

# Danube Wood(s) Cultural Route Strategy

Common Danube Strategy for the sustainable use  
and valorisation of natural resources of Danubian  
forests and cultural heritage of wood

## **DANUBE WOOD(s)ROUTE**

Richness of Danube forests and wood cultural heritage (tangible, intangible) - way towards sustainable green tourism embedded in European cultural route of Danube timber  
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### **Common Danube strategy for the sustainable use and valorisation of natural resources of Danuban forests and cultural heritage of wood**

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Context and Background

The Danube region is home to one of Europe's largest stretches of deciduous forests and a remarkably rich diversity of forest ecosystems. These forests are not only vital reservoirs of biodiversity, but also play a central role in the cultural identity and economic livelihoods of local communities. Wood, in both its traditional and modern uses, has shaped daily life, vernacular architecture, craftsmanship, and artistic expression across the Danube basin for centuries.

In this context, the Danube Wood(s) Cultural Route Strategy proposes a joint transnational approach to the sustainable valorisation of forest and wood-related cultural heritage. The initiative stems from the urgent need to protect forests from increasing pressures, such as unsustainable exploitation, biodiversity loss, and the decline of traditional crafts, and to turn this rich heritage into a driver for local development and regional cooperation.

The strategy addresses common challenges identified by the Danube Wood(s) Route partnership, which brings together organisations from Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Through this cooperation, the partners aim to create a recognised European Cultural Route of Wood(s) that serves as a model for linking biodiversity conservation, forest-based bioeconomy, and sustainable tourism development rooted in local resources.

At the same time, the initiative is aligned with key European and international policy frameworks, including the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030, the European Green Deal, and the objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity. The integrated approach promoted by the strategy - linking nature, culture, and local economies - reflects the need for a just and sustainable transition in Danube regions, strengthening territorial cohesion and a shared cultural identity.

The so-called “Danube Wood” region stretches across diverse forested landscapes along the Danube River and its major tributaries, covering large parts of Central and Southeastern Europe. It includes mountainous forests of the Alps and Carpathians, lowland floodplain woodlands, and mixed deciduous forests in hilly regions. These forests provide crucial ecosystem services, including carbon storage, flood mitigation, soil protection, and climate regulation, and are home to iconic and endangered species such as the lynx, wolf, black stork, and imperial eagle.

From a socio-economic perspective, forests and wood-based activities remain vital to rural livelihoods across the Danube region. The forest-based bioeconomy, including timber production, furniture manufacturing, biomass energy, and eco-tourism, represents a key source of income,

employment, and innovation. Small-scale woodworking, carpentry, and traditional forest use practices continue to play an important role in sustaining local economies and knowledge systems, particularly in remote or economically marginalised areas.

Culturally, the Danube Wood region holds an immense and often underappreciated legacy. Wooden architecture, from wooden churches and farmhouses to watermills and bridges, tells the story of how communities adapted to forest landscapes. Intangible heritage, such as wood carving, joinery, and seasonal forest rituals, are still practiced in many parts of the region and are deeply interwoven with identity, memory, and belonging. These cultural expressions are not only a source of pride, but also a living resource for revitalising communities and fostering cross-border dialogue.

## 1.2. Horizontal Principles

The Strategy is guided by a set of cross-cutting, horizontal principles that align with EU values and policy frameworks and ensure that the initiative is inclusive, sustainable, and effective across the entire Danube region. These principles are integrated throughout the strategy's objectives, actions, and governance model.

### **Environmental Sustainability and Climate Action**

The strategy places ecological responsibility at its core. Forests provide essential ecosystem services, biodiversity, carbon sequestration, water regulation, and the Route will promote their conservation through sustainable management. The strategy supports climate adaptation and mitigation measures and aligns with the EU Green Deal, Biodiversity Strategy 2030, and relevant national and international conservation goals.

### **Social Inclusion and Equity**

In line with EU values and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the initiative ensures non-discrimination and equal access for all stakeholders. Women, youth, minority and marginalized communities are actively encouraged to participate. The Route will provide opportunities for cultural expression, economic development, and empowerment of underrepresented groups.

### **Cultural Diversity and Transnational Dialogue**

Reflecting the Danube's cultural richness, the Route fosters intercultural exchange and mutual understanding across borders. It promotes the recognition and protection of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage related to forests and wood, from traditional crafts to rituals, narratives, and architecture.

### **SME Empowerment and Local Economic Development**

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly wood-based businesses and traditional workshops, are vital actors in the Danube Wood region. These businesses transform raw timber into high-value products, preserve traditional skills, create local jobs, and contribute to eco-tourism and innovation. The strategy recognizes SMEs as key enablers of sustainable development and proposes training, cluster collaboration, financial access, and integration into tourism value chains as priority support areas.

### **Knowledge Sharing, Innovation, and Digitalisation**

To strengthen innovation capacity, the strategy supports knowledge transfer, research cooperation, and digital transformation. This includes tools for digital storytelling, online training, smart tourism, and sustainability monitoring. The use of digital platforms will enhance visibility, accessibility, and operational efficiency across the Route's network.

### **Governance Transparency and Participatory Engagement**

Transparent decision-making and participatory approaches are fundamental to building trust and legitimacy. The strategy promotes inclusive governance models that allow meaningful engagement of stakeholders, from local authorities and NGOs to business actors, citizens, and researchers. Community-led initiatives and grassroots input are vital to shaping and sustaining the Route's development.

## **1.3. Limitations**

This strategy has been developed within a clearly defined framework and set of conditions that shape its scope and applicability. It reflects the shared vision and common interests of the project partners involved in the Danube Wood(s) Route initiative, and is based on the resources, capacities, and territorial context available during the project implementation phase.

### **Territorial Scope**

The strategy is geographically limited to the participating regions of the Danube area covered by the project partners: Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia. It focuses on areas with significant forest coverage, cultural traditions related to wood, and potential for sustainable tourism development. While it aims to serve as a transnational framework, its recommendations are most directly relevant to these regions and may not fully apply outside the project territory.

### **Conceptual and Strategic Scope**

The strategic directions presented here reflect the consensus built among project partners and stakeholders. As such, the vision, mission, and objectives of the Danube Wood(s) Cultural Route have been co-created within the limits of this collaboration and may evolve in future stages, particularly as the network expands and more regions or stakeholders join.

## Legal and Institutional Limitations

This strategy operates under and follows the legal frameworks of the European Union and/or the national legislations of each participating country. All proposed actions, governance models, and partnership structures are designed to be embedded within existing laws, regulations, and procedures, particularly in areas related to cultural heritage protection, biodiversity conservation, tourism development, and cross-border cooperation.

## Alignment with Existing Strategies and Policies

The development of this strategy is also guided by alignment with several overarching policy frameworks and strategic documents, including:

- **EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)** – particularly Priority Areas 6 (Biodiversity) and 3 (Tourism);
- **European Green Deal** – supporting sustainable economic development and climate action - with special focus on **EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 & EU Forest Strategy 2030** – promoting forest biodiversity, ecological restoration, and nature-based tourism;
- **National forest, biodiversity, cultural heritage and tourism strategies** – from each partner country;
- **UNESCO and Council of Europe cultural policy guidelines**, including the criteria for certification as a European Cultural Route.

The strategy is therefore shaped by these limitations: geographical, institutional, and programmatic, which define both its ambition and its realism. Its future updates will need to reflect ongoing changes in policy, territorial cooperation, and partner involvement.



