

South-East European countries strengthen cooperation to address invasive alien species issues!

Invasive alien species (IAS) have been increasingly becoming an issue of serious concern during the past two decades. Numerous binding and non-binding international documents and initiatives appeal for control of IAS introductions and spread, e.g. the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention). Recently, Regulation No. 1143/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council came into force and obliged the EU Member-states to act to 'prevent, minimise and mitigate the adverse impact on biodiversity of the introduction and spread within the Union, both intentional and unintentional, of invasive alien species'. Furthermore, there have been recent efforts to consolidate IAS information into centralised European, regional and national databases. Networking and regional cooperation are of crucial importance for the management of invasive alien species. The East and South European Network for Invasive Alien Species (ESENIA) was established

with the aim to facilitate exchange of IAS information and collaboration in the East and South European countries.

A step forward in response to the IAS concerns in the region was the organisation of the 6th **ESENIA Workshop: East and South European Network for Invasive Alien Species – A tool to support the management of alien species in Bulgaria (ESENIA-TOOLS); ESENIA-TOOLS Kick-Off Meeting**, on 26-28 October 2015, in Sofia, Bulgaria.

The workshop was organised by the Institute of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Research with the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (IBER-BAS) and ESENIA. It was supported by the Financial Mechanism of the European Economic Area 2009 – 2014, Programme 'BG03. Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services', under the ESENIA-TOOLS project.

More than 80 experts from Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Kosovo, R. Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Turkey, and the United



Workshop participants in front of the building of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (photo I. Boršić).

Kingdom took part in this event. The main goals of the workshop were: 1) to bring together researchers and policy makers from the South-East European countries and to strengthen cooperation for addressing IAS issues, e.g. establishment of a common IAS web-portal and database in the region, as well as development of common data forms, protocols and methods for collecting data on IAS; and 2) to share information and experience from the current projects and activities carried out at national levels.

The ESENIAS-TOOLS project's goals and tasks, working plan, activities, and reporting requirements were presented during the first day of the workshop. Activities of the different Working Groups of the project were presented and discussed, including acceptance of common data forms, questionnaires and protocols, database structure, GIS-platform structure, database compatibility with the European Alien Species Information Network (EASIN), capacity building and raising of public awareness activities.

Reviews of the on-going activities related to IAS in the ESENIAS countries were presented in the second workshop day, which was open to a wider audience. The attendants of the meeting were welcomed by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Anna Ganeva, Director of IBER-BAS, Prof. DSc. Dimitar Ivanov, Scientific Secretary at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Mr. Valeri Georgiev, National Nature Protection Service Directorate, Ministry of Environment and Water of Bulgaria, and

Ms. Kremena Gocheva, Coordination on EU Affairs and International Cooperation Directorate, Ministry of Environment and Water of Bulgaria. Then, the establishment and recent activities of ESENIAS were presented by Teodora Trichkova, followed by presentation of the activities of EASIN (S. Katsanevakis), future networking opportunities within ESENIAS-TOOLS project (A. Uludag), and IAS country reports for Bulgaria (R. Tomov), Croatia (A. Duplić), Greece (A. Zenetos), Kosovo (Q. Maxhuni), R. Macedonia (B. Simovski), Montenegro (S. Hadžiablahović), Romania (D. Cogalniceanu), Serbia (M. Rat), Turkey (A. Uludag), and Italy (A. Inghilesi). Three case studies were also presented.

Some other case studies related to IAS in the ESENIAS region were presented during the third day of the workshop. Presentation of preliminary results and discussions continued per ESENIAS-TOOLS project's Working Groups.

This ESENIAS workshop was followed by a 2-day meeting '*Data collection, analysis, standardisation and harmonisation on alien terrestrial invertebrate species*' of the ESENIAS-TOOLS project Working Group 5.

We firmly believe that the workshop contributed to strengthening of the cooperation among the South-East European countries to face the IAS challenges. We are grateful to all attendants for their efforts and active participation! For more information, please, visit: <http://www.esenias.org>.

Vladimir Vladimirov & Teodora Trichkova

Institute of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Research
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences
Sofia, Bulgaria