifying our focus on community and student education is paramount. We recognise the importance of local community education and will strive, with support from foundations such as The Rufford Foundation, to facilitate both continued research and educational initiatives for preserving biodiversity.

The journey ahead encompasses multiple aspects. We plan to produce additional documentary films on the subject, leveraging their captivating nature to reach a diverse audience. Translating an expanded edition of our book into English is on the horizon, extending its accessibility beyond our borders. In collaboration with Biological Society "Dr. Sava Petrović" and the Faculty of Sciences and Mathematics we aim to continue and enhance monitoring programmes. This approach will include socio-ecological research, offering us insights into the contemporary human impact on wildlife populations. Thus, our commitment to advancing understanding, raising awareness, and implementing conservation measures remains steadfast.

## **6. How do you plan to share the results of your work with others?**

In terms of disseminating our achievements to the wider public, we are pleased to have garnered significant media coverage, including appearances on national television and in newspapers. Our team members had the privilege of making two guest appearances on the nationally broadcasted "Prva TV," reaching a diverse audience and sharing insights about our project and its activities.

Looking ahead, we have comprehensive plans for sharing the results of our work. With regard to education and distribution, our team will revisit schools to conduct presentations for new generations of primary and secondary school students, particularly focusing on regions like Niš, Vranje, Leskovac, and Babušnica, where our organisation has established consistent collaborations and engagement with students in our activities.

In alignment with our practice, we will continue to utilize social networks, websites, and collaborations with partner organisations to publish research findings and project updates. We will ensure that our most significant findings are presented through a scientific paper, accessible to the general public via various media channels and platforms, including ResearchGate.

Engagement with symposia and annual gatherings of protected area managers in Serbia will persist, providing us with opportunities to showcase our achievements and garner support. Our results have already been presented at these gatherings, demonstrating the impact of our work to relevant stakeholders.

Furthermore, the results of both this project and my previous RSG project have been incorporated into a published paper:

Nikolić, M., Savić-Zdravković, D., Crnobrnja-Isailović, J. 2021: Evaluation of ecological awareness and superstition on Hermann's tortoise in Eastern and Southern Serbia. *Biologica Nyssana*, 12(2): 159-165. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5759870>

Also, Gratitude to The Rufford Foundation is highlighted in the following paper:

Stojanović, J., Nikolić, M., Savić-Zdravković, D., Žabar-Popović, A., Milovanović, A., Stojadinović, D., Crnobrnja-Isailović, J. 2023: Blood cell morphology of *Testudo hermanni boettgeri* wild populations from Serbia. *North-Western Journal of Zoology*, [In press]

Additionally, my doctoral dissertation, titled "Comparative features of Hermann's Tortoise (*Testudo hermanni* Gmelin) populations from eastern and southeastern Serbia in regard to structure, habitat choice and anthropogenous impact" which has been supported by The Rufford Foundation, contributes a valuable part of dataset. As a standard practice in Serbia, my dissertation is publicly accessible ([link](#)), and we plan to screen our documentary film during my dissertation defence at the university.

In collaboration with MMD Studio from Niš, we intend to adapt our documentary for submission to festivals, highlighting The Rufford Foundation's crucial support. Our goal is to present the film at domestic and international film festivals, aiming for success similar to our previous video, "The Hidden Corners of Serbia," which received notable recognition. Once showcased at festivals, the film will be shared on YouTube and disseminated via social media, partner organisations' platforms, local and national television, and media outlets.

The documentary film will continue to be showcased at visitor centres under the management of protected areas. This strategic approach will ensure that visitors to these centres have the opportunity to view the film and gain insights into our project's accomplishments. Moreover, we intend to provide copies of the film to all protected area managers who possess tourist visitor centres, enabling them to share the documentary within their respective premises. This concerted effort aligns with our commitment to disseminate the results of our work to a broad audience, effectively extending the reach of our project's impact.

Furthermore, we will statistically analyse our collected data and publish our findings in the form of original scientific papers. Our plan includes submitting two additional papers to international journals with high impact factors. The results of our project will also be presented at national and international conferences in the years ahead, ensuring that our work reaches broader academic and professional communities.

## **7. Looking ahead, what do you feel are the important next steps?**

Looking ahead, our key objectives encompass sustained research efforts and an intensified focus on educating the population about the adverse effects on wildlife arising from superstitions and traditional practices. Given the deep-rooted nature of these beliefs, it's imperative to invest significant effort in raising awareness about the vulnerability of wildlife. Prioritising education among young individuals, students, and local residents is pivotal for effective nature conservation. We are committed to fostering continued research and education within the community, with the overarching goal of preserving biodiversity.