# 2. Assessment of current situation

## 2.1. Biodiversity and Natural Resources

The Danube Wood(s) Route covers a territory of immense ecological value, stretching across diverse forest landscapes and biogeographical regions in Central and Southeastern Europe. The forests within this region are home to a wide array of species, habitats, and ecosystems, ranging from Mediterranean and Alpine zones to continental and lowland floodplains. Across the partner countries, forest ecosystems serve not only as reservoirs of biodiversity but also as cultural landscapes and economic resources that support local livelihoods and traditions.

Slovenia is a heavily forested country, with 62% of its national territory covered by forests, positioning it among the leaders in forest coverage within the EU (e.g., Finland 66.2%, Sweden 62.5%, Slovenia 61.1%). In countries like Bulgaria and Romania, forest cover exceeds 35% of national territory, hosting thousands of species of plants, invertebrates, and vertebrates, including many endemic and relict species. Romania's Carpathian forests and Bulgarian forests, for instance, are among the largest remaining tracts of primary and old-growth forest in the EU, and they support keystone species such as brown bears, lynx, wolves, and European bison. Similarly, Bulgaria stands out for its high rate of endemism and extensive coverage under Natura 2000, with forest habitats including ancient beech, Balkan oak, and alluvial systems.

The Pilsen region in the Czech Republic, which includes areas like Šumava National Park and Český les, is another example of a landscape where ecological richness is evident in carnivore populations, diverse fungi and lichens, and complex forest dynamics driven by natural succession. In Slovakia's Poloniny region, UNESCO-designated beech forests form part of one of Europe's last remaining primeval forest ecosystems. These areas are vital for large mammals and support wetland and meadow species of high conservation value.

About 65% of the territory of Sarajevo Canton (Bosnia and Herzegovina) is covered by forests, which are known throughout Europe for their plant diversity. Natural heritage consists of natural areas and natural values as parts of nature of special scientific, educational, cultural and environmental, protective, recreational and other social significance, which enjoy special protection as goods of general interest. On the territory of Sarajevo Canton, there are numerous localities of special importance for biodiversity and ecology. Sarajevo Canton is recognized as an area with a high level of biodiversity due to its diverse natural values, including flora, fauna, landscapes, hydrological, geological and other characteristics of natural heritage. The region hosts a significant number of rare plant, animal and fungal species. Ravna Vala Rainforest on Bjelašnica Mountain, other localities on Bjelašnica Mountain and Igman, protected natural areas (Vrelo Bosne natural monument, Skakavac natural monument, Trebević protected area, Bjambara protected area) are particularly important. These and other sites of exceptional natural value attract visitors and tourists of various preferences

Montenegro and Serbia contribute to the ecological mosaic through their mountainous national parks, forest corridors, and riverine ecosystems. Montenegro's status as an "ecological state" is reflected in its protected areas such as Durmitor and Prokletije, which host the rare Balkan lynx and many plant endemics. Serbia's Đerdap and Tara National Parks, along with the Upper Danube Reserve, offer habitat to lynx, imperial eagles, and plant species like *Tulipa hungarica*.

Despite these remarkable assets, the countries along the route often face more or less similar pressure: increasing impacts of climate change, habitat fragmentation, illegal logging, weak enforcement of environmental regulations and in some areas, lack of compensation mechanisms for human-wildlife conflict. Bark beetle outbreaks in central Europe, forest fires in the southern Balkans, and infrastructure development in remote habitats are notable threats.

At the same time, the Danube Wood(s) Route offers significant strategic opportunities. These include the development of forest-based tourism, valorisation of traditional ecological knowledge, expansion of environmental education, and cross-border biodiversity monitoring. The region holds strong potential to integrate conservation with sustainable economic models, linking biodiversity with innovation in eco-tourism, community stewardship, and the forest bioeconomy.

Ultimately, the forested landscapes of the Danube region are not only natural assets—they are cultural and economic cornerstones of the territory. Protecting and valorising these resources will require joint vision, long-term investment, and the commitment of communities, institutions, and policy-makers across the entire transnational corridor.

## 2.2. Socio-Economic Context

The Danube Wood(s) Route spans a socio-economically diverse region, comprising urban centres, rural villages, mountainous communities, and forest-dependent economies. The socio-economic

context of the area is shaped by historical land use patterns, forest ownership models, demographic shifts, and evolving roles of the forest-based bioeconomy.

## Forests as Economic Backbone and Source of Livelihoods

In many regions of the Danube basin, forests represent a key source of livelihood, employment, and cultural identity. The forestry sector—including logging, primary wood processing, and non-timber forest products—plays an important role in rural development and local economies. This is particularly true for countries such as Romania, Slovakia, and Austria, where forest-related activities remain embedded in rural life. In mountainous and remote areas, forests are often the main source of income and jobs, especially where agricultural productivity is low.

However, the socio-economic dependence on forests varies significantly across countries and regions. In some areas, industrial logging dominates the sector, while in others, small-scale and community-based forestry is more prevalent. Countries such as Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina are increasingly recognising the role of forests in supporting sustainable development and eco-tourism, even though employment in forestry is gradually declining in most of the region.

## Structural Challenges and Disparities

The Danube region faces several structural socio-economic challenges that affect the potential of sustainable forest development. These include:

- **Fragmented forest administration:** particularly in Romania and some Western Balkan countries, where restitution processes have resulted in small and scattered parcels that are difficult to manage efficiently.
- **Aging rural populations:** many forest-rich communities face depopulation, especially among younger generations, leading to a shortage of labour and knowledge transfer gaps in traditional forest-related crafts and management.
- **Underdeveloped infrastructure:** poor road access, outdated processing facilities, and lack of connectivity affect the capacity to mobilise forest resources sustainably and to attract tourism.
- **Limited value-addition:** much of the wood extracted in the region is exported as raw material, with low levels of local processing and innovation, reducing the economic multiplier effect.

## Emerging Opportunities in the Green Economy

Despite these challenges, there is growing momentum across the Danube countries to leverage forests as part of a broader green transition. This includes:

- **Bioeconomy strategies** at national or regional level, aiming to use wood and other renewable resources to develop sustainable materials, energy, and construction models;

- **Growth in eco-tourism and cultural tourism**, especially in areas where forest heritage, woodcraft, and natural beauty can be packaged into authentic experiences;
- **Revitalisation of wood-based SMEs** through innovation in design, product diversification, and digital marketing;
- **Community-led initiatives** promoting non-timber forest products, local branding, and circular economy principles;
- **EU-funded rural development programmes** supporting forest education, micro-enterprise, and multifunctional forest landscapes.

These trends point to a socio-economic context that, while uneven, is rich with opportunities for forest-based sustainability. The Danube Wood(s) Route can act as a catalyst in this transition by connecting local economies to cultural values, biodiversity, and responsible tourism.

## Socio-Cultural Significance of Forests

Forests across the Danube region are more than economic assets—they are also embedded in local culture, identity, and tradition. Many communities maintain strong links to forest landscapes through folklore, seasonal practices, festivals, and craftsmanship. In countries like Bulgaria, Slovenia, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, forest culture is integrated into national identity, while in the Balkans, forests often symbolise resilience, freedom, and spiritual values.

Harnessing these socio-cultural connections can contribute not only to economic development but also to social cohesion, intergenerational dialogue, and the preservation of intangible heritage.

