



## THE SARAJEVO PROCESS AND NATURE-BASED TOURISM: NEW WAYS TO ENGAGE PEOPLE TO VALUE NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS

The Miljacka river in the centre of Sarajevo  
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*Our connection to nature, deeply rooted in cultural values, attitudes, and norms, plays a key role when we intend to increase the size and quality of urban green spaces and plan nature-based solutions (in our cities and beyond). The BiodiverCity partnership went to Sarajevo to learn about new methods to engage residents, enabling them to understand and plan nature-based solutions.*

Due to our impact on the planet, we face never seen ecological challenges. The [EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030](#) and the historic [Nature Restoration Law](#) pave the way for radically new attitudes: giving space back to nature. Simply because nature is our best ally in mitigating the impacts of climate change and helping us adapt to new conditions. What is good for nature, is good for society and the economy.

It is always better to talk about solutions, and nature-based solutions (NbS: actions to protect, sustainably manage, and restore natural and modified ecosystems that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, simultaneously benefiting people and nature) indeed provide not only unbelievable benefits for our physical and mental health but they are cheap and aesthetic ways to develop our cities and reshape our landscapes, to make the long-desired paradigm shift in all areas of economic life.

The challenge is that while one-third of climate mitigation needed to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement can be provided by NbS (according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, [IUCN](#)), that are 50% cheaper in urban infrastructure than grey infrastructure ([BiodiverCities by 2030](#)), yet they received just 0.3% of overall spending on urban infrastructure in 2021.



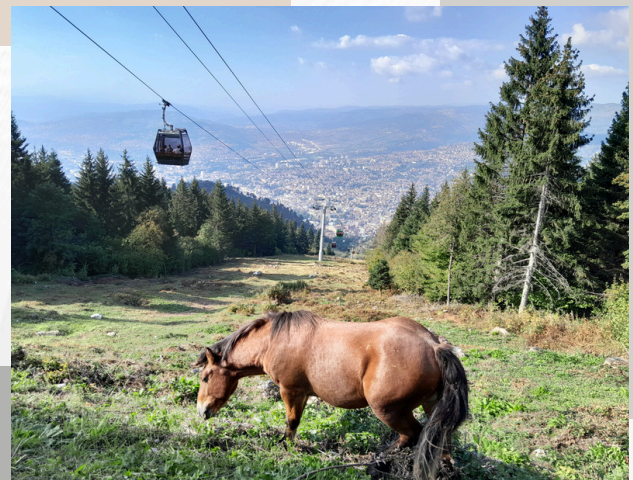
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So, we need to raise awareness of all actors to the effectiveness of NbS and lead by example. In cities too, since they offer unique opportunities for learning and education about a resilient and sustainable future and have a significant potential to boost innovations and governance tools, but also because NbS can largely contribute to climate adaptation and mitigate the risk of natural disasters.



## A city full of contradictions

Sarajevo (ca. 275.000 inhabitants), the capital and largest city of Bosnia and Herzegovina is full of contradictions in this regard. The country is often called “the green paradise of the Balkans”, where huge mountains are covered by untouched forests, and where otherworldly beautiful rivers make unbelievable canyons and gorges. Indeed, the country is at the crossroads of different biogeographical regions (Mediterranean, Alpine and Continental) and the local flora and fauna are also influenced by the varying altitudes – creating one of the highest biodiversity rates in Europe. On the one hand, this extraordinarily rich biodiversity can be found just next to Sarajevo, on the other hand, fast urbanisation and population growth have posed challenges to preserving the amazing natural environment within and around the city. One of the top challenges with this regard is to embed biodiversity-driven and climate resilience approaches into urban (green infrastructure) planning, which would also have a positive effect on improving the seasonally very poor air quality (during wintertime, people often escape from the dense smog by the renovated funicular to the top of the Trebević mountain).



Sarajevo's old bazaar (Baščaršija)  
and view of the city from the Trebević mountain  
© Ferenc Albert Szigeti

Balancing urbanization with conservation efforts is a crucial topic in Sarajevo, where the city needs to demonstrate that the well-being of both its residents and the surrounding natural habitats can be achieved at the same time. If somewhere in Europe, the connection to nature should be reframed here, in the capital of the “green paradise”.

The BiodiverCity partnership, which is about community-driven approaches to foster urban biodiversity and nature-based solutions, went to Sarajevo in October 2024 to learn about new methods to engage residents, enabling them to understand and plan nature-based solutions.

