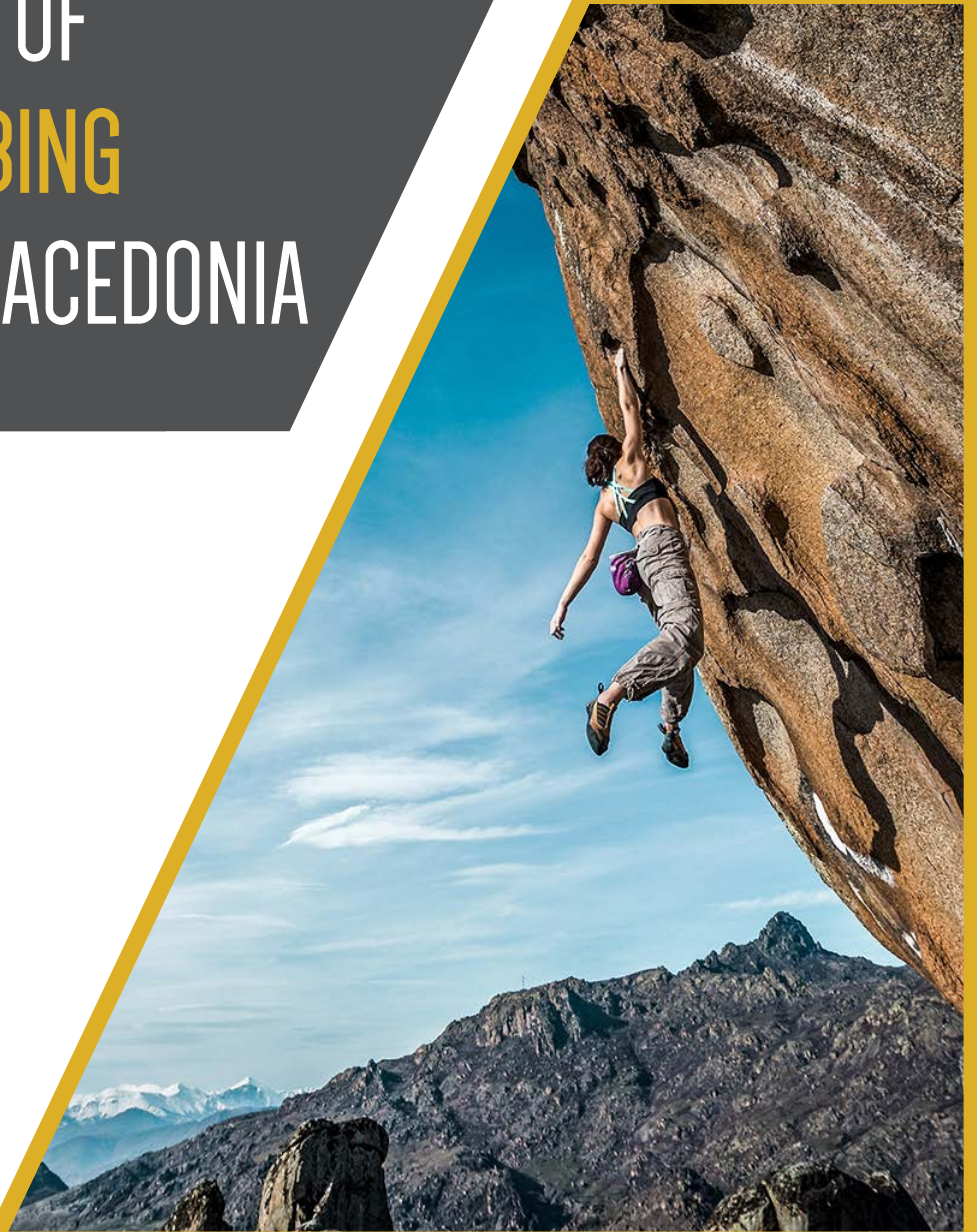




THE
CLIMBING
INITIATIVE

THE IMPACT OF ROCK CLIMBING IN NORTH MACEDONIA

August 2020





ABOUT THE CLIMBING INITIATIVE

The Climbing Initiative is a Colorado-based nonprofit supporting climbing communities worldwide. Through research, community engagement, and partnerships, we bring together organizations invested in the future of climbing and develop best practices for supporting the growth of climbing in emerging contexts. We believe rock climbing can empower individuals, create new sources of livelihood, and foster the development of a more sustainable and equitable world.

climbinginitiative.org

Cover photo by Goran Kuzmanovski

Natalija Ristevska climbing the Krali Marko highball boulder in Prilep

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Biljana Talevska climbing in Demir Kapija

SUMMARY

- ◆ North Macedonia counts approximately 1,300 sport climbing and bouldering routes, but locals estimate that 90 percent of the country's climbing areas remain undiscovered.
 - ◆ Although the country carries a strong tradition of mountaineering, climbing is still in an early stage of development, marked by little public understanding of the sport.
 - ◆ The Macedonian government is enthusiastic about promoting outdoor tourism. Some areas, such as Prilep and Demir Kapija, experience a steady flow of climbing tourists, but others have yet to capitalize on the rocks in their backyard.
 - ◆ Mountain sports have had a significant social impact as a unifying force among ex-Yugoslavian countries and a tool for positive psychosocial development.
 - ◆ Trash and environmental degradation are serious issues in North Macedonia, and some hope that outdoor sports like climbing will inspire Macedonians to develop a more intimate relationship with nature.
 - ◆ To fulfill its potential as a top climbing destination, North Macedonia must see increased public awareness of climbing, institutional support, publicity, and collaboration between the mountain sports federations.
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INTRODUCTION

North Macedonia, a country nestled in the Balkans, is an emerging climbing destination. Its rich history of mountaineering acts as a foundation for the growth of sport climbing and bouldering in the modern era. The country is home to a small but dedicated group of climbers and it welcomes a respect-

North Macedonia, a country nestled in the Balkans, is an emerging climbing destination

able number of European climbing tourists to its most popular boulders and crags each year. While the popularity of climbing has excellent potential to grow in North Macedonia, a lack of public awareness and understanding of the sport holds it back. This case study sheds light on this lesser-known climbing destination and provides recommendations to help it flourish.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

The Climbing Initiative conducts case studies on climbing areas and communities at varying stages of development around the world. We believe that communicating patterns in the context of climbing worldwide has the potential to change how organizations and communities interact around climbing-related issues.