# 2.3. Cultural Heritage of Wood

The Danube Region is exceptionally rich in cultural heritage tied to forestry and wood. Timber has long played a central role in shaping the region's landscapes, livelihoods, and identities. From traditional architecture and artisanal crafts to spiritual customs and oral storytelling, wood has served not only as a building material, but as a medium of cultural expression, continuity, and adaptation. Across the basin, diverse communities have drawn on local forest resources to construct homes and places of worship, carve ritual objects, build tools, and develop symbolic traditions. Today, this legacy remains vibrant, preserved in museums and festivals, maintained through living crafts, and reimagined through cultural tourism and creative industries.

Historically, communities relied on forest ecosystems for construction, heating, transport, and artisan production. In the 19th and 20th centuries, wood also played a role in shaping regional industries and tourism. Despite modernisation, many local traditions survive through museums, restored homesteads, working craft sites, festivals, and intangible heritage such as stories and songs passed down through generations.

While tourism infrastructure and investment levels differ across countries, numerous regions are actively developing wood- and forest-themed experiences that integrate both tangible and intangible heritage. These initiatives often take the form of cultural routes, interpretive trails, and curated visitor offerings. What unites these efforts is the shared diversity of cultural expressions—ranging from Romania’s UNESCO-listed wooden churches and Austria’s immersive open-air museums to Czechia’s timber rafting traditions, Hungary’s pastoral woodcraft, and Slovenia’s iconic hayracks.

Wood-related cultural heritage across the Danube Region aligns with several international frameworks, including UNESCO’s safeguarding of tangible and intangible heritage, the European Heritage Label, and the Council of Europe’s Cultural Routes programme. These frameworks support efforts to promote sustainable cultural tourism in accordance with the objectives of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region.

This section explores the most significant dimensions of wood-related heritage across the partner regions, framed thematically and enriched with exemplary cases.

Each of the following thematic areas illustrates the unique contributions of Danube countries to the shared wood heritage:

**Traditional Wooden Architecture and Rural Building Culture:** Ranging from sacred Orthodox wooden churches in Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Serbia, to hayracks and alpine farmhouses in Slovenia and Austria, the region showcases a diverse vernacular architecture rooted in forest resources and adapted to local climate and culture.

**Craftsmanship and Artisanal Heritage:** Woodcarving schools in Bulgaria and Bosnia and Herzegovina, painted furniture in Hungary, traditional joinery and wood carving in Czechia, and contemporary wood design in Slovenia illustrate both historical continuity and modern innovation in wood-based crafts.

**Museums, Interpretation Centres and Living Exhibitions:** Across the region, institutions such as Etar in Bulgaria, HolzErlebnisWelt in Austria, and the Konjic Woodcarving Museum in Bosnia and Herzegovina interpret timber culture for the public, while also supporting artisanship and educational initiatives.

**Spiritual, Symbolic and Ritual Use of Wood:** Wooden churches, pilgrimage shrines, ritual tools, and sacred trees across countries including Romania, Hungary, Slovenia, and Montenegro affirm wood’s role in expressing spiritual values and cultural identity.

**Transmission of Intangible Heritage and Educational Practices:** Forest schools, apprenticeships, thematic trails, living history museums, and family-run workshops across the Danube region

demonstrate how wood heritage is passed on, adapted, and integrated into education, tourism, and community development.

## 2.4. SWOT Analysis

### Strengths

- Rich ecological diversity across multiple forest types (e.g., beech, oak, riparian, mountain) with high conservation value and endemism.
- Presence of primary and old-growth forests, especially in Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia, supporting iconic species like bears, lynxes, and wolves.
- Cultural richness of wood heritage, including architecture, crafts, and rituals embedded in local traditions.
- Existing museums, open-air sites, and interpretation centers focused on wood culture.
- Recognised sites and practices under UNESCO, European Heritage Label, and other cultural frameworks.
- Strong artisan networks and intergenerational knowledge transmission in many regions (e.g., Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Slovakia).
- Forests as important contributors to rural livelihoods and local economies in countries such as Romania, Austria, and Serbia.
- Forest bioeconomy strategies and multifunctional forest landscapes emerging in several countries.

### Weaknesses

- Fragmented forest governance, particularly in Romania and parts of the Balkans, hindering sustainable management and investment.
- Decline in the number of skilled artisans, and absence of formal education or training in wood-based crafts.
- Weak infrastructure (roads, tourism facilities, interpretation signage) in remote rural and mountain areas.
- Underdeveloped forest-based tourism offerings, often lacking coordinated packaging, marketing, or storytelling.
- Limited value addition and innovation in wood-based industries; much timber is exported with little local processing.
- Policy and institutional fragmentation across countries, leading to inconsistent protection and valorisation of cultural and natural heritage.

### Opportunities

- Growing demand for sustainable tourism and experiential cultural travel across Europe.
- Potential to formalise and expand the Danube Wood(s) Route as a certified Cultural Route of the Council of Europe.

- Integration with major EU policy frameworks: EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030, Green Deal, EUDR, and rural development programmes.
- Digital innovation in heritage interpretation (e.g., virtual exhibitions, augmented reality, participatory mapping).
- Cross-border cooperation for habitat corridors, shared marketing, and knowledge exchange.
- Revival of wood-based SMEs through creative design, digital commerce, storytelling and certification of climate friendly short supply chains.
- Community-driven tourism and branding models based on authenticity and local traditions.
- Increased investment potential through EU and national funding schemes for nature-based solutions, tourism, and green transition.

## Threats

- Depopulation and rural decline, especially in forest-rich areas, leading to the erosion of traditional knowledge and community stewardship.
- Illegal logging, climate change, forest diseases (such as bark beetles), and forest fires posing major risks to forest integrity and biodiversity.
- Risk of cultural dilution and over-commercialisation as tourism interest grows.
- Inadequate compensation or policy mechanisms for sustainable forest conservation and human-wildlife coexistence.
- Insufficient public investment in the restoration and maintenance of wooden buildings and cultural landscapes.
- Global economic pressures and competition undermining the viability of small-scale forestry, local value chains and artisan enterprises.

# 3. Vision and Mission

## 3.1. Vision

To establish the *Danube Wood Region* as a model for sustainable forest conservation, biodiversity and cultural heritage valorisation, and socio-economic resilience.

## 3.2. Mission

To preserve biodiversity, encourage sustainable forest-based economies, and promote the cultural heritage of wood through coordinated, transnational cooperation, community engagement, and innovative ecotourism models.



# 4. Strategic objectives and actions

## Objective 1: Preserve and/or Restore Biodiversity and Natural Resources

**Goal:** Ensure the conservation and sustainable management of the Danube forests, protecting biodiversity and natural ecosystems for long-term resilience.

### Strategic Actions:

#### 1. Monitor Biodiversity:

Implement cross-border biodiversity monitoring systems to track ecosystem health and species conservation. This includes harmonised approaches to data collection and reporting, focused on identifying and responding to threats such as habitat fragmentation, climate change impacts, and invasive species.

#### 2. Strengthen Forest Governance:

Enforce anti-deforestation policies and improve forest law compliance by aligning national and regional forest governance with EU regulations, including the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) and the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030. This action also supports capacity building for institutions and enforcement agencies to combat illegal logging and unsustainable practices.

### **3. Promote Sustainable Forestry Practices:**

Support the adoption of certified sustainable forest management systems across the region, such as FSC and PEFC certification. These practices ensure that forest operations maintain ecological integrity, protect soil and water resources, and enhance long-term forest productivity.

### **4. Foster Cross-Border Collaboration:**

Develop joint conservation and forest management projects with transnational partners to align biodiversity protection goals and foster ecological coherence. This includes enhancing landscape connectivity through ecological corridors, improving access to cross-border funding programmes, and collaborating to reduce environmental crimes (e.g., poaching, illegal harvesting).