## The Sarajevo Process

One of the tools the partnership learnt about is the so-called Sarajevo Process: a co-creative arts-based engagement approach (partly) developed in the city by the Trinity College Dublin and the University of East London in the frame of a Horizont project.

Putting it simply: it is about inviting participants (residents) to nature, to get a direct connection to ecosystems in a facilitated way and using storytelling about their nature experience to co-create valuable urban green spaces and nature-based solutions.



According to the website the process enables stakeholders in cities to:

- 1 tell the story of nature/NbS in their cities;
- 2 engage with citizens to tell their stories, and use these stories to help frame the co-creation process for NbS;
- 3 design NbS to address a particular challenge in a city.

Sarajevo, as a developing city facing many typical, burning urban challenges and surrounded by magnificent nature, indeed provides a great opportunity to test this method, and the city's international atmosphere can further support the process.

Educating the public about the importance of protected areas, green spaces, and their role in supporting life can foster a sense of ownership and stewardship. Along with this philosophy, one pioneer action in Sarajevo was the establishment of an urban garden with sensory elements (video about the [process](#) and the [results](#)) in the courtyard of the School for Vocational Education and the Training Center for Healthy Aging. This is - hopefully - the first step in a longer process since the city could effectively use the method in many other urban areas (e.g. neighbourhoods lacking green areas, at community gardens), to raise awareness of the benefits ecosystems provide us.



Urban Sensory Garden  
© Ferenc Albert Szigeti



The Wilson's Promenade  
© Ferenc Albert Szigeti

Just next to the garden, the Wilson's Promenade also seems an ideal place to engage residents to co-create a public green space and at the same time a stage to tell the story of the climate action. On the one hand, it is located along the river which flows like a canal hindering direct connection to residents, there is a beautiful alley of old trees, and there are lots of students there because of schools nearby, but they have limited recreational possibilities at the river bank. On the other hand, progressive measures (i.e. partly closing the street and creation of a bike line) have been already done (the ice has been broken). It is a great place to communicate about the benefits of trees and water, to organise forest bathing walks, animate the place by using the Sarajevo Process and placemaking, engage residents

to get better access to the water and nature, organise a bioblitz event, and test biodiversity-driven park management (e.g. creating wildflower meadows).

Improvement of existing green spaces like the Wilson's Promenade along biodiversity-driven approaches taking into climate resilience into consideration as well is further supported in Sarajevo by the "Re-imagine My Street" Initiative. This initiative is the first of its kind in Bosnia and Herzegovina, aimed at fostering inclusive and sustainable urban transformation. Citizens are invited to share ideas for renovating and improving public spaces like streets, parks, and neglected areas, with the goal of creating greener, more colorful, and more livable public spaces. It is supported by the Urban Lab, a digital platform through which residents can directly engage in urban planning and co-create public spaces.



The City of Sarajevo also uses the Decidim digital platform that enables residents to participate in decisions related to urban planning. By providing a space for residents to propose ideas and vote on initiatives, Decidim will help ensure that future urban transformations are community-driven and reflective of the public's input.

## A future driven by citizen participation

Sarajevo's innovative approaches to urban biodiversity and nature-based solutions, exemplified by the Sarajevo Process, the sensory garden, and digital platforms like Urban Lab and Decidim, show the city's commitment to involving its residents in the future of their urban spaces. These efforts highlight the importance of fostering a deeper connection between citizens and their local ecosystems and encourage an ongoing dialogue between the public and decision-makers to co-create a greener, more sustainable city.

## When tourism is not only about seeing the world anymore but saving it too

Another potential tool is nature-based tourism. But let's see the bigger picture first! Following the fundamental economic, security, and pandemic turmoil between 2008 and 2021, international tourism is regaining its ground. Over-tourism hits the most frequented urban destinations again, and the environmental footprint of the sector is drastically growing. Following the Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action (2021), COP28 in 2023 clearly stated that sustainable tourism is an urgent necessity. But whether sustainable tourism exist?