Our strategic approach involves a proactive conservation awareness campaign that encompasses a range of activities. These include townhall meetings, engagements with primary and secondary schools, collaborations with universities, and media campaigns to inform and enlighten the local populace. Building on our network of partner organisations is essential, and we are dedicated to both expanding and strengthening it.

Creating fresh publications and educational materials, particularly in video format, holds immense significance for long-term mitigation of this issue. Disseminating educational content on widely viewed television channels dedicated to nature, leveraging endorsements from activists and influencers on social media, along with collaboration with nature protection advocates who can reach diverse audiences, will be focal points for our future efforts.

Lastly, we emphasise the continued importance of our monitoring programmes, especially for Hermann's tortoise, birds, bats, and other vulnerable species. These endeavours will help us quantify the extent of human impact on these populations over extended periods, enabling us to develop informed conservation strategies and track progress.

## **8. Did you use The Rufford Foundation logo in any materials produced in relation to this project? Did the Foundation receive any publicity during the course of your work?**

The appreciation and financial support from The Rufford Foundation were prominently acknowledged in both our documentary film and the published book. Throughout the project's implementation, we featured The Rufford Foundation's logo on promotional materials, including t-shirts, which were distributed among volunteers, colleagues, and protected area managers as a means of recognition. Additionally, the foundation's visibility was heightened through active promotion across our society's and partner organisations' social media platforms. The

acknowledgment of the foundation's support and its logo were prominently featured in all conducted school presentations, symposiums, and published scientific papers. Furthermore, our gratitude to the foundation will continue to be expressed in upcoming scientific publications. The foundation's logo played a crucial role during conferences and presentations, underscoring its role in our endeavours. The spirit of gratitude was further demonstrated through the recognition extended in our future work.

#### **9. Provide a full list of all the members of your team and their role in the project.**

The project team consisted of individuals with diverse expertise and responsibilities:

**PhD Dimitrija Savić Zdravković:** Responsible for promotional material design, project activity promotion, book design, documentary filming, and scenario development.

**Danica Popović:** Journalism student at the Faculty of Philosophy and volunteer at "Media Reform Centar," contributed to social media promotion, conducted media campaigns, scenario development and played a vital role in sociological research. Her engagement significantly enhanced education-related activities.

**MSc Milan Ilić, MSc Ana Samaradžić, MSc Anđela Vučković, MSc Aleksandra Janković, and MSc Aleksandra Zdravković:** Essential in organizing lectures, promotional activities, and educational efforts.

**Marko Nikolić:** Led monitoring programs and coordinated collaboration with stakeholders, communication, book writing, nature footage collection, scientific paper writing, presentation at conferences, and overall project coordination.

**PhD Jelka Crnobrnja-Isailović:** Served as a supervisor, drawing from over 30 years of conservation biology experience. Her guidance was invaluable in publishing project results, designing experiments, and data analysis. Her expertise extended to myths, legends, and traditional beliefs' impact on people's attitudes toward wildlife.

The project also fostered collaborations with experts across various fields such as ornithology, conservation biology, chiropterology, writing, and ethnology. These professionals shared our vision and contributed their expertise to the project's success. The dedication of volunteers from BS "Dr. Sava Petrović," along with the volunteer networks of partner NGOs including NIDSBE "Josif Pančić," BID "Josif Pančić," EID "Mladen Karaman," NGO "HabiProč," and "Social Awareness Advancement Center – Super Građanin," was instrumental across all project activities.

#### **10. Any other comments?**

I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to The Rufford Foundation for their invaluable support. Your understanding of the significance of conservation and research work, particularly for young scientists like myself is truly remarkable. Your support has not only bolstered our efforts but has also fuelled our passion to overcome obstacles

and persist in our pursuits. We eagerly anticipate the prospect of future collaborations with your esteemed foundation.

Furthermore, I am deeply indebted to the RF for granting me the opportunity to realise my fourth project. The financial support provided by RF has enabled my dedicated team and me to uncover a wealth of new insights that hold immense implications for the protection of both vulnerable and critically endangered species in Serbia. This journey has been immensely enriching, and we remain resolute in our commitment to further research in this field, with the hopeful continuation of RF's financial backing.

Best regards from Serbia!



Logo of the project.  
Design by Dimitrija Savić-Zdravković



Design by: Dimitrija Savić-Zdravković



Mock-up of the book



Design by: Dimitrija Savić-Zdravković



Project team members presenting at the annual conference organized by State Enterprise for Forest Management "Srbijašume" – Ivanjica, Serbia 2021



Project team members presenting at the annual conference organized by State Enterprise for Forest Management "Srbijašume" – Boljevac, Serbia 2021



Educational Brochures





The educational edition "Birds of the Radan Nature Park" that we produced in cooperation with the managers of protected areas.

Scenes from "Folk beliefs and wildlife" film series