### **5. Actions for the restoration of biodiversity and natural resources**

Design and implement targeted restoration activities to recover degraded forest and aquatic ecosystems. Examples include reintroduction of native flora and fauna (aligned with rewilding programmes), designation of strict forest protection zones, dam removal, wetland restoration, and rehabilitation of riparian habitats. These actions will be coordinated with public authorities, conservation NGOs, and local communities.

### **6. Financial framework for assuring biodiversity payments (regional/national level)**

Promote innovative financial tools and support mechanisms, including Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES), compensatory payments, and “fair transition” schemes for forest-dependent communities. These mechanisms aim to reward sustainable land stewardship and support equitable economic alternatives to unsustainable exploitation.

# Objective 2: Develop a Sustainable Forest-Based Economy

**Goal:** Support the growth of a bio-economy rooted in sustainable forestry practices and high value-added wood-based industries.

## Strategic Actions:

### 1. Enhancing and accessibility to forest resources:

Focus mainly to local enterprises by raising awareness within target groups or/and stakeholders for the importance of regional<sup>1</sup> value chains and regional added value.

### 2. Enhance market access for “regional” timber products:

Build upon the basis of regional forest resources by supporting short “regional” and cross border value chains, influence the national policies which regulate access to forest resources and promote certified wood products at stakeholder groups.<sup>2</sup> To enhance market access creating platforms and

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<sup>1</sup> Other than in private house building, especially for official and communal buildings and procurement, “regional” does not necessarily or must not be or mean a geographic or administrative concept of region. This is important regarding the eligibility of building materials and wood products for tenders in accordance with the EU guidelines for green public procurement.

<sup>2</sup> It must be ensured that the roundwood originates at least from legal and deforestation-free sources (cf. EUDR) and/or from verifiably sustainable forest management by strict forest laws, low risk of corruption in the country, forest management plans, no wood from no-go areas, etc. and/or forest management certificates according to FM-FSC and/or FM-PEFC forest certification schemes. However, it must also be explicitly ensured that the round timber does not come from primary forest logging, including single-stem extraction from such forests. It must also be ensured that the roundwood does not originate from tree species that are endangered according to CITES and IUCN.

It is important to distinguish between forest management (e.g., forest management certificates - FM certificates) and roundwood from such forests on the one hand, and supply chain documentation along the entire processing chain for wood products (e.g., chain-of-custody certificates - CoC certificates) on the other. For the implementation of “regional” supply chains, it is important to note and point out that specifying sustainable forestry in tenders alone does not enable or even guarantee regional supply chains. This is particularly important in tenders and public procurement. If tenders only require sustainable forestry, the supply chains of the procured or manufactured products can be very long, and the roundwood can come from sources all over the world, as supply chains for wood products are often global today. It is also not sufficient to consider only the last step in the supply chain.

This means that it is not sufficient, if the last manufacturer or wood processor, such as the carpenter or joiner, is based in the respective region. Only if the entire supply chain is taken into account, from the forest, through all processing steps and nodes in the supply chain, to, for example, installation in a building (cradle-to-gate and

networks to help local businesses access larger markets for regional wood products. This could take place by implementing certification of regional value chains, like LCT (Low carbon timber), developing a concept of unique identifiers (e.g. wood pillars with QR codes), establishing innovative sustainable and low carbon transports to access offers, linking similar initiatives and others.

### **3. Valorisation of forest products and services other than timber:**

Aside from timber production, there are many products and services, forests provide to society (e.g., recreation like: mountain biking, visitors, camping, hunting, etc. and environmental services such as water protection, avalanche protection, air cleaning, biodiversity protection and others). Many of these services are currently not recognized and honoured and there is a lack of systematic valorisation. With regard to recreational use or the extraction of non-timber products, it is important to ensure and communicate or monitor that the extraction of non-wood products from the forest is carried out in a sustainable manner or is regulated by law. In many cases, however, the definition of what constitutes “personal use” and what constitutes commercial use does not appear to be defined or regulated. The question of how much usage of this kind a forest can tolerate is also uncertain and probably depends on the type of forest, land, or region. This aspect is therefore difficult to address in the project at this stage and requires further definition.

### **4. Encourage Local Entrepreneurship:**

Develop training and funding programs for local entrepreneurs in the forest, timber industry and regional value chains targets of the project. The training should take place together with regional partners, stakeholders, chambers and networks, regionally and cross borders. Training should involve operators and stakeholders with regard to European, national and regional regulations. Within the project and beyond, regular internal workshops and/or working groups on specific topics will be held with interested partners

### **5. Foster Innovation: Invest in research and development for innovative wood-based bio-economy solutions.**

This comprises different actions and levels. On the one hand this is a matter of governmental decisions to establish funding programs for scientific research. This is out of the reach of the Danube Wood(s) project. On the other hand, there are potential micro scale activities to foster innovation, like design and Innovation Boxes and other formats, to develop new products and market strategies.

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gate-to-building), the product can be seen as ‘regional’. Only in this case the supply chains are climate- and environmentally friendly, and only then the added value remains within the “region.” However it is important to have the respective regionality of supply chains externally proven or certified. For this purpose there is an acknowledged European certification scheme existing, called Holz von Hier® (HVVH) resp. Low Carbon Timber® (LCT), that is third party controlled (TÜV) and usable in green public procurement. This certification scheme can immediately be used within the participating countries by partners and stakeholders (with interested partners, Holz von Hier offers, to jointly establish country representatives).

Self-declarations from actors in the supply chain are not sufficient in this regard. Experience shows that the actual regional nature of a supply chain only becomes apparent when it is subject to external monitoring. This is also important in order to avoid greenwashing.

This should also take place by scaling up traditional practices and combining these with modern designs and processing techniques.

# Objective 3: Valorise Cultural Heritage Related to Wood

**Goal:** Preserve, promote, and celebrate the cultural traditions, craftsmanship, and heritage tied to wood usage in the Danube region.

## Strategic Actions:

### 1. Promote Traditional Craftsmanship:

Support artisans and craftspeople through workshops, events, and micro grants. For example: organizing workshops with young people, summer schools and heritage camps with international participation, mentorship programs (Master + Apprentice), providing micro grants for craftsmen, development of the Origin/Authentic wood brand label or inclusion of wooden products in the existing regional Origin brands.

### 2. Annual Festivals and Events:

Organize annual cultural festivals focused on wood craftsmanship and heritage. For example, local Day of wood festival, and one common Day of cultural heritage of Wood (each year in different regions), Thematic events in cooperation with museums - storytelling.

### 3. Cultural Tourism Initiatives:

Develop cultural tourism products, including heritage trails, exhibitions, and guided tours. This could include participatory workshops, hackathons, challenges, including awarding the best proposals.

### 4. Establish strong regional networks among key stakeholders:

The groups could include craftsmen, tourism stakeholders, education, cultural institutions, other relevant stakeholders, such as hubs, living labs, and competence centres.

### 5. Develop Heritage Centres:

Create regional centres or museums dedicated to the history and art of wood-related crafts, or providing support for existing local museums through the integration of “wood heritage modules”.

# Objective 4: Develop Sustainable Tourism

**Goal:** Leverage the natural and cultural heritage of the Danube region, particularly focused on wood and forests, to drive sustainable tourism initiatives that support local communities, enhance their economies, and protect the region's environment.

