

# Slovak Karst – Aggtelek Karst

... together for a cross-border cooperation!

# Project philosophy of the Landscape of the Year in short

The why and wherefore of every Landscape-of-the-Year project is to trigger a long-term cross-border process that is conducive to the preservation of natural and cultural landscapes as well as to the creation of local sources of income. The idea is to achieve a balanced mix of practical schemes, events, political awareness raising and lobbying.

The designation as Landscape of the Year is supposed to draw Europe-wide attention to the Slovak Karst – Aggtelek Karst with its outstanding natural and cultural treasures both below and above the ground. The key target pursued by Naturefriends with their activities in the Landscape of the Year is to boost cross-border cooperation. As such, the project is intended as an international beacon of support to cooperation, interaction and amicable meetings between Slovakia and Hungary.

www.landscapeoftheyear.net





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# Landscape of the Year 2010/11 – together for a cross-border cooperation!

ever since 1989, the Presidents' Conference of Naturefriends International has designated transboundary European regions of outstanding ecological value as Landscapes of the Year, with the objective of boosting sustainable development.

In the Gömör-Torna Karst area, Naturefriends International (NFI) together with Naturefriends Hungary (MTSZ) and Naturefriends Slovakia (KST) have been active and dedicated to the development of bordercrossing sustainable tourism initiatives in the region over the last two years.

Naturefriends' commitment to intensify the cross-border dialogue has undoubtedly set a clear sign for fruitful cooperation and friendly relations at local level. Especially during the period of political tension between Hungary and Slovakia in early 2010, the Naturefriends' inauguration and official launching act of the "Landscape of the Year 2010/11" aroused awareness for the cross-border dialogue among the local population, tourism actors, associations, authorities, policy-makers and non-governmental organisations.

The development of sustainable cross-border tourism and awareness raising for the biological diversity of the region were among the core initiatives within the project and could only come to a result with the support, different perspectives, expe-







riences and information by experts and our partners. However, besides the language barrier, the particular challenge of the project was the influence of the current political situation in both countries, which directly affected the project and its progress.

With this final report we would like to present our achievements as well as potential starting points for follow-up in the development of sustainable tourism in the Gömör-Torna Karst area.

At this point we would also like to thank our partners and promoters for the cooperation: their commitment was crucial for the development of the project.

Manfred Pils
President NFI

Imre Szabó
President MTSZ

Miroslav Herchl President KST RT



# Slovak Karst – Aggtelek Karst: A European Jewel of Nature



The Slovak Karst – Aggtelek Karst – situated in the most extensive Central European Karst region on the border between northern Hungary and southern Slovakia – covers an area of more than 600 square kilometres. Forming part of the southern foothills of the limestone Carpathians, this picturesque Karst landscape is a typical regional feature and forms a veritable open-air museum of karst formations.

#### The caves

More than 1,000 caves have been discovered to date. There is an immense variety of types featuring diverse sinter formations, minerals, countless dripstone springs and – despite the mild climate – even ice formations. The Baradla-Domica subsurface cave system, which extends across the border over a total length of 25 km, is of outstanding beauty. Consequently, the cave systems in the Karst region were inscribed by UNESCO on the World Natural Heritage List in 1995 and were designated Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention in 2001.

