Bosnia's neglected cave seeks U.N. recognition

Legend says fairies used to dance in the large chambers of the Vjetrenica cave, in southern Bosnia. The dancers were beautiful, but traces on the ground betrayed their cloven feet, the story goes. Visitors who wish to see the cave must keep watch for landmines along the run-down road leading to Vjetrenica.

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Today, the cave is praised by scientists as one of the richest in the world for underground biological life, but war and neglect have hindered efforts to shine the light of international acclaim on its treasures.

Located in the south of Bosnia, about 25 km (15 miles) north of the ancient Adriatic town of Dubrovnik, the cave was put on the United Nations preliminary list for World Heritage sites last December - the first step in a complex process to win an official nomination to the list.

“Our goal is to prove that Vjetrenica is the world's single richest cave in underground fauna,” said research coordinator Jana Bodek of the Croatian Bio-Speleological Association.

Before the break-up of former Yugoslavia, Vjetrenica had been thoroughly explored and opened to visitors. A one km-long tourist track equipped with special lights was built into the 6.2 km (3.8 mile) labyrinth.

But during the 1992-95 war in Bosnia, the cave's infrastructure was devastated and all supporting buildings, such as the archive centre, tourist office and a motel were burned down by Bosnian Serb forces.

Now, visitors wishing to see the cave must keep watch for landmines along the run-down road leading to Vjetrenica.

“To make Vjetrenica a World Heritage site, we must get rid of the mines and build a decent road. We must ... show that we care,” said Midhat Uscuplic, who backs the project on behalf of Bosnia's Academy of Arts and Science.

THE WORLD'S ONLY HYDRA

More than 30 underground species have been found exclusively in Vjetrenica, including cave snails, a spider, a shrimp, a worm and the world's only cave hydra, according to the International Society for Subterranean Biology.

"The life in speleological objects, such as caves, is very rare ... and Vjetrenica, with its 86 species, is extremely rich," said Ana Baksic, a Croatian speleologist and member of an international research group at the caves.

Visitors are buffeted by fierce winds as they enter Vjetrenica's low vaults. Then, they pass into a dark tunnel that widens to spacious chambers.

The caves contain rare drawings of a horseman and hunters typical of Bosnian medieval tombstone art and the remains of the 16th century summer palace belonging to a local nobleman, who used the strong winds as natural air-conditioning.

Some scientists believe that Vjetrenica, which means "Wind Cave", is actually a system of multi-layered canals, chambers, streams and lakes stretching all the way down to the Adriatic.

It is a prime example of the karst -- rough limestone with underground drainage -- typical of the Balkans.

All good reasons, say Vjetrenica's backers, for it to become a U.N. World Heritage site, joining a list of places deemed to be of outstanding universal value.

Ivo Lucic, a member of the Ravno speleological association near Vjetrenica, says the real job of winning this status for the cave is only beginning.

Bosnia must provide the United Nations Environmental, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) with a full and precise file on the cave's contents and condition.

"As for the natural aspects of Vjetrenica, we are fine, but the main problem will be the social aspects," Lucic said, adding that there is no state institution to manage the cave.

STATE PROTECTION NEEDED

Vjetrenica was put under state protection in 1950, but postwar Bosnia was divided into two autonomous regions -- a Muslim-Croat federation and a Serb Republic -- and now there is no law regulating the status of natural sites nor a state institution devoted to protecting them.

The federal government allocated funds for the lighting to be re-installed at Vjetrenica and Australian specialist Neil Kell is working to design the best system of illumination for the cave, which visitors now can see only by torchlight.

Uscuplic said the Academy of Arts and Science, which is based in Sarajevo, would propose setting up an Institute for Karst in Ravno to take charge of Vjetrenica.

The cave's backers say other problems also loom -- like the Croatian government's draft plans to build a section of an Adriatic highway across the area around Vjetrenica.

"We shall not allow that to happen," Lucic said bitterly, sitting in front of the cave. "We shall lie down at the construction site and they will have to run over us."


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