

In Serbia: Old Mountain Renewed

Vesna Kostic, Sr Communications Officer in the World Bank Belgrade Office, offers this story.

Stanko Pejic couldn't believe his eyes when he and his flock of sheep came home after spending the summer in a mountain pasture. His old house, dirt-floored, without an indoor toilet, was renovated, with new tiles on the floors and indoor plumbing. He and his wife hosted a group of tourists last spring, something that would have been unthinkable a year ago.

Not far away, Gordana Tosic tells the same story. "I never had a job and my husband was laid off. We came back to Gostusha since this house now gives us the opportunity to make money out of tourism."

Life is coming back to Gostusha, a village on Serbia's famous Old Mountain. Until recently, Gostusha was fading away, the village's traditional architecture and way of life vanishing, taking a piece of Serbia's heritage with them.

Rebirth in an Old Place

With support from the World Bank, the Serbian Government is offering small grants, tempting people back to deserted villages. Tourism in Gostusha, Senokos, and Dojkinci are helping do that. Through farming and tourism, the grants aim to bring life back to these lovely hills and pastures. Sergej Ivanov helps run the grants program. "Rural tourism is giving local people the opportunity to stay in the village and to have the motivation to live there."

The project also finances small repairs to roads and other infrastructure, as well as trails for hiking and biking. It also paid for a new visitors' center. "Before we started with the project there was no interest for rural tourism whatsoever," says Nikodije Velinov, an agro-ecological consultant. "People have now stopped selling their property for peanuts. The project played the role of a spark and you can see the houses and roofs being rebuilt. Here and there young people are coming back."

Bringing Back Farming

Up on Old Mountain's pastures, the animals are coming back, too. The land here was once famous for its cattle. Now farmers are investing in rare breeds, and once-neglected pastures are being used once again. Water buffalo, mountain ponies, Busha cattle, and donkeys are once more grazing this land. Serbian officials want the region to catch up with European agricultural standards.

"Piroat sheep were already extinct. But now we have more than 200 of this breed in the region," explains Sergei Ivanov. "We also have Karakachan sheep, which were very rare before. Now they number 300."

High up on the hills of Old Mountain, the homestead of Slavica Stanulov and Martin Krstev is richer, with six cows, 35 sheep, and a new tractor. "I used to gather hay from two to two and a half hectares. This tractor allows me to get it from eight hectares now, which makes my household more efficient. I am also happy to have six Busha cows. Children born in the '80s have never even seen them, as they were almost extinct," Martin Krstev explains.

Moving Home

Aleksandar Vasov, a veterinarian, left his job in the capital Belgrade and moved back to Old Mountain to breed rare animals. The grants project helped him build his new barn. "This modern barn will help me maintain old breeds and breed them in a sustainable manner," Vasov says, "which includes animal welfare."

Photo Gallery



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Aleksandar Vasov

Their genetic potential is high and we should preserve them for generations to come."

All told, the project's grants paid for 1,449 heads of cattle, of which 810 are rare breeds. And with the animals comes food. Grant money is going for the production of renowned local cheeses, for wool manufacturing, and for the sustainable management of Old Mountain's abundant natural resources.