



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



Success Stories

Learning Sustainable Behaviour in the Škocjan Caves (Slovenia)

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What healing power does juniper oil have? Is spring water drinkable? And what is in it? Within the Škocjan Caves Park School Network, twelve to fourteen year old secondary school students from Slovenia and Italy explore research topics related to the Reka River, one of the largest sinking rivers in the world.

Located in the south-west of Slovenia, close to the Italian border, the Reka River is distinguished by its torrential character. Throughout time, the river's 40-kilometre underground flow formed the Škocjan Caves. There are seven thousand caves in Slovenia, but the Škocjan network of eleven caves with hollows, swallow holes, natural bridges and its cultural heritage is unique. Since 1986, the Caves are part of UNESCO's World Heritage.

In 1999, the Škocjan Caves Park initiated a school project, 'The Reka River from Snežnik to the Seaside', with financial support from the European Union. In 2003, the participating schools and the Park signed the Škocjan Caves Park School Network Charter. *"Our aim was to raise awareness about the significance of the protection and sustainable use of wetlands among students and the general public,"* underlines Vanja Debevec Gerjevič, Head of the Research and Development Service of the Škocjan Caves Park. The plan is working out. In 2012, six schools from small towns along the Reka River in Slovenia and Italy participated in the project. Their activities are partly funded by the 'Man and the Biosphere' intergovernmental programme.

"If you massage juniper oil into an aching stomach, it relieves the pain." Klara, a seventh grader from Divača, a small town five kilometres away from the Italian border, has interviewed her family as part of her school's research on the traditional usage of juniper. The plant is characteristic for the region and found all along the Reka River. *"My uncle and my grandpa also showed me the utensils for distilling juniper brandy and making juniper oil."* Throughout a whole school year, students collected information from their families and complemented findings through literature research. To share their results, they uploaded all collected information to a web portal.

Teja, an eighth grader, points out her experience with the network. *"We visited the Škocjan Caves and discussed ways to promote and raise their visibility without jeopardising them. We sent these proposals to the mayor."* Suggestions included limiting the number of visitors, ensuring waste disposal and regulating what type of industries are set up within the area.

A project bringing together different schools from the network is called "8 March", after the date of International Women's Day. Students explore living and working conditions of women from the Reka region in the past and present. *"Our grandmothers didn't use a lot of make-up, otherwise they would have been treated as if they were indecent,"* says Karin, a seventh grader. In Ilirska Bistrica, students explored the use of cosmetics. *"Women washed their hair with liquid obtained from cooking leaves and curled their hair with corn leaves soaked in warm water."* Neža explains that they pinched their cheeks to give them a rosy colour.

The students interviewed elderly people from the region to collect information. Nada Šircelj, a mentor of the project, underlines *"We include seniors in our research as they are an invaluable source of information about the old ways of living that are gradually disappearing. It is important for young people to perceive their origin and to learn to respect their ancestors."* And the older generation benefits as well. *"The work of the young is really appreciated everywhere"*, adds Šircelj.

To share and spread results of the various research projects, the Škocjan Caves Park organised a young research congress in 2010, bringing together 18 young researchers from the six participating schools. Every year now, the Park invites an expert to present an interesting initiative at the young researcher's congress.

The students work on specific projects for the congress. A few years ago, students from Ilirska Bistrica undertook research on sources of drinking water in the region. *"Our reports were the basis for subsequent renovations"*, according to Nada Šircelj. In the village of Dolnji Zemon, for example, the spring and its surroundings were cleared of sprawling plants and garbage. The municipality of Ilirska Bistrica gave money to set up a warning sign. The school now aims to achieve similar results with a project on trees in the town centre. *"We want our students to get some first-hand experience of sustainable behaviour"*, underlines Šircelj.

Šircelj is one of the mentors guiding the students in their project work. To exchange experiences, information and literature, mentors take part in seminars every year.

Meanwhile, the Škocjan Caves Park School Network is crossing European borders. In 2006, the Slovenian Notranjska Regional Park and the Cerknica Lake and Učka Nature Park in Croatia established similar school networks. The Slovenian Kozjansko Regional Park has also voiced interest.

Recently, the school of Divača set up contacts with the Vinninga School in the municipality of Lidköping in Sweden. Students and education staff will participate in activities on the diversity of cultures, languages and values within a Comenius project of the European Union. *"We intend to cooperate with our local community and partners from the tourism sector and the environmental protection area. We want to integrate sustainable development into everyday life"*, says Vanja Debevec Gerjevič.

Further information:

www.park-skocjanske-jame.si/eng/skocjan-caves-park_education_schools.shtml

As lead agency for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), UNESCO promotes an education that allows every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future.

Education for Sustainable Development means including key sustainable development issues into teaching and learning; for example, climate change, disaster risk reduction, biodiversity, poverty reduction, and sustainable consumption. It also requires participatory teaching and learning methods that motivate and empower learners to change their behaviour and take action for sustainable development.

It engages people through innovative ways of learning about biodiversity by focusing on education and training to address the interlinking issues of ecosystems and livelihoods, the interactions of nature with culture, society and economy, and the actions we can take without affecting our quality of life.

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