



DestiMED PLUS

*Project report
card 1*

April 2021

SHIFTING THE FOCUS OF TOURISM FOR LASTING CHANGE

What impact has COVID-19 had on ecotourism in the Mediterranean?

Something unprecedented has been taking place in the Mediterranean. The beaches and bays, the bars and resorts – where once there were masses of tourists – have gone very quiet. The past year has seen a complete change in our region, and changes are happening at a deeper level too. When the [DestiMED PLUS](#) project began we expected that an increased demand for ecotourism was going to be closely linked to more general, gradual, changes in tourism behaviour. Never could we have foreseen the current hiatus in international travel, nor imagined the possibilities for rethinking tourism in general. The pandemic has had a major impact, as detailed in recent studies of [management](#) and of [tourism](#) in protected areas. There have been issues of visitor behaviour, overcrowding and lack of resources, while progress in and finance for

conservation, and the livelihoods of local communities and tourism businesses have all suffered. But there have been unanticipated benefits. Following the restrictions on travel linked to COVID-19 a marked trend in nature-seeking tourism has been making [headlines](#). Lessons from this pandemic are worth learning for the longer term. The current popularity of nature and protected areas presents an opportunity to engage new audiences and foster a sense of connectedness to nature among a broader spectrum of the public. The pandemic has shifted the focus of travelling and tourism on a global scale, and concepts such as resilience, regeneration, community, sustainability and responsibility have gained greater weight, and are securing the attention of policy makers.

Key opportunities for protected areas (PAs)

- **Recovery:** many PAs have experienced ecological recovery and restoration.
- **Regeneration:** there has been increased interest in, and demand for, nature-based tourism and sustainable travel.
- **Reflection:** we have a unique opportunity to rethink the way we travel and experience tourism in Mediterranean PAs.
- **Resilience:** there is increased recognition of the value of adopting more sustainable models of tourism.
- **Responsibility:** there is a growing awareness of the importance of collaborative structures of management.

How do we transform tourism?

The DestiMED PLUS project is aligned with this shift in focus and offers long-term sustainable solutions and [policy guidelines](#) for tourism in Mediterranean PAs. Using and building on the [MEET approach](#), DestiMED PLUS is fostering collaboration between protected area managers, conservationists, planning authorities and local tourism businesses to develop low-impact, locally-crafted, park-led travel experiences which benefit protected areas, conservation

and local communities. In the following two brief case studies we look at how protected areas, part of the DestiMED PLUS project in Albania and Andalucia, have been impacted by COVID-19 and how the sustainable tourism models that DestiMED PLUS and MEET provide are supporting them to turn crisis into opportunity.

Emerging long-term solutions

- ▶ Promote a park-led ecotourism model that doesn't depend on large visitor numbers.
- ▶ Increase public-private collaboration between tourism and conservation industries.
- ▶ Measure the environmental and social impacts of tourism in PAs.
- ▶ Ensure the active participation of local communities in tourism planning processes.



A NEW ERA OF ECOTOURISM IN ALBANIA

"While the number of EU and American tourists has decreased dramatically across Albania due to travel restrictions, we saw increased tourism last summer from Albanians and from neighbouring countries outside the EU – Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro. This meant we needed to adapt our 'ecosystem of services' and we needed the local community to be a major link in this chain of change."

In the [Divjakë-Karavasta National Park](#) DestiMED PLUS offers a more resilient form of tourism for the destination because it encourages greater participation from local service providers. The role of the local community is vital, increasing the authenticity of the product they are developing, ensuring that income from tourism is going directly

back into the local community and raising awareness about the importance of conservation. *"Living near a protected area becomes an asset for the community; becoming service providers makes them aware of their impact and the power they have in the protection of natural resources. In the current global crisis, being able to offer a 6-7 day tourism package with small groups gives us a head start on developing strategies for tourism in the coming years. The pandemic, and the resulting opportunity to engage with a different audience, has kick-started the process towards a real park-led ecotourism. Next we will engage with Albanian tourist agencies, and support them in creating packages which embed sustainable practices and principles."*

We spoke to Artenisa Peçulaj from NAPA, the Albanian National Agency of Protected Areas, a DestiMED PLUS project partner working with the Divjakë-Karavasta National Park team for their pilot site.

"We really like the fact that there is a 'PLUS' in DestiMED – it has given us the opportunity to include our local communities in the project process, not just share the results with them."

Even just speaking to people about the project gives them a vision of what works, what is possible, what is sustainable and helps to spread the philosophy of ecotourism more generally. The project is bringing a new era of ecotourism to Albania."



A COORDINATED APPROACH IN ANDALUCIA

As a tourist destination, [Cabo de Gata Nijar Natural Park](#) was under growing pressure pre-COVID from increasing 'sun, sea and sand' tourism in the protected area. "Over summer 2020 there was an explosion of visitors coming to the park in search of nature tourism, prompting park staff to take stock of how the world is changing around us. It became clear that long-term solutions are needed to deal with the stretching of Park resources, and this shift in tourist focus." Collaboration between Park authorities and other institutions is considered key. Working together is no new concept, but it may have been little discussed in the tourism sector before the pandemic. DestiMED PLUS has provided a way to put in place systems that support the new model of tourism that the Park is striving for as a destination. They are seeking to create dynamics that require time

and care, but are willing to put in the effort because they can see the value and are committed to changing the way they do tourism. "The project gives us an opportunity to become accustomed to a new 'higher-level' form of sustainable tourism. The DestiMED PLUS and MEET model for ecotourism development helps us put a collaborative structure in place that moves away from sun, sea and sand tourism, and is strongly aligned with the direction that Cabo de Gata wants to go. The MEET approach is a good option not only at the territory level but also as a scalable model that we hope could be adopted across Andalusia. The governance structure that DestiMED PLUS advocates works toward this and is aligned with the goal of a greater awareness of conservation and protected areas which goes beyond PA staff and management."

We spoke to Lucía Tejero from Cabo de Gata Nijar Natural Park, Almería, Spain, and Milagros Pérez from the Regional Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning of Andalusia, a DestiMED PLUS project partner.

"The key to a successful strategy for sustainable tourism in the destination is for the PA administration and management, the visitors and local service providers to be united in a coordinated approach to ecotourism and for it to be clear that everyone has a responsibility to conserve the protected area".

Photographs:
© DestiMED

© Divjakë-Karavasta National Park

© Consejería de Agricultura, Ganadería, Pesca y Desarrollo sostenible

destimed-plus.interreg-med.eu/
secretariat@meetnetwork.org

DestiMED PLUS supports the MEET Network
www.meetnetwork.org



DestiMED PLUS project partners