## Strategic Actions:

### 1. Cultural Tourism Products

#### 1.1. Creation of the Cultural Route:

Design and implement the Danube Wood(s) Cultural Route, focusing on mapping key heritage sites, identifying important cultural and natural landmarks, and creating well-defined itineraries that showcase the uniqueness of the region. These itineraries should offer diverse experiences, ranging from historical woodcraft villages to ancient forests and key cultural monuments. Additionally, the creation of a clear and compelling brand identity will help distinguish the route as a premier sustainable tourism destination.

#### 1.2. Strengthen "Living Heritage" Interpretation:

The concept of "Living Heritage" will be at the heart of the Danube Wood(s) Cultural Route. Along the route, enhance the interpretation of traditional practices, using storytelling, re-enactments, and interactive experiences to connect visitors with the region's deep cultural and ecological roots. This could involve collaborating with local communities to preserve and share traditional crafts, folklore, and forest-related customs. Immersive experiences like woodcraft workshops, live demonstrations, and guided tours will bring history to life, offering a deeper understanding of the cultural context behind wood and forest traditions.

#### 1.3. Unified Branding and Design:

A joint branding strategy to be developed to create a strong, unified identity for the Danube Wood(s) Cultural Route, integrating its cultural and environmental values. This branding should extend across all tourism materials, including signage, brochures, websites, and social media platforms, ensuring that the route is easily recognizable and appealing to both international and local visitors.

#### 1.4. Support for Museums and Exhibitions:

The creation and enhancement of specialized museums and exhibitions focusing on the region's wood heritage will be a key component of the Danube Wood(s) Cultural Route. This could include open-air museums, traditional woodcraft centres, and heritage parks that illustrate the historical role of wood in shaping local communities and economies. These museums should not only focus on the past but also highlight ongoing traditions, providing a space for artisans to showcase their work and engage visitors in hands-on experiences like wood carving or furniture making.

#### 1.5. Promote Local Crafts:

Woodcrafts and other local artisan products are central to the cultural identity of the Danube region. By elevating the visibility and importance of these crafts within the tourism offering, visitors will gain a deeper appreciation for the role of craftsmanship in the area's heritage. Opportunities for craft workshops, artisan markets, and demonstrations will be created to enable visitors to experience first-hand the skills involved in traditional woodworking and wood-based art forms. This will also contribute to supporting local artisans economically by offering them a platform to sell their products.

## **2. Active Tourism Products**

### **2.1. Hiking and Biking Trails:**

The Danube Wood(s) Cultural Route will feature a network of hiking and biking trails that traverse the region's diverse forests, national parks, and protected areas. These trails will be designed to accommodate various levels of difficulty, from leisurely forest walks to more challenging mountain routes, ensuring that a wide range of visitors can enjoy the natural landscapes. Sustainable trail-building practices will be employed to minimize environmental impact while maximizing the enjoyment of visitors.

### **2.2. Thematic Guided Tours:**

Specialized guided tours will be developed, focusing on the natural and cultural significance of the forests, such as mushroom foraging, herb collecting, and learning about the flora and fauna of the region. These tours will provide visitors with an educational experience, deepening their understanding of how local communities have historically relied on forest resources. Additionally, local guides trained in environmental education and cultural heritage will offer personalized insights into the region's ecosystems, history, and traditions.

### **2.3. Interpretation and Presentation Tools:**

To further enhance the visitor experience, interpretation tools will be strengthened across the route. This includes the development of information boards, interactive displays, and digital tools at visitor centres and key natural and cultural sites. These tools will provide additional context about the flora, fauna, and cultural significance of the area, making the experience more enriching and educational for visitors. Advanced technologies like augmented reality (AR) could also be used at certain sites to give visitors a more immersive understanding of the heritage and ecology of the region.

### **2.4. Eco-Camping Facilities:**

A network of eco-camping sites will be established along the route, offering visitors the opportunity to experience nature up close while minimizing their environmental footprint. These campsites will be designed with sustainability in mind, using renewable energy sources, waste management systems, and eco-friendly building materials. Eco-camping will appeal to environmentally conscious tourists and promote the values of sustainable tourism.

### **2.5. Sport and Adventure Tourism:**

Support the growth of sport and adventure tourism, including mountaineering, orienteering, and other outdoor activities. These activities will appeal to visitors seeking active, nature-based experiences while encouraging physical engagement with the landscape. Well-organized adventure



tourism can contribute to both local economies and environmental education by fostering appreciation for the natural environment.

#### 2.6. Wildlife Observation Tourism:

As part of the sustainable tourism offering, wildlife observation will be developed as a core tourism product, with opportunities for birdwatching, wildlife photography, and nature walks. Protected areas along the route, such as forests and wetlands, will serve as key locations for these activities. Additionally, trained guides will lead wildlife tours, providing educational content about local species and ecosystems.

#### 2.7. Quality Standards for Rural Tourism and Gastronomy:

As part of enhancing the overall visitor experience, a focus will be placed on improving rural tourism services and gastronomy. Local accommodation providers and restaurants will be encouraged to adopt sustainable practices and to highlight regional flavours, particularly those linked to the forest and wood culture (e.g., forest mushrooms, wild herbs). Training will be offered to help rural tourism operators raise the standard of their offerings, ensuring that visitors enjoy high-quality, authentic experiences.

### 3. Capacity Building for Tourism Stakeholders

This includes training Programs for Local Stakeholders. To ensure that the benefits of tourism are widely shared, training and capacity-building programs will be provided for local guides, hospitality providers, and tourism entrepreneurs. These programs will focus on a range of topics, including product development, online marketing, heritage interpretation, and visitor management. Local operators will be encouraged to embrace green technologies and sustainable practices in their businesses, helping to create a tourism industry that supports both local communities and environmental conservation.

### 4. Infrastructure Enhancement

Key tourism infrastructure, such as visitor centres, resting places, shelters, and signposting of trails, will be developed or enhanced along the route. This will ensure that visitors have access to the necessary amenities and services while traveling through the region. The infrastructure will be designed with a focus on environmental sustainability, using local materials and low-impact construction techniques.

### 5. Promotion

#### 5.1. International Promotion Campaign:

A robust international marketing campaign should be created and delivered in order to increase visibility and attract visitors from around the world. This campaign will promote the Danube Wood(s) Cultural Route as a unique, sustainable tourism destination that blends history, culture, and nature. Digital platforms, travel influencers, and international tourism fairs will be used to reach global audiences and showcase the region's exceptional offerings.

#### 5.2. Integrated Tourism Packages:

Integrated tourism packages will be developed, combining cultural heritage tours, forest-based activities, and traditional woodcraft demonstrations. These packages will offer visitors a holistic

experience, enabling them to explore the region's rich traditions and natural beauty in an organized and accessible way.

# Objective 5: Raise Awareness and Build Community Engagement

**Goal:** Foster environmental stewardship and community participation through education, outreach, and awareness campaigns.

## Strategic Actions:

### 1. Educational Campaigns:

Develop and implement awareness-raising campaigns tailored to schools, local communities, and the general public. These campaigns will cover topics such as forest ecology, biodiversity, sustainable forestry, and the cultural heritage of wood. Materials will be adapted to different age groups and include interactive and multilingual formats to ensure accessibility across the Danube region.

### 2. Educational Programs:

Introduce hands-on educational initiatives in schools, cultural centres, and community hubs aimed at transmitting traditional woodworking skills and heritage knowledge. These may include school modules, woodcraft clubs, vocational programs, and intergenerational learning formats that bring together master craftsmen and youth.