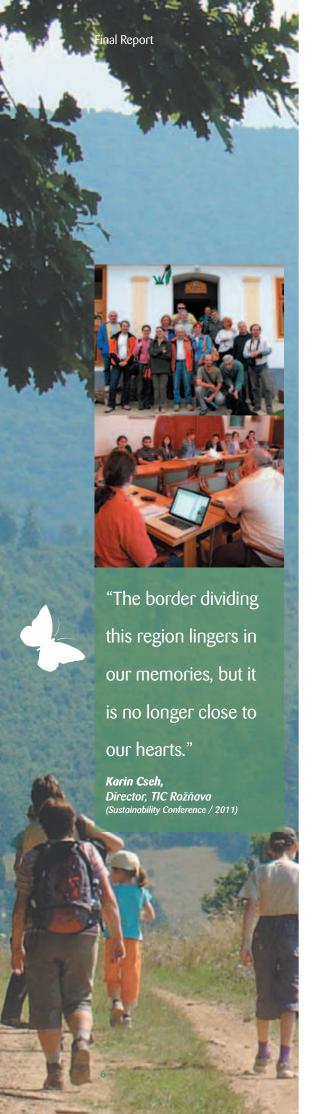
#### Fauna and flora in the Karst

The main features of the Gömör-Torna Karst uplands are the plateaus at altitudes between 400 and 800 m, variously structured by smallish basins, ravines and wider river valleys. The region also boasts almost pristine landscapes typically covered by beech and mixed deciduous forests, steppe grassland, shrub land and rock grassland societies with a wide variety of rare plant and animal species that have found their habitats in one of the richest and most exceptional areas of the Carpathian basin.

Among them are endangered species such as the red-listed Turna Golden Drop, the Dog's Tooth Violet and Sesleria heuffleriana. There are rare beasts of prey, such as wildcat and lynx living next to the wolves and brown bears that have returned to the area. This Natura 2000 site also provides habitats for numerous protected bird species, such as hazel grouse, black stork or imperial eagle as well as for over 2,000 butterfly species.









## **Project progression**

was thanks to a partnership initiative involving Naturefriends International, Naturefriends Hungary (MTSZ) and Naturefriends Slovakia (KST), as well as a number of other stakeholders on both sides of the border, that the region covered by the Slovak Karst and the Aggtelek Karst was designated Landscape of the Year 2010/11.

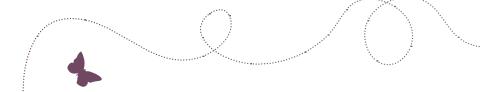
An international **project steering group** consisting of members and experts of NFI, MTSZ and KST was formed. Together with the Hungarian and Slovakian Naturefriends, who also were the executing organisations in the region, regular project group meetings were organised to develop, organise and implement projects.

Partners and experts during the project period were amongst others: Aggtelek National Park (HU), Slovensky Kras National Park (SK), Local Government of Aggtelek (HU), City Council of Rožňava (SK), Tourism Information Center (TIC) Rožňava (SK), TourInform Aggtelek (HU), Hungarian National Tourist Office (HU), Slovak Tourist Board (SK), Slovak Bicycle Association (SK), Hungarian Bicycle Association (HU), Hungarian Ministry for Environment (HU), Slovak Ministry of Economy (SK), Ministry for Transport, Construction and Regional Development (SK), Jósvafő Museum of Local History, District of Košice.

To present the project in the region and to invite stakeholders to participate in the project itself a **multi-stakeholder meeting** was organised in the town hall of the City Council of Rožňava (SK) on 7 December 2009. Around 40 stakeholders from Slovakia and Hungary actively participated at the meeting. The most important regional issues were outlined during the discussion to be treated within the project Landscape of the Year 2010/11. The breaks between the discussions were used for networking among stakeholders, who appreciated the possibility for the cross-border exchange.

The most **prioritised focal issues** within the project adopted to the region emerged in clear relief: cross-border development of sustainable tourism including the promotion of soft mobility, awareness raising for the local biodiversity and environmental education.

Despite the good intentions and existing cooperations across the borders, the project was challenged by the temporarily tensed **political situation** between Hungary and Slovakia early in the project, by the current political situation on both sides of the border, as well as by the heavy floods in May 2010, which caused severe damages in the region.



# **Kick-off and Closing Event**

#### Naturefriends festival and official launching act (21–24 May 2010)

On 21 May 2010, the region Slovak Karst – Aggtelek Karst on the border between Slovakia and Hungary was proclaimed "Landscape of the Year 2010/11" and officially inaugurated by NFI president Manfred Pils in the small Hungarian village of Aggtelek. In numerous speeches, several well-known regional politicians and stakeholders as well as the representatives of the two National Parks of the area agreed on the importance of combining cross-border cooperation and sustainable regional tourism development of this special area.

