



**Good Practice Story Title:** Vevcani Green - A Journey Through Nature's Masterpiece

**Destination:** Municipality of Vevcani

**Country:** North Macedonia

**Submitting Organization:** Municipality of Vevcani

**Category:**

- Destination Management
- Nature & Scenery
- Environment & Climate
- Culture & Tradition
- Thriving Communities
- Business & Marketing



## Destination description:

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In the southwestern part of North Macedonia, just 15 km from Lake Ohrid, the oldest lake in Europe and a UNESCO World Heritage site with both cultural and natural significance, lies Vevchani. It is the smallest municipality in the country, covering an area of only 35km<sup>2</sup> and inhabited by around 2500 people. Vevchani is an ecologically and geologically unique site with a rich tradition, culture, gastronomy and natural treasures. The Jablanica mountain, which overlooks the area, is home to forests of high conservation value, known for their bio-ecological, cultural-historical, socio-economic, and scientific importance. At an altitude of 960 meters, the Vevchani Springs consist of 7 smaller springs that converge to form the Vevchani River and a unique cave. The local community has a strong bond with nature, utilizing its resources sustainably for centuries. They take pride in the fact that their territory includes a protected area, which they see as a potential for socio-economic development. Due to the natural values of the area and the support of the local population, the "Vevchani Springs" was declared a protected area under category III Monument of Nature by law in 2012. The settlement of Vevchani dates back to the 3rd century BC and may have formed from the merging of ancient Macedonian settlements. According to legends, the Berziti tribe settled in Vevchani in the 6th or 7th century..

This area has a rich history and culture. Centuries ago, the Vevchani workers and masters were widely known for their building skills, including stone carving, and facades. They worked as migrant workers throughout the Balkans and beyond, and were known for their honesty and hard work. People welcomed them with joy because their presence meant the creation of something new. The beauty of Vevchani is also seen in the old houses, which are witnesses of a time and the living habits of the local population. Among the numerous preserved houses, a few cultural heritage houses tell the story of Vevchani's traditional architecture.

The traditional costume of Vevchani reflects the folk cultural tradition of the Macedonians, incorporating elements of folk beliefs and aesthetic understandings developed over the centuries.

The Vevchani Carnival, which is over 1,400 years old, combines paganism and modernism. It takes place on January 13 and 14 (the eve and first day of the New Year according to the old calendar). The carnival is characterized by its archaism, secrecy, and improvisation, setting it apart from other carnivals around the world. The entire village of Vevchani becomes a theater during the carnival, with disguised participants performing like real actors in every house and street.

In 1987, there was a case in Vevchani where the government tried to take control of the Vevchani Springs. They claimed it was to provide water to the neighboring village of Oktisi, but their real intention was to use the water for the elite weekend settlement of Elen Kamen, where the government leaders had their villas. The people of Vevchani opposed this and set up barricades to prevent the installation of water pipes. Tensions escalated on August 7, 1987, when special police forces used "electric batons" for the first time in what was then Yugoslavia. After these events, there was a symbolic protest in which the "Republic of Vevchani" self-proclaimed itself. They created their own passports and money, which have now become a tourist attraction. These events caused a significant impact on the Macedonian and Yugoslav public and society, leading to wider dimensions and political implications.





## Summary of Good Practice Story:

### “Vevcani Green - A Journey Through Nature's Masterpiece”

, a perfect place for a relaxing getaway. The municipality is nestled near the Ohrid Lake on Jablanica's mountain slopes. It is a charming village renowned for its vibrant greenery and breathtaking natural scenery. Vevcani adventures are themed around Vevcani Green, and they promise a deep dive into nature's embrace, where every turn reveals a new wonder.

Vevcani is like a place taken out of a fairy tale, a small village distinguished by rich cultural heritage, and surrounded by natural beauty. The Vevcani Springs is a natural water source that has sustained this place for many centuries. It is surrounded by enchanting mountain paths introducing the region's lush vegetation. Towering beech, chestnut, and oak trees form a dense canopy overhead, while their leaves whisper in the breeze. The ground is carpeted with vibrant moss and dotted with wildflowers. The sound of the rushing water, the crystal clear waters cascades over the rocks, forming a pristine pool, reflecting the greenery around them, it's a place where time stands still.