STUDY AREA

North Macedonia (known as Macedonia before 2019) is a country in the heart of the Balkan Peninsula in Southeastern Europe, which gained independence from Yugoslavia in 1991. The 25,713-square-kilometer (9,928-square-mile) landlocked country is neighbor to Kosovo, Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Albania. It is home to 2.08 million people, a quarter of whom live in the capital and largest city, Skopje. North Macedonia is blessed with remarkable natural wonders, from high mountain massifs to expansive national parks and one of the oldest lakes in Europe. This study was conducted at several sites, including Skopje,



Mavrovo National Park, Demir Kapija, Prilep, Ohrid, Zli Dol, and Lake Prespa.

METHODOLOGY

In August 2019, The Climbing Initiative conducted a case study on the impacts of rock climbing in North Macedonia. The principal researchers, Ludivine Brunissen and Veronica Baker, carried out interviews with a variety of climbers, business owners, government officials, and others with knowledge of the impacts of climbing in the country. Interview questions focused on the history of climbing in North Macedonia; its economic, social, and environmental effects; relationships between local businesses, municipalities, climbing developers, and tourists; challenges they currently face; attempts to address those challenges; and hopes for the future. The

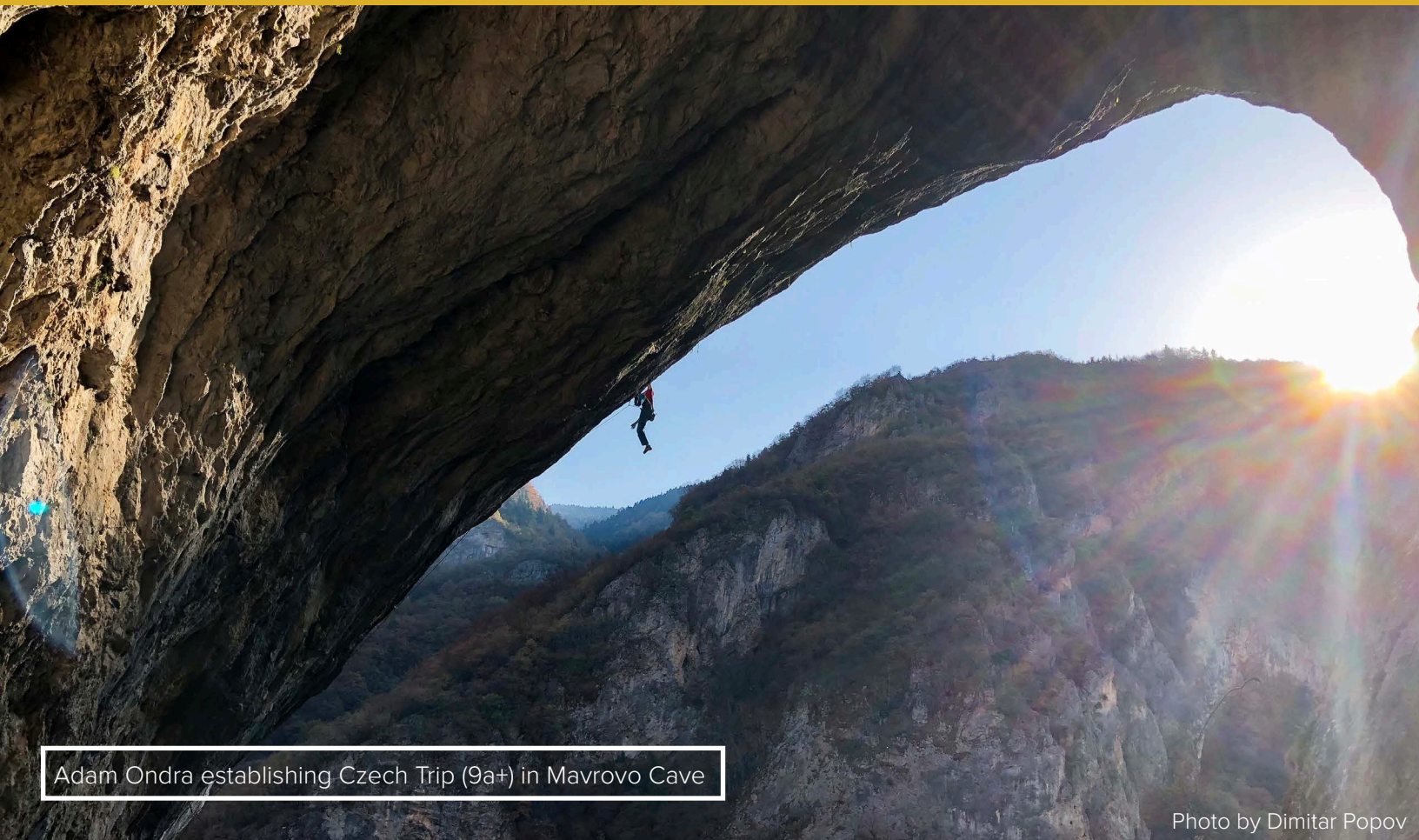
study employed snowball sampling and semi-structured interviews.

SUPPORT

This study was supported by funds from the Jackson Institute for Global Affairs at Yale University.

CONTACT

The Climbing Initiative welcomes feedback and opportunities for future research. We would love to hear from you. Please feel free to reach out to info@climbinginitiative.org or find us on Instagram at [@theclimbinginitiative](https://www.instagram.com/theclimbinginitiative).



Adam Ondra establishing Czech Trip (9a+) in Mavrovo Cave

Photo by Dimitar Popov

HISTORY

MOUNTAINEERING AND THE EMERGENCE OF CLIMBING

Rock climbing is a relatively new phenomenon in North Macedonia, despite the country's rich history of mountaineering spanning more than a century. While organized rock climbing began in the country in the 1970s, the first

sport route, Jumbo Jet (7a), was not bolted until 1990 by Vladimir Trpovski and Lazar Lazarov. Today, there are still fewer rock climbing clubs than mountaineering clubs, but the numbers are steadily increasing. Goran Nikoloski, President of the Mountain Guide Commission of North Macedonia, believes "interest is really growing for climbing

and other extreme sports,” fueled by the country’s recent economic growth and political stability. “Psychologically, we weren’t very open to tourists. There was the war in Bosnia, and there were some political problems in 2001, but now everything is improving. Kosovo and Serbia still have some issues, but it is calmer now, which leads to more interest in sports and tourism.”