The three-day event took place on both sides of the border and brought together Naturefriends from at least seven European countries and inhabitants throughout the Gömör-Torna region. The official launching act was combined with the traditional annual opening of the hiking season of the Hungarian Naturefriends and included a rich programme with cross-border hiking, competitions, traditional Slovak and Hungarian folklore and concerts as well as culinary specialities. About 1000 visitors came to the region and attended this colourful opening linking people and culture across the borders.

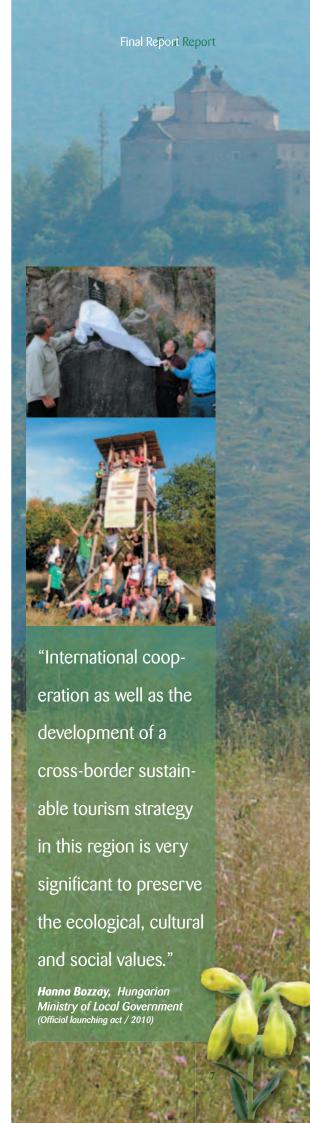
#### Sustainability Conference and closing event (9–10 September 2011)

A sustainability conference entitled "Tourism – Youth – Future: Sustainable Development in the Gömör-Torna Region" was mounted at the town hall in Rožňava (SK) on 9 September 2011.

The closing conference which took place under the personal patronage of Ján Figel, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Transport, Construction and Regional Development ended with the adoption of a joint declaration "Roadmap for the development of sustainable tourism" for the region.

Presentations, panel discussions, a short film by International Young Naturefriends (IYNF) featuring the situation of young people, and the opening of a photo exhibition prompted a discussion on sustainable trans-border development in the region among the approximately 100 participants and the high-level speakers from a total of 14 countries. The closing conference was embedded in a two-day touristic and cultural programme as part of the official closing act including cross-border hikes, visits to impressive caves and folklore. 200 participants from local, national and international young and not-young Naturefriends enjoyed the festivities in this special region.





# Commitment to Sustainable Tourism, Biodiversity & Environmental Education

A fter a visit to one of the impressive caves, only very few of the many visitors decide to extend their visits to several days to explore the aboveground universe and its historical and cultural sights. However, apart from the caves, traditional villages and handicrafts, many historical monuments, the vast network of walking trails in the National Parks, cultural events, the economically important vineyards and orchards as well as cycling and horse riding

hold **significant potential for cross-border sustainable tourism in the region**. Against this background and according to the Landscape of the Year, Naturefriends committed themselves in both conceptional and practical terms to support a sustainable tourism development, which is closely linked to the protection of the region's environment and biodiversity as well as raising the awareness on that topic across borders.

Numerous hiking events (2010 – 2011)

The Slovak Naturefriends and the Hungarian Naturefriends organised numerous hikes and transboundary hiking tours in the region with in total several hundreds of participants throughout the years 2010 and 2011. Also traditional Hungarian hiking competitions with either 15, 25, 35, 50, 70 km legs or orienteerings were part of the programme. Besides the hiking itself, Naturefriends also contributed to the renewal of path markings in the region. The hiking tours certainly led to a raised aware-

"The project has intensified the dialogue across borders and fostered friendship, further cooperation and new projects."