GreenKayak in action (Copenhagen)  
© [visitcopenhagen.com](https://www.visitcopenhagen.com)



A lot of different activities were born in the last years to support this evergreen challenge. Some call it the “visitor economy”, some refer to it as “new tourism”, but many cities are about creating „quality experience spaces” where the well-being and satisfaction of both visitors and stakeholders, as well as locals, are provided. New tourism needs new narratives. Not only experiences are to be sold, but the stories linked to those local experiences that can motivate, inspire and educate visitors and locals. The question is not anymore what cities can do for tourism, but what tourism can do for cities. This approach places active humans in the centre and intends to reestablish trust with local people since tourism too often has become a negative issue in many places. Instead of the number of nights, new tourism intends to measure for example the satisfaction of visitors and locals in connection with the touristic infrastructure and services, the volume of local companies having an environmental certification, the number of tourists arriving with sustainable transport means, or the local added-value of the visitor economy.



Are you ready to get to know how a real (primeval) looks like?

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The rise of the visitor economy is parallel to many new trends of ecotourism (travelling environmentally and socially responsibly). Let’s see some of them:

- Experience tourism: having a once-in-a-lifetime experience or gaining an emotional connection with cultures and nature. 72% of millennials prefer spending more money on unique experiences rather than on material things.
- Homestays: community-based tourism model that allows visitors the opportunity to experience the daily life of their host family and interact with the lived experience of local communities.
- Transformative Travel: aiming to make a difference in both the lives of visitors and hosts (visiteering, voluntary work, cultural exchange). According to booking.com, 68% of global travellers would consider participating in cultural exchanges to learn a new skill, followed by a volunteering trip with 54%.
- Undertourism (as a response to overtourism): putting new stories and areas on the map.



Some concrete examples:

- Be local: organised ways of visiting locals' favourite places, using public transport with locals, leisure activities recommended by locals or with locals, etc.
- GreenKayak: borrow a kayak for free and help keep Copenhagen's waters clean, while you explore the harbour.
- Creation of sightseeing tours and apps based on local stories and anecdotes (e.g. PocketGuide app called Talking Monuments, Eger, Hungary)
- Heartbeat Streets Vienna: fall in love with Vienna's neighbourhoods. Create a unique Vienna program and combine classic sights with colourful and lively neighbourhoods!
- Micro-travels with local guides: you can explore less frequented parts of Gdansk with local guides, like the Monumental Painting Collection in Zaspa.

## The rise of nature-based tourism

What nature-based tourism is and what its connection to nature-based solutions?

Nature-based tourism can be defined as the number of outdoor activities performed by tourists in the natural environment. Some of these activities have a high ecological footprint (e.g. adventure activities), but some of them more and more aim to have a positive impact on ecosystems, and local society, as well as target smaller carbon footprints. This nature-based tourism is about helping nature heal, exploring local wildlife and natural resources and getting involved in local habitat restoration and landscaping projects, highlighting the benefits of biodiversity. This results in positive, optimistic spirits and tourists feel they are responsible for protecting their home country's nature and have the same feelings which strengthen their relationship with it.



At the BeePath of Ljubljana  
© City of Ljubljana

Some concrete examples regarding nature-based tourism connected to nature-based solutions:

- Explore pollinator-friendly Ljubljana: get an insight into the history of beekeeping in Slovenia and learn about the Beekeeping Trail of Ljubljana!
- Get to know the pros and cons regarding beavers during a Beaver Safari!
- Get to know how sustainable – continuous tree canopy - forestry works! Hungarian forestry Pilisi Parkerdő is organising a series of forest walks to explain how forestry, especially sustainable forestry works.
- Hungarian Hub for Nature-based Solutions has already tested a thematic walk in Budapest to highlight the features of the Sponge City concept and is working on a thematic walk to highlight the future of a village (showcasing regenerative agriculture, community-based agriculture, traditional ecological knowledge, sustainable forestry, etc).



## Engagement of communities in urban green spaces



Getting to know  
how a sponge city works (Berlin)  
© LIFE in RUNOFF

Green space stimulates identity and community spirit efficiently, they are great tools to mobilise citizens. This is important as cities can address the impacts of an ecological crisis 1. by changing their physical infrastructures and service systems and 2. as the most local forms of governance, by changing the attitudes of their residents. New, biodiversity-driven green spaces might be advocates of the mindset change required and nature-based tourism organised locally can help achieve such an ambitious goal.

Engagement of communities along green spaces is a core theme for the BiodiverCity partnership as well as for many other European cities. Further engagement tools are described in the BiodiverCity [Baseline Study](#).



Natural grazing in Den Bosch with cattle and horses as the first step of a rewilding process. by [Free Nature](#), a local branch of [Rewilding Europe](#) counts on nature-based tourism as one of the benefits of such a rewilding process.

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