Despite this, the development of climbing in North Macedonia has been slow-paced compared to its neighbors Greece, Slovenia, and Bulgaria. Natalija Ristevska, a member of the climbing club Vertical Bitola, attributes this to location: “We were part of the same country in Yugoslavia, but Slovenia is really close to Austria and Austrians had a big impact there. I think their mental state is still Balkan, but they try to be like other European countries, and they managed well, really well.” Jovica Ugrinovski, President of the Mountaineering Federation of North Macedonia, believes that financial support from the government has also played an important role in the rapid development of climbing in countries such as Greece, “because the local community saw that they can benefit by developing climbing in the region. Greek clubs are very well supported financially by the local authorities and the government,” he said. “This has started in Macedonia, and I hope it will be better and better in the future.”

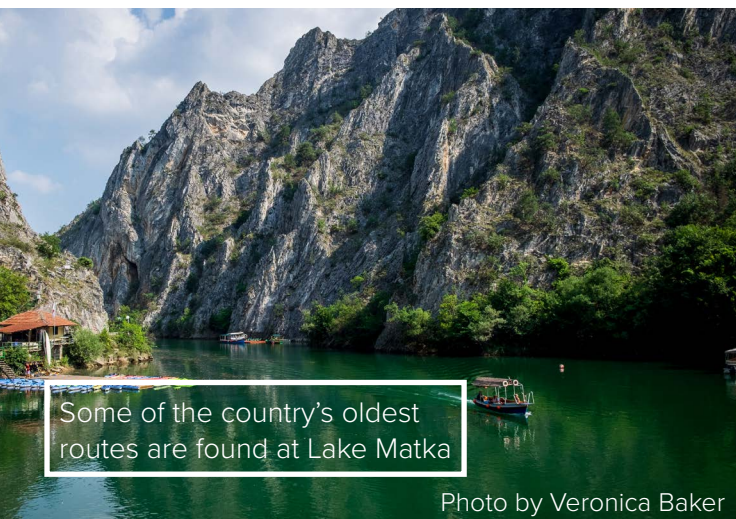
After almost 50 years as one of the six republics of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Republic of Macedonia declared independence on September 8th, 1991. While Macedonians are proud of their newly independent country, many look back fondly on their Yugoslavian past. Iliina Arsova, an accomplished climber, mountaineer, and the first Macedonian woman to reach the Seven Summits, reminisces about her country’s historical athletic achievements with nostalgia. “It seems like there was a great sports culture in the time of Yugoslavia, which we don’t have now. So it was somehow lost in this time,” she said. Arsova attributes this shift to poor physical education in schools, the loss of partnerships with other ex-Yugoslavian countries, and a general feeling of stagnation experienced by some Balkan countries following the Yugoslav wars.



Macedonian mountaineers ascending Mount Shara in 1929

Photo by Federation of Mountaineering Sports of Macedonia

Three independent bodies govern mountain sports in North Macedonia: the mountaineering federation (focused on high-altitude hiking and the management of mountain huts), the alpinism federation (focused on technical mountain ascents), and the sport climbing federation (focused on bolting, competitive climbing, and the development of crags and artificial walls throughout the country). The organizations were joined as one until their split in 2010, driven by a desire to clarify distinctions between disciplines. In the eyes of Vladimir Trpovski, who has been the President of the Sport Climbing Federation of North Macedonia for eight years, the sport climbing and mountaineering federations still benefit from a close relationship today. However, a distinct rivalry has arisen with the alpinism federation, stemming from grievances developed during the split.



Some of the country's oldest routes are found at Lake Matka

Photo by Veronica Baker

DEVELOPMENT OF SPORT CLIMBING

While traditional climbing grew naturally from the longstanding popularity of mountaineering, sport climbing developed slowly from a self-funded, do-it-yourself approach that persists in the country today. “We saw the first competition on an indoor climbing wall on TV, and I said ‘Why don’t we try this here?’ So we made the first sport climbing route, in Matka,” said Trpovski. “We were working for three months, with no drills. It was an expedition.”

The more recently developed climbing areas of Mavrovo and Kadina are the crown jewels of the sport climbing federation’s bolting efforts, featuring spectacular limestone caves. “In Macedonia, we did not know about the world-class standard [for climbing], and now, with Mavrovo and Kadina, we do. We just dreamed about this, to have this kind of style with overhanging routes, tufas, etc.,” said Dimitar Popov, Owner of Ski Hut Gorica, Founder of climbingschool.mk, and one of the leading climbing developers in North Macedonia. Reminiscing about the discover of Kadina’s striking roof, he added, “it’s one of the pictures in my head that I hope I will never lose in my lifetime.” Mavrovo Cave was made famous by Adam Ondra’s visit in October 2018, during which he sent

Macedonian Trip, a 9a project bolted by Slovenian Clemen Becan in 2015, and established a 50-meter long 9a+ route, which he named Czech Trip.

Popov has been using events such as climbing festivals and outdoor climbing competitions to drive the development of Mavrovo, Demir Kapija, and Kadina. On August 2nd, 2014, he organized the first Epic Challenge competition, a year after the first few routes were bolted in Mavrovo Cave. The event featured a competition for the first ascent of a natural rock traverse route, Separatizam (7b), and was attended by approximately 48 climbers from North Macedonia, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Western Europe. “I decided to organize this competition because these kinds of events encourage us to work more. The competition is the last day, but before that we need to build stairs, the via ferrata, etc.,” said Popov. “So these kinds of competitions are first for promotion and second for boosting development.” North Macedonia hosts several climbing festivals each year, which help increase both local and international interest.