Martin Markušovský (KST) and Imre Duró (MTSZ), Regional Project Coordinators



ness for this region, its natural environment and habitats. However, more importantly the dialogue across the borders was intensified and has fostered friendship, further cooperation and new projects.

## Inauguration of the cross-border theme path "Green border trail" (21 May 2010)

Within the framework of the Landscape of the Year, the National Parks Aggtelek and Slovensky Kras developed the first cross-border theme path in the region – the "Green border Trail". In twelve different stations the National Parks developed a nature and educational theme path, which was financially supported by the LoY-project and inaugurated on both sides of the border – in Domica (SK) and Aggtelek (HU) – during the launching act. The "Green border Trail" contributes to strenghtening the Landscape of the Years' cross-border approach and links the two National Parks.





## Cross-border Natura Trail Gömör-Torna Karst (September 2010 – September 2011)

The general objective of the Natura Trail Campaign is to establish an EU-wide network of Natura Trails through Natura 2000 sites linking the experience of nature with the imparting of knowledge about characteristic species and habitats.

In September 2010, after a joint on-site inspection, environmental experts and rangers from the Aggtelek National Park, Slovensky Kras National Park and the Naturefriends decided on the establishment and implementation of the Natura Trail in the Karst region.

Finally the cross-border Natura Trail "Gömör-Torna Karst: A Karst Region embraced by the Carpathians" was developed along an old trading route and published with bilingual folders which inform about the fauna and flora that is characteristic in this protected area, introduce readers to its biological diversity and invite them to discover the area. Thus, it helps to showcase the positive aspects of EU environmental legislation in a comprehnsible manner. The folders were distributed in the region to the information centres. National Parks and Naturefriends.

#### Speleological Symposium (24 – 26 June 2011)

To raise the awareness about the conservation of nature & biodiversity in the cross-border region, Naturefriends co-organised a Speleological Symposium in Aggtelek (HU) from 24 to 26 June

2011. Numerous national and international scientists attended the conference.

#### Tour d'horizon (25 June –2 July 2011)

For each Landscape of the Year, Naturefriends design a model tour – a Tour d'horizon – which formes a brand mark of NFI and is a model for environmentally sound and culture oriented cross-border tours.

In June 2011 (25 June – 2 July), the Tour d'horizon was organised as a transboundary exploration journey for multipliers focusing especially on tour guides, group guides and hiking guides of the Naturefriends organisations. Mainly multipliers from German Naturefriends participated at the one-week information journey.

Local tour guides informed the participants on both sides of the Slovak-Hungarian border about nature and culture and initiated the direct interchange with local people in the region. The feedback of the participants was very enthusiastic and they also decided to organise travels to the region in 2012.



"It is of growing importance to reflect on the development of tourist trends and to realise that our future guest is pragmatic, likes to travel, requires quality and is in quest of a unique product."

Stanislav Rusinko, Slovak Ministry of Transport, Construction and Regional Development (Sustainability Conference / 2011)



With the **Tour d'horizon**, Naturefriends offer a travel package which aims at getting institutionalised in the region in order to support the cross-border cooperation and the understanding for nature in the living environment. It makes a contribution to the improvement of sustainable tourism offers in the region.

In 2011, at least three more international tours with approximately 50–100 participants form Germany, Austria and Switzerland were guided to the region organised by Naturefriends from listed countries.

#### **International Bicycle Meeting** (27 – 29 August 2011)

An International Bicycle Meeting in Rožňava (SK) in cooperation with the Hungarian and Slovak Bicycle Association was organised by Slovak and Hungarian Naturefriends in the framework of the Slovak Cycling Week from 27 to 29 August 2011. The event was held under the chairmanship of the mayor of Rožňava, Vladislav Laciak. More than 70 participants enjoyed the meeting and a two-day cross-border bicycle tour through the region.

### International Young Naturefriends & movie production (6 – 11 September 2011)

The International Young Naturefriends organised their annual planning week together with the closing conference of the Landscape of the Year in Rožňava from 6 to 11 September 2011. More than 30 young participants from 14 countries attended the meeting.