The Monument of Nature – Vevcani Springs is a protected area surrounded by the numerous hiking trails that crisscross the area. Each trail offers its own unique perspective of Vevcani's natural splendor. Every trail finds a way to alpine meadows, where the air is crisp and filled with the scent of pine.

There are a few lookout points, greeting with a breathtaking panoramic view. Rolling green hills stretched as far as the eye could see, dotted with patches of wildflowers in every imaginable hue. Below, the village of Vevcani lay nestled among the trees, its red-roofed houses adding a splash of color to the verdant landscape.

One of the most captivating aspects of Vevcani is the symphony of sounds. Birds chirp melodiously from the treetops, while the distant hum of bees adds a gentle background rhythm. The occasional rustle of leaves signals the presence of small woodland creatures. Vevcani lives in perfect harmony with nature, local's gardens are a testament to this, with every home boasting a variety of plants and flowers that seem to thrive effortlessly. Even the village's architecture reflects a deep respect for the environment, with stone and wood structures seamlessly blending into the landscape.

And the food is delicious. All the restaurants in Vevcani offer authentic, traditional recipes prepared with tons of love and attention to enrich the tourist experience.

Vevcani is one of the top 10 Macedonian destinations, but, Vevcani Green is a unique experience that combines interesting mountain adventures, stay in local guest houses, and delicious traditional meals accompanied by the culture and tradition that in this place lived for many centuries. It is an experience that reconnects with the simple pleasures of nature, reminds of the importance of preserving such pristine environments, and leaves with a deep sense of gratitude for the beauty that still exists in our world.



### **Issues faced:**

The Vevcani area is of great importance because of its unique local context. The people there have lived in harmony with nature for centuries, using its resources sustainably. They are proud that there is a protected area in their territory, which they see as having potential for socio-economic development. The "Vevcani Springs" was declared a protected area in 2012. However, the state does not provide any financial support to these areas, even though it is legally obligated to. As a result, protected areas are left to finance themselves, leading to situations where activities like logging are allowed to generate income. Although these areas are required to develop and implement ten-year management plans, they struggle to secure the necessary funding. The municipality of Vevcani manages the "Vevcani Springs" area and has developed a management plan, but implementing it is challenging due to the lack of financial resources. The municipality has been able to implement some planned activities and measures with the help of donors such as UNDP(United Nations Development Programme), PONT(Prespa Ohrid Nature Trust), and SDC(Strategic Development Consulting). However, the municipality must find ways to ensure financial sustainability.

A large number of visitors to Vevcani were not well-informed about the destination and the activities available there. As a result, they only stayed in Vevcani for a few hours because there was nothing to keep them interested and engaged.

### **Solution:**

The Vevcani Green initiative starts with recognizing the need for a serious approach to sustainable development and responsible resource management. It's important to realize that developing sustainable tourism practices is crucial for the region where Vevcani Green originated. By adopting responsible tourism approaches, we can preserve our cultural and natural heritage, minimize our impact on the environment, and support the socio-economic development of the local community. Sustainable tourism practices aim to ensure the long-term sustainability of our region by balancing tourism activities with the conservation of natural resources. This approach enhances visitor experiences, creates economic opportunities, and improves the livelihoods of local residents. However, this initiative did not only involve the municipality as a destination. It was decided to implement a certification process for businesses included in Vevcani's tourist offerings through the Good Travel Seal Program. The program was presented to all tourism stakeholders in Vevcani, including restaurants, accommodation facilities, mountaineering societies, honey producers, farmers, and cheese producers. The first businesses to participate in this initiative were the restaurants Via Ignatia and Kutmicheva, Apartments Shutinoski, and the travel agency JJ Adventures.

All 4 businesses have obtained certificates from this program, which proves their good business practices. But there are 2 more businesses that have started or are starting this process, which leads the destination along with the tourism offer one step forward to sustainability.