Trposvki believes the lack of easy routes and the secluded nature of some crags have prevented North Macedonia from reaching its potential as a climbing tourism destination. “In Macedonia, only Demir Kapija could eventually be as famous as Greece

for climbing, because it’s a valley with a town. You can stay there, eat, sleep, and climb. Other places are not so big. For example, Mavrovo is perfect, but it’s not for beginners. It’s challenging to climb there, and the rocks are difficult to approach. But maybe in 15 years or so, Mavrovo could become a mecca for climbers who climb 8a and up. I think Mavrovo will be the future for high-level climbers.”





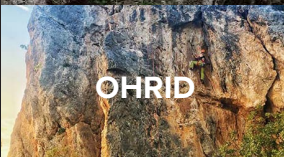


“I think Mavrovo will be the future for high-level climbers”

CURRENT STATE OF CLIMBING IN NORTH MACEDONIA

Despite the widespread availability of climbing in North Macedonia, Trpovski estimates the number of active local climbers to be only around 200. Rock climbing has not seen the same expansion as other outdoor sports like hiking, biking, and trail running. According to Ugrinovski, climbing is beginning to gain momentum in schools, thanks to the development of indoor facilities. The country now features ten climbing gyms and a 57-meter-high outdoor artificial wall often used for competitions.

In addition to the world-famous bouldering site Prilep, North Macedonia currently counts nine developed sport climbing crags. The country's largest sport climbing destination, Demir Kapija, boasts 475 single and multipitch routes from 4 to 8c on towering limestone cliffs surrounding the picturesque Vadar River. Just over an hour's drive away, the textured, coarse-grained granite boulders of Prilep have been termed "Eastern Europe's premier bouldering destination," featuring 550 routes. "We have really good granite that other countries except for Bulgaria don't have, in Prilep and Pelister. It has a lot of fric-

tion, it's really sharp and different from the other limestone and granite," said Ristevska. The sport climbing federation has been consistently expanding existing crags and developing new ones. Yet, Trpovski estimates that less than 10 percent of potential climbing areas have been developed. Cosima Vom Meer, who leads outdoor climbing trips in Mavrovo National Park, sees North Macedonia as a valuable alternative to more popular climbing destinations in Europe. "I'm sure that people will be interested in developing areas that are not so crowded. That is kind of the beauty of this place."

CRAGS IN NORTH MACEDONIA			
 PRILEP	Bouldering Granite, gneiss 550 routes	 DEMIR KAPIJA	Sport, trad, multipitch Limestone 475 routes
 BISLIMSKA KLISURA	Trad Limestone 73 routes	 PLOCHA/ PILAV TEPE	Sport, trad, bouldering Granite 52 routes
 KADINA	Sport Limestone 43 routes	 OHRID	Sport Limestone 55 routes
 MAVROVO	Sport Limestone 37 routes	 MATKA	Sport, trad Limestone 83 routes
 PRESPA	Sport Limestone 10 routes	 PELISTER	Sport Granite, gneiss 8 routes

The 57-meter high outdoor artificial wall in Skopje, built in 2011, attracts visitors and hosts climbing competitions



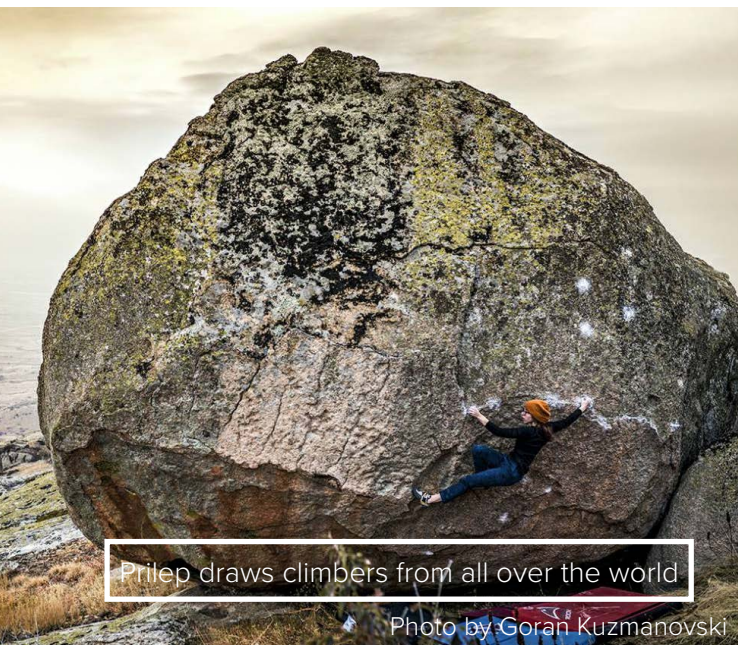
Photo by Qúnica Studio

ECONOMIC IMPACT

North Macedonia possesses abundant natural resources and is becoming a well-known outdoor tourism destination in Eastern Europe. “A lot of people come to Macedonia for outdoor sports like hiking, biking, etc. because we have a lot of mountains which serve as a good base for these activities,” said Nikoloski. The Macedonian govern-

ment has recently increased its efforts to promote outdoor tourism, and local businesses are starting to see economic benefits. “I believe that climbing tourism has the potential to positively transform the community’s social and economic health, and elevates community morale,” said Goran Kuzmanovski, President of Vertical Bitola.

Trpovski estimates that over 1,000 climbing tourists visit North Macedonia each year. According to Ristevska, climbing tourism in Prilep has grown dramatically in response to publicity from the 2014 Petzl Rock Trip. Most of the boulderers she sees in Prilep are from other European countries, including Germany, Slovenia, and Poland. However, in other areas, the number of foreign climbing tourists has stayed relatively low. Vom Meer believes that “maybe only 10 percent maximum [of summer visitors to Mavrovo] are rock climbers. Very few. And actually, most of them are Balkan or Macedonian, very few from abroad.” She believes that publicly available information about Macedonia’s climbing areas, such as a guidebook, would greatly increase international visitation.