### 3. Digital Awareness Programs:

Launch multimedia campaigns and digital content strategies to promote the values of the Danube Wood(s) Cultural Route. These will include short videos, social media storytelling, podcasts, and digital exhibitions that highlight traditional practices, sustainable solutions, and the voices of local communities. Tools will also be developed for online education and interactive learning.

### 4. Community Workshops:

Organize regular community workshops and events focused on forest conservation, sustainable living, and cultural heritage. These activities will be designed to foster dialogue, exchange of knowledge, and empowerment of local stakeholders. Events may include hands-on workshops, thematic fairs, seasonal celebrations, and local forums.

### 5. Public Information Platforms:

Create online and offline platforms that serve as repositories of knowledge and tools for community engagement. These platforms will provide access to best practices, policy updates, participatory

planning tools, and local success stories. Print and digital formats will ensure wide access, including in rural or underserved areas.

## **6. Stakeholder Collaboration Forums:**

Establish annual or bi-annual forums bringing together diverse stakeholders—local governments, NGOs, community groups, educators, businesses, and researchers—for exchange and collaboration. These forums will function as spaces for co-creation, monitoring progress, and sharing innovations and challenges across regions.

# 5. Governance and Operational Framework

## 5.1. Governance Model and Decision-Making Mechanisms

This chapter outlines the guiding principles, possible structures, and preferred direction for the future governance system, based on partner consultations and the outcomes of the workshops. Final decisions regarding the establishment of bodies, allocation of roles, and legal arrangements will be taken collectively in subsequent project phases.

### Principles for Governance

The governance model should ensure that the Route is:

- **Coherent:** Maintaining a shared vision and strategic direction;
- **Inclusive:** Engaging all partner countries and relevant stakeholders;
- **Adaptable:** Allowing different regions to contribute according to their strengths and capacities;
- **Transparent:** With clear procedures and accountability;
- **Viable:** Supported by realistic administrative and financial arrangements.

## Preferred Governance Approach: Balanced and Layered

During the partner discussions, there was broad agreement that neither a fully centralised nor a fully decentralised model would suit the realities of the Danube Wood(s) Cultural Route. Instead, a **balanced governance model** was considered the most appropriate. This would combine transnational coordination with strong regional implementation and local flexibility.

Partners expressed the need for:

- Local ownership over the design and delivery of visitor experiences;
- A central coordination point to manage overall branding, visibility, and strategic cohesion;
- Shared responsibility for funding, quality assurance, and development of the Route.

This approach acknowledges the diversity of contexts and capacities across the Route while maintaining a unified identity and common objectives.

## Possible Governance Components

The following components were discussed as potential building blocks for the governance system:

### *A Central Coordination Function*

A lightweight central coordination function could be created to:

- Facilitate partner communication and knowledge exchange;
- Coordinate common branding and storytelling across countries;
- Liaise with the Council of Europe and other European institutions;
- Support joint fundraising and project development;
- Ensure minimum quality standards are observed across the Route.

This function could be hosted by an existing organisation or a newly formed legal entity (e.g., association, secretariat) and may rotate between partners over time. Its structure—possibly including a general meeting of members and an advisory group—will be decided later based on partner consensus and funding availability.

### *Regional and National Hubs*

Each country or region involved in the Route could designate a coordination point (a "hub") responsible for:

- Coordinating local activities and partner engagement;
- Supporting the identification and management of sites;

- Developing regional action plans and tourism products;
- Liaising with the central coordination function.

These hubs could be based within cultural institutions, NGOs, destination management organisations, or public authorities—depending on the national context. Their roles and responsibilities will be outlined in future partnership agreements.

### *Decision-Making Framework*

It is anticipated that major decisions will be made collectively by all partners, potentially through a general assembly or regular coordination meetings. Day-to-day decisions could be managed by a small working group or coordination team. Voting procedures and governance rules (e.g., majority vs. consensus) will be determined as part of the route's legal and operational framework.

A **Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)** or equivalent document will likely be drafted to clarify how decisions are made, who does what, and how resources are managed—while leaving space for future adjustments.

## **Next Steps in Governance Development**

As of this stage, the project partners agree on the need to:

- **Maintain flexibility** in designing the governance model;
- **Build on lessons learned** during project implementation;
- **Test working structures** through pilot activities;
- **Engage stakeholders** in shaping roles and responsibilities.

Further exploration during the next phases of the project will include identifying a suitable host organisation for the coordination function—either as a permanent structure or through a rotating model among partners—alongside drafting basic internal rules and operational procedures to ensure clarity and functionality. Financing mechanisms will also be examined, including the potential mix of EU project funding, national contributions, and a flexible membership fee model. In parallel, minimum quality standards and reporting requirements will be defined, with careful attention to preserving local diversity and respecting the different capacities and contexts of the regions involved.

The governance of the Danube Wood(s) Cultural Route will evolve in parallel with its implementation. It will be rooted in cooperation, shaped by shared experience, and adapted to the realities of the regions involved. This strategy offers a starting framework and a shared commitment to developing a transparent, inclusive, and functional governance model that will support the Route's long-term vision and sustainability.

# 5.2. Roles and Responsibilities. Stakeholders Engagement and Collaboration

## Key Stakeholders Mapping

Stakeholders in the Danube Wood(s) Cultural Route span multiple sectors, including conservation, culture, tourism, education, and local economic development. They can be grouped as follows:

- **Public authorities (local, regional, national):**  
Responsible for forest management, heritage protection, tourism planning, and infrastructure. They are key actors in providing institutional support and policy alignment.
- **Protected area administrations and forest services:**  
Manage key biodiversity and forest areas, contribute to conservation and education efforts, and ensure environmental sustainability.
- **Museums, cultural institutions, and heritage centres:**  
Custodians of local memory and wood-related traditions, they support the interpretation and promotion of cultural heritage through exhibitions, workshops, and educational programming.
- **Local communities and grassroots organisations:**  
Vital for co-creation and long-term stewardship. They host the sites, maintain living traditions, and embody the cultural identity of the region.
- **Artisans and SMEs in the wood and tourism sectors:**  
Key to local economic development, they contribute through product innovation, cultural transmission, and sustainable business practices.
- **Universities and research centres:**  
Provide knowledge, innovation, and training support in forestry, heritage, tourism, and environmental sciences.
- **NGOs and civil society actors:**  
Play a critical role in advocacy, education, community mobilisation, and pilot initiatives, often acting as intermediaries between institutions and citizens.



- **Tourism boards and destination management organisations:**  
Promote the Route as a coherent, high-quality experience, facilitate tourism development, and support market integration.

Each of these stakeholders has a unique role to play and will be engaged at different levels depending on the context and objectives of specific actions.

## Engagement Mechanisms

To ensure active participation and shared ownership, the Route will rely on a variety of engagement mechanisms adapted to the diversity of contexts and stakeholder types:

- **Participatory workshops**  
Organised during the development and implementation of regional action plans, these workshops enable collaborative planning, visioning, and exchange of local knowledge.
- **Public consultations and focus groups**  
Conducted at key milestones to gather input from community members, visitors, and local actors, particularly on sensitive or strategic topics.
- **Advisory boards or thematic working groups**  
Composed of experts, community representatives, or institutional partners, these groups provide ongoing guidance on topics such as biodiversity, wood heritage, education, and tourism.
- **Surveys and online platforms**  
Used to collect structured feedback, monitor satisfaction, and identify emerging needs from broader stakeholder groups.
- **Storytelling and co-creation initiatives**  
Designed to capture local narratives and traditional knowledge, strengthening visibility and engagement while building a shared identity.
- **Stakeholder assemblies or regional forums**  
Held annually or biannually, these events bring together partners and contributors for peer learning, experience exchange, and project review.

