

CASE STUDY 9

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MONTENEGRO

Organization: Civic Initiative Save Sinjajevina (CISS)
Region: Europe, Middle East, North Africa (EMENA)

The Sinjajevina-Durmitor mountain range in Montenegro encompasses approximately 1,000 km^2 of mountain grasslands and pasture-land, making it the second-largest continuous grazing area in Europe. This territory lies within the Tara Canyon Biosphere Reserve, an EMERALD site, an Important Plant Area (IPA), and a proposed Natura 2000 site. Archaeological evidence indicates continuous pastoral use since prehistoric times, establishing Sinjajevina as both an ecological and cultural heritage landscape. Approximately 200 families, around 2,000 people, directly depend on the territory for grazing, agriculture, bee-keeping, and medicinal plant collection, while over 22,000 people inhabit the lower lands.

Sustainable land governance practices are routed in pastoral commons and TEK, for example through the following of the *progon* paths, which are ancient, unalterable drove roads carved by generations of animal movement that were protected spaces where no construction was allowed, and animals were so used to them that they instinctively followed the same trails each season, reflecting the deeply rooted traditions of transhumant life in the region which can still be felt, lived and remembered. There is also regulated seasonal access to grazing lands, fostering plant growth and maximizing fodder production with thinker organic soils that stores carbon underground, protecting it from escaping to the atmosphere in the case of forest wild fires or wood cutting. Environmental monitoring demonstrates the effectiveness of long-standing communal custodianship. Data on land cover change between 2000

and 2020 indicate that the territory under pastoral management has experienced very little change in forests and grasslands over the past 20 years[39], reflecting the resilience of adaptive community-based management in maintaining ecological integrity while sustaining livelihoods.

However, the territory faces significant pressures. In 2019, a military project was proposed to install a training and weapons testing polygon on a large portion of Sinjajevina, effectively blocking the creation of a Natural Regional Park. The project, linked to Montenegro's NATO accession, involved live-fire exercises and explosives within a Biosphere Reserve without prior environmental impact assessments, contravening the UN Aarhus Convention. These activities posed direct threats to biodiversity and pastoral livelihoods. The community resistance has successfully halted all violent military exercises since 2020, though NATO was threatening again in 2023 to reactivate the military ground. On 10 July 2025, the Montenegrin Prime Minister stated a legally binding cancellation of the military ground, and early declarations about making Sinjajevina a future protected area taking into consideration local communities and pastoralists. Besides this military ground, wind energy infrastructure development forms another pressure to the territory.

Compounding these pressures, land tenure is legally divided between state and private ownership, often conflicting with historical communal governance. While much of the land is formally state-owned, local populations continue to manage it according to customary law, with tenure arrangements managed commonly and with the presence of *katuns* (temporary seasonal pastoral settlements for transhumance), varying in customary regulations of use and management across the territory. CISS continues to advocate for participatory, community-rooted protection of Sinjajevina, ensuring that conservation and land management decisions reflect local needs.

39 Potapov, P., Hansen, M.C., Pickens, A., Hernandez-Serna, A., Tyukavina, A., Turubanova, S., Zalles, V., Li, X., Khan, A., Stolle, F. and Harris, N., 2022. The global 2000-2020 land cover and land use change dataset derived from the Landsat archive: first results. Front. Remote Sens. 3: 856903. doi: 10.3389/frsen. ***https://doi.org/10.3389/frsen.2022.856903***