Prilep draws climbers from all over the world

Photo by Goran Kuzmanovski

Demir Kapija, on the other hand, is seeing an increase in both international and Macedonian climbers. Aleksander Klenov, who runs Rock Land Camp, a climber’s campground in Demir Kapija, attributes the area’s growing popularity to its many well-bolted, beginner-friendly crags. “There has been a 10 percent increase in climbing tourists every year, but in the last two years, we mostly get Macedonian climbers. On the weekends, the campsite is full of Macedonian climbers. It’s starting to get more popular,” he said. “Only climbers eat in restaurants here [in Demir Kapija]. The tourist groups stay in hotels, eat in hotels, and don’t see the city,” he added. “Only climbers walk around and buy things from the shops. The climbers buy from the community.” Ristevska believes that Demir Kapija is currently the only place in North Macedonia where there is an understanding that climbers can benefit the local economy. “That’s actually how the town lives right now,” she said, noting that local restaurants have developed a special salad and other offerings specifically geared toward climbers.

Lazar Petrov, Mayor of Demir Kapija, sees climbing as an asset for his town. “Climbing is like killing two birds with one stone: sports and creating jobs,” he said. However, some people in Demir Kapija observe a problem with economic benefits from climbing tour-

ism reaching just a few individuals, often foreigners, instead of being equitably distributed among local businesses and the municipality. “Who is profiting from this whole thing?” asked Arsova. “One campground, a few restaurants maybe. Things are improving: some more accommodations for climbers are slowly opening up, but the whole community is not yet involved.” Petrov plans to develop a strategy for climbing tourism in the coming years that better engages the local community. “We are a bit selfish in the Balkan region, and people try to work by themselves,” he said, “but once we have a more organized form of tourism, we will function much better.”

Like climbing tourism, the economic impact of climbing gyms in North Macedonia is still small but growing. Unlike other European countries where the climbing gym market is booming, the Macedonian climbing community’s small size means gyms have been slow to develop. Trpovski is the owner of Boulderbar, a 130-square-meter bouldering gym in Skopje. Despite a difficult start, the gym now sees more than 110 first-time climbers monthly and counts more than 50 climbers with active memberships. “This year, it’s much better, we have a minimum of 800 climbers per year,” said Trpovski. Unfortunately, even with relatively low entrance fees, some Macedonian climbers consider gyms



Vlatko Delovski and Stefanija Jurukovska in Demir Kapija

Photo by Keti Talevska

to be out of their price range. “There is a lot of potential that can be grasped with climbing tourism,” concludes Popov, but to harness that potential, local businesses and authorities must coordinate their efforts to support climbing gyms and outdoor tourism.



Natalija Ristevska and Mario Minchevski climbing in Pelister, which features walls of gneiss and granite



SOCIAL IMPACT

Many Macedonian climbers believe that climbing can serve as a tool for unifying ex-Yugoslavian countries and members of different ethnic groups in their country. “Yugoslavia was crushed in ‘91. We became the biggest enemies [...] But in the last ten years we have become so friendly, we are like one country again. Slovenians are coming in 4-5 buses to Prilep for climbing, twice a year. Serbians are starting to come,” stated Trpovski. Youth competitions organized by the Macedonian Sport Climbing Federation have brought children from the Balkans together to engage in a shared experience. “Every third weekend of September we have a competition for children from the Balkans. We have 174 children coming from Macedonia, Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia. It’s a tradition,” said Vane Naunov, General Secretary of the Macedonian Sport Climbing Federation. Additionally, some believe that climbing could help bridge cultural divides between North Macedonia’s many ethnic groups. “Macedonian is the majority. Albanian. Turkish. Bulgarian. Serbian. Vlach. Roma. It’s a mixture of many ethnic groups. And different religions. The majority are Orthodox, followed by Muslims, and Catholics,” said

Ugrinovski. “The clubs are a mixture, consisting of different ethnic groups. On the mountain, we are just mountaineers. The greatest impact of climbing is that it brings these groups together.”

Climbing is credited with other positive social effects in North Macedonia, including psychosocial development in youth. Darko Kaevski, Director of the Agency for Youth and Sport of North Macedonia, is a firm believer in the importance of youth sports. “Sport is the biggest ambassador of our country,” he said. “When I became director in 2017, only 9 percent of the young population practiced sports. Now, since the beginning of 2019, somewhere between 25 and 27 percent of Macedonian youth practice sports.” Around 80 students participated in after-school climbing programs in 2019, and the sport climbing federation hopes to grow these programs further. Youth who are especially passionate about the sport join local climbing teams, which compete in a national league eight times per year. Naunov, who coaches Skopje’s youth climbing team, has witnessed firsthand the cognitive and emotional growth that comes from youth partici-

pation in climbing. “The most important benefit is intelligence,” he says. “Then, in addition to psychomotor benefits, the adrenaline and the focus can make you a better person.”

Even though the climbing community is still small, climbing has been a vehicle for personal growth and overcoming hardships for many Macedonians. Members of the climbing club Vertical Bitola emphasized the considerable impact of climbing on their lives. “When I started climbing, I had mild depression, so every climb was like a personal gain, like a ‘mission accomplished.’ I started appreciating what I can do more,” said Biljana Talevska. “I also love hanging out with people of a similar state of mind and being in nature,” she said. “When you think about our future here, it’s not very bright,” added Ristevska. She believes climbing allows her to separate herself from the economic and political situation of her country to focus on the present moment and overcome self-perceived limitations. “The most important thing I’ve learned through climbing is to give back to the community,” said Mario Minchevski. “Create, work, and teach. Share the experiences I’ve had over the years—both good and bad—and have a positive impact.” Dimitar Markovski, another member of Vertical Bitola, beautifully sums up the influence of climbing on his life: “I felt disconnected from everything, and now I feel safe.”

For climbing to have a lasting social impact and spread to more people in North Macedonia, the public’s perception and understanding of the sport must change. “This sport is not very loved here. You are crazy if you are doing it,” said Markovski. According to Ristevska, female climbers are especially discouraged from pursuing the sport: “Once I met a nurse, and when I told her that I was rock climbing, she said that I have to take the bible with

Climbing has been a vehicle for personal growth and overcoming hardships for many Macedonians

me, and I have to pray. She thought that I shouldn’t go rock climbing because it’s not for girls.” Yet, “some of Vertical Bitola’s best competition and outdoor climbers are our female members,” said Minchevski. “I am super proud of that because we, as a community, are breaking a barrier that used to give second thoughts to women who wanted to climb [...] Society is starting to recognize the benefits of our sport and stereotypes are being broken.”