Part of the planning week was the production of a short-film documentation with special emphasis on the situation of youth in the region. In seven minutes, the film captures the rather hopeless situation, where unemployment and lack of educational possibilities force young people to leave the region. The movie was presented and screened at the Sustainability Conference in Rožňava on 9 September.

## Model region for sustainable tourism (June 2010 – December 2011)

Under a two-year EU project, the Landscape of the Year 2010/11 together with four other previous Landscapes of the Year served as a model region to develop successful practices to implement and promote sustainability in tourism and raise its competitiveness.

The new EU criteria for sustainable tourism were tested in the region and a "Roadmap for the development of sustainable tourism" was elaborated.



### **Public Relations**

Public relations activities have been built into the Landscape of the Year (LoY) project consistently and in many different ways:

#### Information material

A bilingual booklet introducing the Landscape of the Year 2010/11 "The Caves and more ..." (HU/SK + EN/GE), bilingual folders for the Natura Trail Gömör-Torna Karst (HU/SK + EN/GE), banner and poster exhibition introducing the project (EN/HU/SK).

#### Press conference

The project was officially presented to stakeholders and also journalists within a multi-stakeholder event in the City Council of Rožňava (SK) in December 2009 for the first time. In March 2010 the LoY Slovak Karst – Aggtelek Karst was announced during a special press conference at the travel fair in Budapest in the framework of the presentation of the national Hungarian tourism strategies for 2010. The press conference was organised in cooperation with the Hungarian Tourism Office and attended by about 60 journalists.

#### Promotion at fairs and festivals

In January 2011, Naturefriends in cooperation with the National Hungarian Tourism Board presented the LoY Slovak Karst – Aggtelek Karst bilingual booklet at the travel fair in Vienna. Naturefriends promoted the project with a booth at the Gömör-Torna festival (July 2010) in Aggtelek and at the "Kocsonya-festival", which is one of Hungarian biggest open-air events (February 2010).

#### Media work

At local, regional and national level the media was informed about the activities and events within the Landscape of the Year 2010/11. Several clippings in Hungarian and Slovak media, including reports on Slovak and Hungarian TV and Radio Channels and print media were achieved.

#### **Exhibitions**

A poster exhibition to inform the local population as well as tourists about the aims, contents and approach of the LoY initiative was presented at the launching act. Furthermore a photo exhibition which displayed the beauty and biodiversity of the caves and the Karst was officially inaugurated at the closing conference.

#### Web

Latest information, reports, photographs and publications can be accessed at www.landscapeoftheyear.net/karst. During the first project development phase a bilingual website was launched to additionally inform about the project in Hungarian and Slovak language (www.evvideke-karszt.net | www.krajinaroka-kras.net).





### **Conclusions**

The Landscape of the Year project is a process-oriented initiative banking, first and foremost, on **cooperation and communication**. Activities and measures are planned and implemented in the given context together with the partners on the ground and coordinated with other projects and activities in the region. This approach opens up new paths, but reaches its limits when cooperation and communication fail, falter or need to be rebuilt over and over again.

#### Difficulties in project implementation

In the Gömör-Torna Karst area it was inter alia the unstable and tensed political situation between Hungary and Slovakia, and within both countries. The political situation in Hungary e.g. led to significant effects on the Aggtelek National Park including a new director in place and partly new policies taking place. Planned projects in partnership with the Aggtelek National Park Directorate could not take place in the originally planned way. Furthermore, Naturefriends of both countries also had to face a severe cutback and difficulties to aquire funding.

Human resources and the language barrier were other decisive elements: The Landscape of the Year projects depend on the (voluntary) support of all those concerned. There are limits to such commitments which often result in bottlenecks. Transla-

tions and interpretation between Hungarian, Slovak and English in meetings and in informal communication required more time and resources than estimated as also no common communication language was possible among the project group members.

A combination of these points including the lack of human resources, languages, funding and the effects of an unstable political situation resulted in the non-implementation of some of the planned workshops and seminars, also including a press tour to the region. The development of a transboundary bicycle trail in cooperation with the National Parks and the Hungarian and Slovak National Bicycle Associations was intended, however could not be realised. However, the plans are still in place and could be used in a new attempt.