Engagement will follow principles of inclusivity, transparency, and respect for local cultures, ensuring that all voices—especially from underrepresented groups—are heard and considered.

## Collaboration Models

Given the transnational nature and multi-thematic scope of the Route, collaboration must be structured yet flexible. The following models are envisioned:

- **Multi-level collaboration**  
Aligning local, regional, national, and international actors through clearly defined but adaptable roles, allowing coordination while respecting subsidiarity.
- **Public-private partnerships (PPP)**

Encouraging cooperation between public authorities and private actors (such as wood-based SMEs or tourism operators) to invest in infrastructure, services, and branding.

- **Cross-sectoral alliances**  
Building bridges between forestry, cultural heritage, education, and tourism sectors to enable integrated project development and funding applications.
- **Transnational pilot initiatives**  
Implemented jointly by partners from different countries, these pilots will test collaborative models and contribute to mutual learning and innovation.
- **Regional clusters or hubs**  
Acting as intermediaries, these hubs will manage stakeholder networks at the territorial level, coordinate implementation, and feed back into the transnational structure.
- **Peer-to-peer partnerships**  
Facilitating direct exchange between similar institutions or organisations in different countries (e.g., museums, schools, artisan groups).

These collaboration models will be tested and refined during the project implementation phase, with the goal of establishing long-term relationships and scalable practices.

## 5.3. Resource Mobilization and Funding

Establishing and maintaining the Danube Wood(s) Cultural Route as a dynamic and sustainable transnational initiative requires a diversified and adaptable funding strategy. The Route's activities—ranging from coordination and communication to site development, training, and promotion—must be supported through a combination of European, national, regional, and private sources.

The financial strategy for the Route is not fixed at this stage but will be progressively developed and tested during project implementation, based on partner experience, evolving needs, and emerging opportunities. This chapter outlines guiding principles and potential approaches for funding the Route's structures and activities in the short, medium, and long term.

### Funding Sources

A variety of funding sources will be explored to ensure resilience and reduce dependency on any single stream. These may include:

- **EU funding programmes:**  
Project-based support from Interreg Danube, Creative Europe, Horizon Europe (clusters related to culture, environment, and rural development), Erasmus+, and LIFE. These programmes can finance both coordination activities and thematic pilot projects.
- **National and regional public funding:**  
Ministries or agencies responsible for culture, environment, rural development, or tourism may offer grants or co-financing for local and regional activities that align with the Route's objectives.
- **Membership fees:**  
A tiered membership model may be considered, with modest, equitable contributions from participating organisations. This could support basic administrative and coordination costs. Further discussions are needed to determine affordability and fairness, and this mechanism will only be implemented with broad partner consensus.
- **Private sector sponsorship:**  
Partnerships with ethical businesses, particularly in the forest-based industries, cultural tourism, and green innovation sectors, could provide additional income or in-kind support. Sponsors may also contribute to specific campaigns, events, or co-branded initiatives.
- **Income-generating activities:**  
Revenues may be generated from services such as guided tours, training programmes, merchandise, or certification/branding schemes (e.g. labels for "authentic wood heritage" sites or products), developed and tested in future phases.
- **Community-based fundraising:**  
Donations, crowdfunding, and volunteer-based support could also play a role, particularly in smaller-scale initiatives or events.

## 5.4. Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting

A strong monitoring, evaluation, and reporting (MER) system is essential to ensure that the Danube Wood(s) Cultural Route achieves its objectives, remains accountable to its stakeholders, and continuously improves over time. The MER framework is not meant to be a rigid or bureaucratic

system but rather a flexible, learning-oriented tool to track progress, share results, and adapt to changing needs and opportunities.

During the project phase, the MER approach will be developed gradually, starting with simple tools and indicators and becoming more structured as the Route matures and moves towards certification and long-term operation.

## Monitoring: Tracking Progress and Activities

Monitoring will focus on tracking the implementation of strategic actions at both transnational and regional levels. This includes:

- Progress on strategic objectives (e.g., number of restored sites, tourism activities developed, educational programmes launched);
- Stakeholder participation (e.g., events organised, institutions engaged, communities involved);
- Communication and outreach metrics (e.g., website visits, media coverage, social media interactions);
- Capacity-building efforts (e.g., trainings delivered, tools created, partnerships formed).

Each partner will contribute to monitoring by reporting on their activities and achievements through light, user-friendly templates. Regional Hubs will collect and consolidate data locally, while a central coordination point will produce overview reports at the transnational level.

Monitoring will be conducted on an annual basis, with mid-term and final reviews aligned to key project and funding cycles.

## Evaluation: Reflecting, Learning, and Improving

Evaluation will be used to reflect on the overall effectiveness, relevance, and added value of the Route over time. It will address questions such as:

- Are we achieving the intended impacts in conservation, heritage valorisation, and community development?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of our governance and operational model?
- Are we meeting the expectations of stakeholders and target groups?
- What lessons can be drawn to inform future activities and scale-up?

Evaluations will be both internal (self-assessment by partners) and external (conducted by independent experts), depending on available resources. They will be organised at key moments,

such as the end of project phases or before major strategic decisions (e.g., certification application, expansion).

Participatory methods—such as interviews, focus groups, and peer learning workshops—will be encouraged to ensure that evaluation is inclusive and practical.

## Reporting Mechanisms

Transparent reporting is important for trust-building, visibility, and alignment with external frameworks (e.g., EU funding, Council of Europe Cultural Routes certification). The following reporting mechanisms are proposed:

- **Annual Progress Report**  
A short narrative and visual summary of activities, achievements, and key indicators, compiled by the central coordination function with input from Regional Hubs.
- **Regional Activity Reports**  
Each Regional Hub may prepare an annual or bi-annual summary of activities and progress, including good practices and challenges. These reports will feed into the overall progress report.
- **Thematic Briefs or Spotlights**  
Occasional reporting on specific topics (e.g., biodiversity impact, tourism flows, SME involvement) to support learning, advocacy, or funding proposals.
- **Public Communication**  
A simplified version of reporting will be made available to the general public via newsletters, websites, and social media to increase transparency and engagement.

## Indicators and Tools

A simple, shared set of indicators will be developed collaboratively with partners. These indicators will align with the strategic objectives and horizontal principles and may include both quantitative and qualitative elements. Example indicators include:

- Number of certified sites and events held;
- Area of restored or protected forest land;
- Number of SMEs involved in the Route;
- Visitor satisfaction levels;
- Media and online reach;
- Stakeholder engagement levels.

Digital tools (e.g., shared platforms, online forms) will be used to make data collection and reporting efficient and comparable across regions. Capacity-building and support will be offered to ensure that all partners can participate meaningfully in MER processes.

## 5.5. Risk Management Plan

The implementation and long-term sustainability of the Danube Wood(s) Cultural Route (DWCR) will inevitably involve various forms of risk—strategic, operational, financial, environmental, and reputational. To ensure the Route’s resilience and credibility, a flexible but structured risk management approach will be embedded in its governance and operations from the early stages.

Rather than eliminating risk entirely, this plan aims to anticipate, monitor, and mitigate potential challenges that could compromise the Route’s integrity, effectiveness, or continuity. The approach will be reviewed regularly and refined as the Route grows in complexity and membership.