Mario Minchevski getting horizontal on the roof of Mavrovo Cave

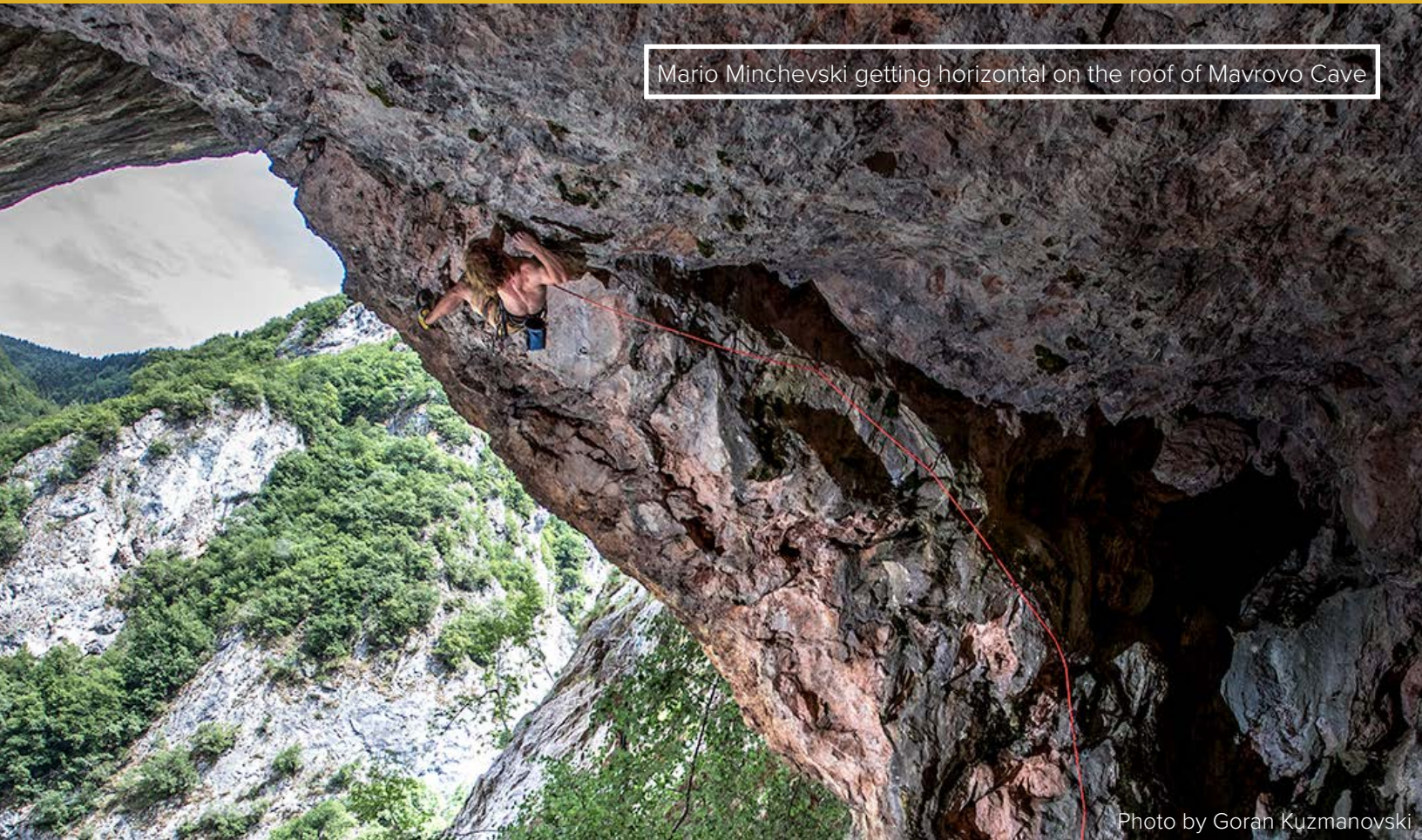


Photo by Goran Kuzmanovski

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

In some countries, climbing contributes to environmental stress due to an influx of visitors. North Macedonia, on the other hand, credits climbing with having mostly positive effects on the environment by promoting environmental awareness. In a country struggling with waste disposal, pollution, and deforestation, outdoor sports can

change the collective conscience regarding environmental degradation. Vom Meer attributes this loss of environmental responsibility to a lack of exposure to the outdoors for Macedonians living in urban areas. She believes that outdoor sports can help restore Macedonians' feeling of connection to nature and sense of stew-



Natalija Ristevska bouldering in Prilep

Photo by Goran Kuzmanovski

ardship over their public lands. “To see the places that you normally don’t see, to have an appreciation for the countryside and to also understand and observe changes in the environment, can have a massive impact on society,” she said.

Mavrovo National Park has been welcoming of climbers due to their ‘leave-no-trace’ ethics and care for the environment. In Demir Kapija, the environmental impact of climbing is also largely positive, but better trail management in climbing areas is needed to protect the habitats of cliff-dwelling endangered birds. Galicica National Park has raised similar concerns over the disturbance of wildlife by climbers in Zli Dol. However, according to Arsova, national park officials use this as an excuse to prohibit a sport that they

do not understand, while supporting other environmentally degrading but more lucrative activities, including logging, Jeep safaris, and hunting. “We as climbers have the lowest environmental impact. We go there on foot. Those bolts were placed there 10 years ago and there is minimal maintenance from time to time. We are the least dangerous for the environment,” said Arsova.

As climbing tourism continues to grow in North Macedonia, environmental management strategies are needed to minimize climbers’ impact on the country’s abundant and diverse fauna. “It might not yet be a problem here, but when more and more people come, it will have an impact on the wildlife and the rock,” said Vom Meer. “By being on your own with the rock and feeling exposed to the forces of nature, you feel more respectful of it as well,” she added. To preserve North Macedonia’s pristine nature for the next generation of climbers and outdoor enthusiasts, public environmental awareness and education must increase. The solution lies in the implementation of fines for littering and fostering a sense of collective responsibility in youth through “school projects where [children] actually go climbing, hiking, or do something else outdoors,” said Von Meer. “It’s education that needs to start from grass roots.”