### **Methods, Steps, and Tools applied:**

In the Vevcani Green initiative, local businesses were involved through the Good Travel Seal program. In this process, these businesses were certified and then developed complementary tourism products. These products aim to provide equal representation for all businesses and ensure they receive economic benefits. The products are already available on the Vevcani Green website and the Outdoor Active platform. The entire process was



designed to improve the Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) scheme, which involves collecting fees for ecosystem services in the protected area. As part of this, 10% of the proceeds from every tourist product of Vevcani Green will be allocated to the Manager of the Protected Area and the Municipality of Vevcani for the development of the area. This is the first scheme of its kind in the country, and the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning sees the potential for it to provide financial security to protected areas. They also support the idea of replicating this scheme in other protected areas, following the example of Vevcani. This would involve conducting necessary analyses to determine the capacity of ecosystems to provide ecosystem services, assessing the demand for these services, considering the opinions of the local population, selecting the most appropriate service for the Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) scheme, and finally, examining the feasibility of such a scheme.

Also, the municipality, as part of "Vevcani Green", which needs to be certified, has established a separate legal entity (enterprise) in charge of the development and promotion of sustainable tourism based on "Vevcani Green" initiative, and this becomes the municipality's strategic determination for development, by taking into account the benefits not only for the local population, local business, but also for the nature.

### **Achievements and Results:**

As originally envisioned in the project itself, these businesses have developed complementary tourism products where they are all equally represented and have economic benefits, and the products are already set up and offered on the Outdoor Active website. This whole process was conceived in this way in order to better work out the PES scheme, i.e. the collection for ecosystem services in the protected area, so that 10% of every tourist product of Vevcani Green remains for the Manager of the Protected Area, Municipality of Vevcani, precisely for the development of the area.

The promotion of Vevcani's Green activities included organizing events and extensive media promotion. The events comprised of:

1. Balkan Green Road Show: This series of events was held in Balkan countries and featured certified destinations or those in the process of certification. The events took place in Trebinje, Bosnia and Herzegovina; Tivat, Montenegro; Vevcani, Macedonia; and Belsh, Albania.
2. Promo Tour Vevcani Green: This tour involved several Instagram influencers from Macedonia, along with representatives from MED, Pharmachem, and the Swiss Embassy in Macedonia. They experienced an excursion through Vevcani, learning about the village, its natural beauty, history, culture, and tradition. The tour included visits to various attractions and businesses, such as "CAA Drimkol," "Pupin's House," Vasilichari Konak (Carnival House), Vevcani Springs, Horse Club, old houses around Vevcani, Via Ferrata, Jankov Kamen (Janko's Stone) picnic area, and a ride on an electric bike along the path of Jablanica. The tour also involved visiting the four certified businesses and using their services.

For media promotion, various activities were undertaken, including:

- Development of the Vevcani Green website ([www.vevcangreen.com](http://www.vevcangreen.com))
- Social media information campaigns through official profiles of the mayor, municipality, Vevcani Springs-Monument of Nature, and the official profile of the Nature conservation program (Со грижа до берикет)
- Sharing information on internet portals





- Guest appearances on radio shows, TV shows, and reports for local, national, and foreign media
- Recording and presentation of professional photographs and videos for Vevcani Green
- Facebook promotion of the four Good Travel Seal-certified businesses

### **Lessons Learned and Advice:**

From the activities carried out so far, we have learned that improving the sustainability of the destination requires collaboration. This includes collaboration between the municipality and national and international organizations, as well as between businesses themselves. It is also essential to foster cooperation between the municipality and businesses, along with the entire local community. Involving as many local businesses as possible in sustainability efforts benefits all parties. This involvement can lead to an increased number in tourists visiting the destination, resulting in higher income for businesses and, consequently, the local community. This income comes from the purchase of products, employment opportunities, as well as through taxes and infrastructure investments.

Now we have certified businesses on one hand and the municipality on the other hand, which is in the process of certification. This certification is important to be able to have one general offer. "Vevcani Green" has helped bring the municipality and the businesses together, building trust. The businesses are now joining together to be stronger in their efforts to improve their service, and cooperation has been initiated for the past year and for other projects in the municipality, which may have indirect or direct influence on the protected area.

### **Recognitions and Additional Reference**