#### **Achievements**

Anyhow, some things have been achieved over these two years and further preconditions to a (more) sustainable regional and tourism development could be set:

- enhanced cross-border dialogue between different regional stakeholders and several critical issues have been raised
- enhanced development of horizontal and vertical cooperation and networks





- greater awareness among stakeholders of the fact that a common implementation of a sustainable regional development is needed
- elaboration of a common roadmap for the development of sustainable tourism
- follow-up projects by Hungarian and Slovak Naturefriends in the region to build on established approaches and activities

#### How to move on?

Within the last 10 years the efforts of national civil organisations and international organisations for enhancing cross-border cooperation and several projects have resulted in many different solutions for the region. Especially the development of tourism has lead to hope among the population. However, tourism does not offer the only way out for the problems in the region, which is also demonstrated by a high youth unemployment rate.

On account of the prevailing situation the region is faced with a challenge: On the one hand, a growing number of young people leave this structurally weak and sparsely populated region, looking for job options in the towns. On the other hand, tourism is one of the few sectors that holds promises of a brighter future for the population, provided a balance can be struck between tourism, nature conservation and job creation.

Here, a common implementation by tourism stakeholders and regional authorities for the development of a cross-border sustainable tourism is missing. Strategies and proposals have already been presented throughout different projects. The Landscape of the Year 2010/11 has adopted a "Roadmap for the Development of Sustainable Tourism" which is a directory and a strategic approach for regional population, stakeholders and authorities and offers proposals to be translated into action. Particularly the establishment of a regional trans-boundary tourism association including all tourism stakeholders and regional authorities would be necessary to develop and manage a common image and marketing strategy for the Gömör-Torna region to create set elements of sustainable tourism services.

The common declaration is a pathway to enhance the cross-border cooperation for a common sustainable development of the regions environment and society and to strengthen the development of an environmentally friendly tourism. Hungarian and Slovak Naturefriends who will continue the cross-border cooperation with follow-up projects will support this approach in the region.



"Sustainability has to be considered an integral part of regional development, which also comprises tourism." Christian Baumgartner, Secretary General, NFI



# Landscape of the Year Slovak Karst – Aggtelek Karst

### Roadmap for the Development of Sustainable Tourism

Rožňava | Aggtelek | Vienna, September 2011 (short version)

he points raised in the Roadmap for the Development of Sustainable Tourism are the upshot from conferences, workshops and activities organised in the Landscape of the Year 2010/11 Slovak Karst – Aggtelek Karst between 2009 and 2011. The results were discussed and summed up at the Closing Conference in Rožňava on 9 September 2011.

Bearing in mind the partnership that enabled the implementation of the Landscape-of-the-Year project, the signatory organisations (NFI, MTSZ, KST) consider the following four conclusions as the mainstay of the future development of tourism in the Slovak Karst – Aggtelek Karst:

#### 1. Stepping up trans-boundary,

#### horizontal and vertical cooperation

Both formal and informal cooperation should be established and optimised in all areas. Tourism development in the region should be increasingly dovetailed with protected areas – such as with the National Parks – establish its very own distinctive brand (USP) and together with a trans-boundary cooperation develop a common, regional identity. A regional, trans-boundary tourism association embracing all the public and private stakeholders in the tourism sector, all the NGOs interested and, in particular, SMEs should be set up. It should be a decidedly transboundary, service-oriented and non-state association. Finally, orienting the development of tourism towards upgrading the sustainability performance needs the active (financial) support of regional and national bodies.

### 2. Infrastructure development, professionalisation and local value creation

Sustainable tourism depends on a satisfactory professional infrastructure, which draws on regional resources and is marked by high sustainability performance and the provision of attractive tourism options. The upgrading of accommodation besides advanced training formats for (potential) accommodation providers with a view to upgrade the quality of service should meet tourist expecta-

tions as regards environmental and sustainability performance. The transboundary production and marketing of regional products for a common characteristic regional image should be boosted as a means to create local value furthermore also by applying the slow-down principle. Marketing ought to be focused on tourism service elements and sustainable products and formats.