Keti Talevska on an arête in Prespa



CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

LACK OF PUBLIC INTEREST IN CLIMBING

Despite the sport climbing federation's push to develop more crags and open new gyms, the climbing community in North Macedonia has not grown beyond 200 climbers. According to Naunov, interest in sport climbing has actually dropped over the years. "When I was a beginner, there were 30 of us in the gym in Stip, which is unexplainable to me because nowadays, I don't think the level of interest is as good as it was 10 years ago," he said. "We have a lot of indoor gyms and outdoor areas to climb. We have equipment, instructors, everything. But no interest from people," he said. Arsova has similarly noticed that an increase in outdoor climbing offerings has failed to attract more climbers. "I really wish to see the day when every time we go to Zli Dol on the weekends, it will be full," she added. "We have beautiful crags and routes, but if we see anyone, it will be foreigners." "I think there is plenty of room to improve rock climbing and gain more people and popularity, but it's a long journey," concluded Naunov.

According to Arsova, openness and inclusivity are vital to increasing the number of climbers in North Macedonia. "The climbing community needs to open up a little bit and change its approach to promoting climbing to be more interactive and collaborative with the wider community," she said. Climbing festivals and events at gyms have the potential to expose more people to the sport. "In Boulderbar there are more and more film festivals, presentations, and bringing good climbers over to tell their stories; I think it's quite motivating," added Arsova. "I think the first step is to show [the community] that climbing is a sport for everyone," remarked Naunov.

PUBLIC CONFUSION ABOUT THE CATEGORIZATION OF MOUNTAIN SPORTS

Even though climbing will have its Olympic debut in 2021, Naunov said, "I am sure that even now, a lot of key people in the highest level of sport management in Macedonia do not know what sport climbing is or that it exists in our country. They're talking about sport climbing, alpinism, and mountaineering

all as one thing.” As a result, “it is difficult to explain to the Agency of Sport, who is who,” said Nikoloski. This blurring of disciplines has resulted in concerns over sport climbing’s safety, by association with alpinism, which has limited youth participation. “Sometimes there are good kids, but the parents have a bad opinion of the sport,” said Arsova.

THE COLLECTIVE “MINDSET” AMONG CLIMBERS

Many of the climbers with whom we spoke emphasized the Macedonian climbing community’s mindset as one of the main things holding it back. Specifically, they cite a lack of motivation to push one’s limits and invest in the sport compared to other communities in the Balkan region. “Very rarely today do you want to push your limits or are really motivated to train hard and make it a priority in life,” said Arsova. According to her, this stems from a lack of institutional support and personal motivation. “It is the support from a country and an encouraging community which make a difference.” Based on his experience as a youth climbing coach, Naunov is of the opinion that this attitude toward the sport reflects a more widespread mindset in Macedonian society. “The old school mindset is one of the biggest problems. I have a lot of parents of children who say ‘don’t push too hard, don’t hurt yourself, just be happy.’



Dimitar Markovski
in Jorgov Kamen

Photo by Keti Talevska

In Macedonia, a lot of people think only from their point of view. They’re not seeing the big picture,” he said.

Naunov believes that the key to maintaining passion for climbing among young people as they age is to create a supportive, motivating environment. “Climbing is both a social sport and a competitive sport. With my kids, I am forming groups of similar ages so that they have things in common, I am motivating them to climb harder, and I climb with them to show them that the routes are not impossible. I’m treating them like my friends, not like students, and I think that’s how I keep them interested.” he said. His approach has paid off, according to Arsova: “Now, this third/ fourth generation that has worked with trainers and instructors is going to bring good results, I think.”



Members of the Vertical Bitola club in Prilep

Photo by Goran Kuzmanovski

LACK OF FINANCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Compared to other sports, climbing has not been avidly supported by all governmental bodies and other institutions in North Macedonia. “We have some good support from the Agency of Youth and Sport, but we need to work more and more on collaboration with other institutions as well, such as local munic-

ipalities, NGOs, schools, and the Ministry of Education,” said Naunov. Both Naunov and Arsova have experienced a lack of financial support from the government in response to their climbing achievements. “At the World Cup, I realized that with these conditions, with this amount of money, it was impossible for me to reach the top ten in Europe [...] I completely lost my motivation,” said Naunov. “We need more government money, more government programs to stimulate kids to try harder, because in Macedonia if you are a good climber, you don’t get proper feedback from the government,” he added.

In order for the sport to truly take hold, some see the need for a more decentralized and well-rounded approach to how funding is distributed in the climbing community. Paying living wages to climbing developers, instructors, and coaches will translate to sustainable growth for the Macedonian climbing community. “They will focus their energy on climbing and climbing development because they won’t have existential fears anymore,” said Popov. Naunov agrees. “For me to pay attention to you, training or coaching should be my only job, with financial benefits,” he said. Additionally, using government funding to bolster crag infrastructure and events such as climbing festivals would go a long way to attract new climbers. “The spirit of these events is very poor and

low-cost, it's improvised and basically from our own pockets," Popov said. He believes funds dedicated to improving signage, trails, and bathroom facilities at crags could help provide a safe and welcoming experience for beginners.

The lack of support from local institutions is exemplified by the hurdles that Vertical Bitola has faced in their efforts to build a new climbing gym. "Everything is business-oriented here. When we tried to find a new location for our gym, we found two places, but nobody wanted to help. They would rather give it to some businessman who will build a house or flats," said Simona Mirchevska. "We started to look for sponsorship for our club recently, but everyone rejected us," added Ristevska. Vom Meer attributes this to a widespread lack of awareness of the sport's potential impacts. Indeed, when asked whether the municipality supports the development of climbing in Mavrovo, she replied: "For them climbing is just so out of context. They do not understand it."

FRICION BETWEEN THE FEDERATIONS

Lastly, many believe that the split of the mountaineering, alpinism, and sport climbing federations was detrimental to mountain sports in North Macedonia. "When the federations were together, it was one of the strongest organizations

in the country. We symbolically say that every door was open to us. Now, because of pressures and bad management, we are separate," said Nikoloski. "If the federations were all together, it would be easier to influence the state. Programs, projects, everything would be stronger. There would be concrete action plans, strategic plans. Now, each federation has its own priorities [...] If the sport climbing federation wanted to open or rebolt an area, the pressure would be much higher if it came from a larger organization. Now, if there is a problem, Vladimir is going in alone, trying to open doors by using friends and connections, which is not good. It's not great for long-term action. This is why we are trying to find some connection across projects with the other federations," he concluded.