### Types of Risks and Potential Impacts

The main categories of risk identified at this stage include:

#### *Strategic Risks*

- Misalignment between partners’ expectations and strategic goals;
- Lack of a clear shared vision or commitment over time;
- Fragmentation or loss of cohesion among regions;
- Inability to meet Council of Europe certification criteria or sustain recognition.

#### *Operational Risks*

- Limited administrative capacity or coordination inefficiencies;
- Weak participation or disengagement of key stakeholders;
- Over-complex procedures or lack of clarity in governance roles;

- Language and communication barriers across countries.

### *Financial Risks*

- Lack of secured, multi-annual funding for central coordination;
- Inability or unwillingness of partners to contribute membership fees;
- Overdependence on project-based funding with uncertain continuity.

### *Reputational Risks*

- Inconsistent quality of visitor experience or branding;
- Public criticism due to poor coordination, lack of transparency, or miscommunication;
- Failure to deliver on publicly stated objectives or values.

### *Environmental Risks*

- Conflicts between tourism development and conservation goals;
- Climate change impacts on natural heritage and ecosystems;
- Insufficient adaptation to environmental standards or regulations.

## **Risk Mitigation Measures**

To address these risks, the following general mitigation strategies are proposed:

- **Clear governance and roles:** A shared governance charter or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) will define roles and responsibilities, decision-making processes, and lines of accountability.
- **Scalable coordination model:** The central coordination structure will be designed to operate at different intensity levels depending on available funding and capacity, ensuring basic functions can be maintained in low-resource scenarios.
- **Phased development:** The Route will evolve in stages, allowing for continuous learning and adjustment. Initial phases will prioritise testing and refinement through pilot actions and soft structures.
- **Monitoring and review:** As outlined in Chapter 5.4, annual reviews and progress reports will serve as checkpoints for identifying and addressing emerging risks.

- **Transparent communication:** Open and regular updates to partners and the public will help manage expectations and reinforce trust.
- **Flexible funding model:** Combining EU projects, national funds, private sponsorships, and optional contributions will reduce reliance on a single funding stream.
- **Training and capacity building:** Regional coordinators and stakeholders will receive support and guidance on governance, quality assurance, and collaboration tools.
- **Diversity and redundancy:** Spreading responsibilities across multiple actors and levels (central, regional, local) will reduce vulnerability to partner disengagement or institutional changes.

## Escalation and Response Mechanisms

In the event of persistent issues or major risks, the following escalation and response measures could be introduced:

- A risk log maintained by the coordination body to document and track issues;
- Peer mediation or external facilitation in case of conflict between partners;
- Temporary delegation of responsibilities if a region is unable to fulfil its role;
- Review of membership status or roles in cases of repeated non-compliance.

## Future Adaptation and Learning

Risk management will not be a one-off task, but a continuous learning process. As the Route grows and more stakeholders join, new risks may emerge, while others diminish. Annual governance reviews and feedback from partners will be used to refine the risk framework and ensure it remains relevant, practical, and aligned with the values of the Danube Wood(s) Cultural Route.



# 6. Communication and Outreach Plan

Effective communication and outreach are vital to the success of the Danube Wood(s) Cultural Route. They enable the Route to build a strong identity, attract diverse audiences, and maintain engagement across different regions and stakeholder groups. The communication plan is designed to serve both internal and external purposes—enhancing collaboration among partners while increasing visibility, credibility, and reach among the general public, decision-makers, and tourism markets.

The communication approach will be participatory, multilingual, and inclusive, using both digital and in-person tools to connect local stories to a transnational vision. It will promote the Route as a shared cultural and ecological journey, where forests and wood heritage are celebrated as sources of life, identity, and sustainable development.

## 6.1. Digital Strategy

The digital strategy outlines the Route's approach to building a coherent online presence and fostering interactive engagement. It focuses on how digital tools will be used to represent the Route, disseminate content, and connect stakeholders across borders. This includes establishing the Route's digital identity, making information accessible, and creating spaces for participation, visibility, and dialogue in a dynamic online environment.

The strategy recognises that digital communication is not limited to promotion; it is also a space for education, interpretation, and storytelling. It aims to cultivate an active community of followers, contributors, and advocates who shape and share the Route's values.

## 6.2. Local Engagement

Local engagement is central to ensuring that the Route is grounded in the communities it represents. This subchapter defines the principles for working directly with local actors—municipalities, civil society organisations, schools, cultural groups, and residents—to strengthen their involvement and ownership of the initiative.

The approach emphasises communication as a two-way process: not only informing local communities, but also listening to their voices, understanding their perspectives, and integrating their stories. It supports the creation of trust, relevance, and cultural continuity, and seeks to reinforce the Route’s function as a platform for community pride and participation.

## 6.3. Media Outreach

Media outreach provides the strategic orientation for how the Route positions itself in public discourse. It includes collaboration with press and broadcast media, as well as newer formats such as digital journalism, blogs, and influencers.

Media relationships will be cultivated and the Route will present its activities, values, and identity in a way that is compelling and accessible to broader audiences. It recognises the media as multipliers—helping to extend the Route’s visibility beyond project partners and sectors, and contributing to public awareness, tourism interest, and cultural recognition.

## 6.4. Branding and Storytelling

Branding and storytelling give the Route its emotional and visual identity. This subchapter sets the foundation for how the Route communicates its narrative, values, and distinctiveness in a consistent and resonant way.

Branding is not only about aesthetics—it conveys trust, unity, and belonging. Storytelling complements this by capturing the diverse voices, traditions, landscapes, and practices that define the Danube Wood(s) Cultural Route. The approach embraces diversity while ensuring coherence, linking local stories to the wider European and Danubian context. It also provides tools and frameworks that help all partners communicate with clarity and connection.

# 7. Implementation Timeline

See Annex A

# 8. Conclusion

The Danube Wood(s) Cultural Route Strategy presents a comprehensive and forward-looking framework for preserving the ecological richness, cultural legacy, and socio-economic vitality of forested landscapes across the Danube Region. Grounded in cross-border cooperation and community engagement, the strategy reflects a shared vision: to transform wood-related natural and cultural heritage into a unifying force for sustainable regional development.

Throughout the strategy, five strategic objectives have been defined—spanning biodiversity preservation, forest-based economic growth, cultural heritage valorisation, sustainable tourism development, and awareness raising. Together, these objectives are supported by a robust governance model, a participatory monitoring and evaluation framework, and an inclusive communication and outreach plan. These interconnected pillars ensure that the Route will not only be a network of places, but a living platform for cooperation, innovation, and resilience.

The Danube Wood(s) Route builds on the strengths of its partner regions—remarkable biodiversity, artisanal traditions, and community-based knowledge—while acknowledging current challenges such as climate risks, depopulation, and fragmented policy environments. It proposes an adaptive, layered governance system that balances local initiative with transnational cohesion. Moreover, it positions the Route as a strong candidate for future certification as a European Cultural Route under the Council of Europe framework.

This strategy should be viewed as both a roadmap and a commitment. It provides a foundation for the continued development, recognition, and expansion of the Route in the years ahead. It also calls upon public authorities, local communities, civil society, businesses, and cultural actors to play an active role in shaping the Route's evolution—ensuring that the forests, stories, and skills of the Danube region remain vibrant and valued.

Through the implementation of this Strategy, the Danube Wood(s) Cultural Route aims to contribute meaningfully to a greener, more inclusive, and culturally connected Europe.