#### 3. Improving the transport situation

Currently, tourists find it neither attractive nor easy to use short-distance public transport and consequently opt in their majority for their own cars. An improvement concerns especially the gap in the trans-boundary railway service, which needs to be closed, and pick-up services from the nearest railway stations, which need to be provided and advertised. Furthermore, local mobility needs to be improved and the local, transboundary cycle network needs to be upgraded. Finally, the potential of public transport needs to be dynamically propagated in all the tourism advertising media.

#### 4. Ecological carrying capacity and monitoring

The carrying capacity of the various areas in the region ought to be analysed especially on the Hungarian side, capacity limits should be agreed and pertinent monitoring instruments developed and applied. Clear-cut capacity limits ought to be set. Furthermore, the European ecolabel ought to be promoted and the European Commission's new (as yet unpublished) indicator system for sustainable tourism destinations ought to be put to use.

Naturefriends International Naturefriends Hungary (MTSZ) Naturefriends Slovakia (KST)



The full version of the Roadmap can be downloaded under: www.landscapeoftheyear.net/karst







#### **Naturefriends International**

Diefenbachgasse 36
A-1150 Vienna
Tel.: +43 1 892 38 77
E-mail: office@nf-int.org
www.nf-int.org



#### Magyar Természetbarát Szövetség

Thököly út 58-60.1./107
H-1146 Budapest
Tel.: +36 1 311 24 67
E-mail: info@termeszetbarat.hu
www.termeszetbarat.hu
www.evvideke-karszt.net



#### Klub slovenských turistov

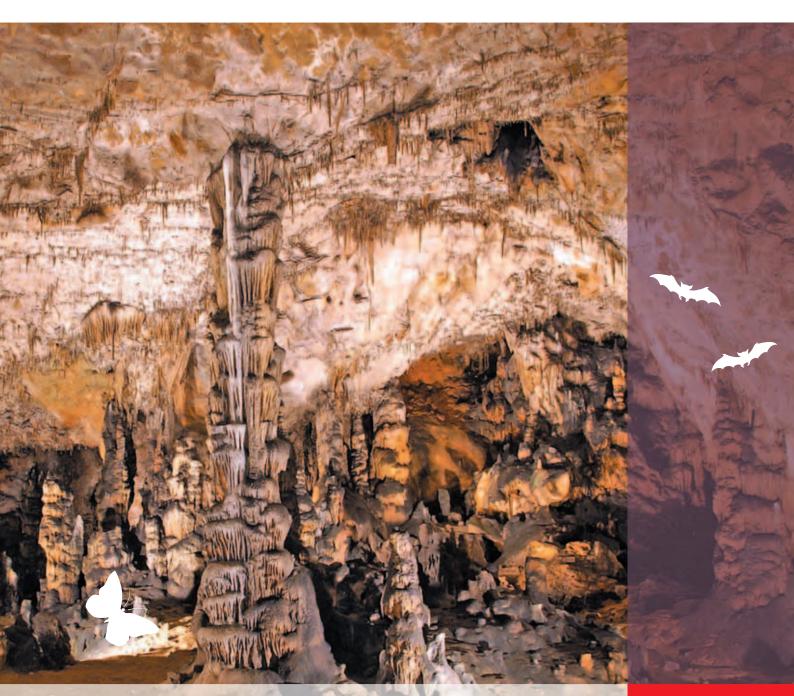
Záborského 33 SK-83103 Bratislava 3 Tel.: +421 244 45 11 21 E-mail: ustredie@kst.sk kst@kst.sk

www.krajinaroka-kras.net









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#### Naturefriends International

Diefenbachgasse 36 A-1150 Vienna

Phone: +43 1 8923877 Fax: +43 1 8129789

office@nf-int.org www.nf-int.org

www.landscapeoftheyear.

net/karst