Vladimir Gjorgjevski climbing in Demir Kapija

RECOMMENDATIONS

Promote local understanding of climbing. Most non-climbers in North Macedonia know little about climbing, and often confuse it with mountaineering and alpinism. This lack of awareness has serious repercussions on financial and institutional support for climbing at the local scale and prevents the country from reaching its full potential as a climbing destination. A coordinated push from the sport climbing federation and the Agency for Youth and Sport to educate local governments and businesses on the benefits of climbing, combined with an integration of climbing into school curriculums, would have the power to reshape Macedonians' appreciation of climbing, setting the country up for future economic, social, and environmental benefits.

Decentralize climbing funding. Currently, climbing development throughout North Macedonia is dominated by the sport climbing federation, which receives most of its funding from the government. Most climbing development, in turn, is conducted by a small handful of individuals. In order to build a robust and long-lasting climbing communi-

ty, it is essential that more community members are engaged in climbing development throughout the country. By distributing more funding to local clubs and developers, North Macedonia will be investing in the shared knowledge of its climbing community, ensuring its growth for years to come.

Gather more data on climbing. In order to convince relevant stakeholders of the importance of climbing, quantitative data on the number and impact of visiting climbers is needed. Outside of Demir Kapija, very few non-climbers understand the positive force of climbing tourism and the benefits it can bring. A cooperative data collection effort between the national government, local authorities, and the mountain sports federations will help the community make more informed decisions about how to best support the growth of climbing tourism while preserving climbing areas.

Develop a comprehensive guidebook. For North Macedonia to reap the economic benefits of climbing tourism, international climbers must be able to research and plan their trips. Although

a guidebook exists for bouldering in Prilep, the country is in need of a comprehensive guidebook that provides further details on the quality and style of routes, gear requirements, and trip planning information such as a list of nearby restaurants and accommodations. This is an opportunity to involve local businesses in the development of climbing tourism and increase local support.

Publicize climbing achievements.

In order for climbing to grow in North Macedonia, it must be celebrated in the media alongside other sports. In coordination with climbing's Olympic debut, the country should develop a strategy that increases the visibility of climbers in the press. The Agency for Youth and Sport and the sport climbing federation should also commit to highlighting the achievements of female climbers and mountaineers in order to counter existing societal narratives about women's strength and abilities.

Make climbing more accessible for beginners. Climbing in North Macedonia is still in a stage where it is difficult to learn requisite skills unless you are affiliated with a local club. If the above recommendations to increase public awareness and publicize climbing achievements are followed, it is important that gyms, climbing clubs, and the sport climbing federation coordinate to

facilitate gym-to-crag education, make beginners' clinics more available, and increase the number of beginner-level routes throughout the country.

Encourage cooperation between the mountaineering, alpinism, and sport climbing federations.

The current antagonism between the federations creates an environment of unhealthy competition. In order for mountain sports to gain funding, popularity, and ultimately reach their full potential, existing tensions must be remedied and the federations must work together to further their common goals, including environmental protection, access, and public interest in the sports.

Use mountain sports as a catalyst for better treatment of the environment.

The long history of mountain sports in North Macedonia has created a shared identity among Macedonians connecting them to the surrounding peaks. With this comes a growing opportunity for new generations to bring about a shift in attitudes towards environmental protection. North Macedonia's struggles with littering and pollution are rooted in insensitivity to the damage of human activity on the environment. Experiencing the pristine condition of the mountains may inspire more Macedonians to adopt environmentally conscious behaviors and encourage others to do the same.

Members of the Macedonian climbing community together for the 2019 climbing festival in Mavrovo



CONCLUSIONS

North Macedonia holds great potential to become a well-known climbing destination. The expansive boulder fields of Prilep, towering limestone walls of Demir Kapija, and newly-uncovered treasures like Mavrovo Cave offer only the beginning of opportunities in a country where an estimated 90 percent of climbing areas remain

undiscovered. However, the climbing community has remained small due to a lack of public understanding and interest in the sport, which hinders the climbing community's development, as gyms continue to struggle financially, crags lie undeveloped, and few new climbers join the sport. "I believe that we are slowly building a strong four-

dation for our sport, constantly learning from our mistakes and growing,” said Minchevski. “Despite all the obstacles that we’ve faced so far, it really gives me hope that with our efforts and determination that has not faded even a bit, we will create an environment where people who want to start climbing will have much easier access to the sport than we’ve had.”

For climbing to grow in North Macedonia, the sport climbing federation, local climbing clubs, and gyms must be supported not only by the national government, but also by municipal governments and other institutions at the local level. The Agency of Youth and Sport and the sport climbing federation should develop a strategy to increase public awareness and understanding of the sport. In doing so, they must work to publicize climbing achievements and distinguish climbing, mountaineering, and alpinism as separate yet complementary disciplines. This will require coordination between the federations, whose relations have been tense since their split. The country would also benefit from a decentralization of climbing funding, so that climbing clubs have autonomy to invest in their climbing communities and local developers can be compensated for their work. Finally, the creation of a comprehensive guidebook for the country would encourage more

international climbing tourists to visit and promote greater buy-in from local businesses.

If implemented successfully, these recommendations will allow North Macedonia to maximize the economic, social, and environmental benefits of climbing for its people. Domestic tourism from Macedonians visiting rural crags and international tourism from climbers seeking to experience the pristine, less-trafficked rock of North Macedonia could be valuable drivers of economic growth. The social and psychological benefits reported by climbers would reach more Macedonians, fostering community and improving physical and mental health. Finally, introducing a new discipline of mountain sports to the broader population could catalyze outdoor engagement and inspire more young people to protect the natural beauty of their homeland. It is essential that all stakeholders with an interest in the growth of climbing in North Macedonia collaborate on a new strategy for the country to reach its full potential as a climbing destination and expand its thriving climbing community.

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