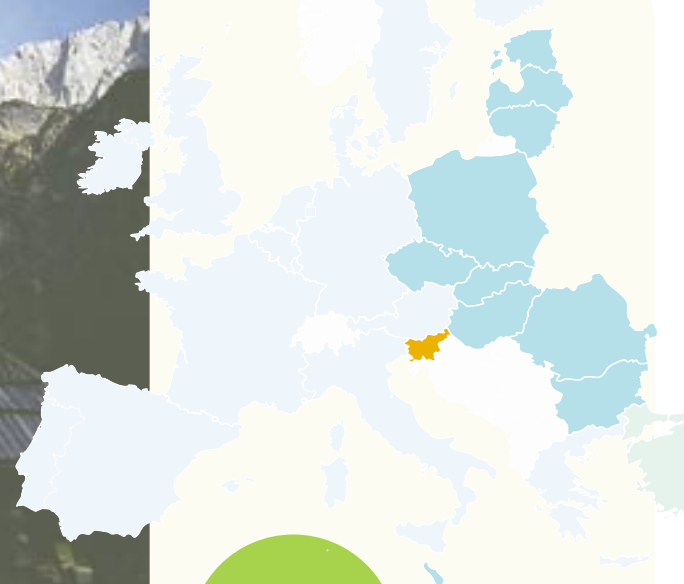




photo 1: © WWF



## Slovenia from Alps to Adriatic

Slovenia packs an impressive diversity of landscapes and biological diversity into an astonishingly small territory. In an area half the size of Switzerland are the eastern tip of the **Alps**, part of the **Danube** (Pannonian) basin, a short stretch of **Adriatic coast**, as well as the northern edge of the **Dinaric mountains**, which stretch down from here to the Balkan peninsula. Altitudes vary from 2,854 meters above sea level at the tip of **Triglav** peak in the **Julian Alps** to 0 meters above sea level along Slovenian's 46.6 km Adriatic coastline.

### Disappearing lake

Slovenia is sometimes referred to as the "country on the sunny side of the Alps" because of its location at the eastern tip of the European mountain range, which covers about a third of the country. The Julian Alps offer breath-taking sights with limestone peaks in the corner of the country where western Slovenia meets with the borders of Austria and Italy. Mount Triglav (2,864 m high), with its three

distinctive peaks, is a symbol of Slovene identity and the focal point for the Triglav National Park.

The Pannonian hills and plains, found on the lower reaches of the **Drava**, **Kolpa**, **Mura**, and **Sava** rivers in the east of Slovenia, are the country's main agricultural area. Large fields of wheat, corn, and sugar beet lie in the flatlands, while vineyards and orchards cling to the hills. A number of the river forests, including parts of the Drava and Mura, are still intact.

Slovenia's narrow stretch of Adriatic coast, squeezed within the 46 kilometers stretching from the outskirts of the Italian city of Trieste to the Croatian border, is rocky and marked by Mediterranean species of flora and fauna.

A complex system of **subterranean caves**, some submerged under water, others dry, has been etched by water into the carbonate bedrock that is found on more than half (53%) of the country's territory. These karst systems provide habitats for a wide diversity of species, including the richest population of cave-dwelling fauna in the world. Many of these species are unique to their particular isolated habitats.

One of the more curious features of Slovenia's karst landscape is the disappearing **Cerknica Lake**. The ten-kilometre long and five-kilometre wide lake regu-

larly disappears in May or June, before re-appearing during heavy autumn rains and spring melt.

### Biological tycoon

Both natural and cultural landscapes in Slovenia are in relatively good condition. Forests, ranging from broad-leaved deciduous to montane, cover some 53% of the country's territory, and dominate about 80% of Slovenia's landscapes, making it one of the most heavily forested countries in Europe. Common beech is the most naturally widespread tree species

**Area:** 20,253 km<sup>2</sup> (half the size of Switzerland).

**Terrain:** a short coastal strip on the Adriatic, an alpine mountain region adjacent to Italy and Austria, mixed mountain and valleys with numerous rivers to the east.

**Elevation extremes:** lowest point: Adriatic Sea 0 m, highest point: Triglav 2,864 m.

**Land use:** arable land: 12%, permanent crops: 3%, permanent pastures: 24%, forests and woodland: 54%, other: 7% (1996 est.).

**Protected areas:** 1 National Park (84,805 ha), 1 Regional Park (413 ha), 37 Landscape Parks (60,298 ha), 49 Nature Reserves.

**Population:** 1,930,132 (July 2001 est.).

**Capital:** Ljubljana – population 270,000.



photo 2: © H. Kretschmer/WWF-A

in Slovenia. Most of the country's forests (85%) regenerate naturally, i.e. do not require artificial planting of seedlings to replace themselves, and are characterised by a native mixture of tree species.

The fine fragmentation of the Slovene landscape makes it attractive, but inconvenient for modern farming. As a result, though 36% of Slovenian territory is agricultural land, most of this – some 70% – belongs to upland and mountain farms. Most of this land



photo 3: © A. Mohl/WWF-A

is divided among small farms that cultivate an average of only 3.2 hectares of land (only 6% of all farms cultivate more than 10 hectares of land). The extensive agricultural practices that are used to cultivate much of these lands supports a high level of biological diversity.

The forests are home to vital populations of **large mammals**, including brown bears, wolves and lynx – populations that are beginning to re-stock the depleted populations of the Alps. The relative health of Slovenia's habitats, plus their fine fragmentation and diversity as well as location at the crossroads between Balkan, Pannonian and Central European regions, makes the country one of Europe's biological tycoons, just behind Slovakia and Turkey in terms of relative biological wealth.

Currently, about 8% of Slovenia's territory has protected status, but this is planned to increase in coming years to nearly a third of the country's territory.

## Challenges

Economic growth based on industrial, urban and agricultural development has contributed to pollution of surface and ground water, soil and air and a decrease in biological and landscape diversity. While critical loads in air and soil pollution could be restricted to industrial and urban or intensive agricultural areas (i.e. Ljubljana, Celje and Maribor basins and Pannonian plain), water pollution is more widely spread and is critical in the lower reaches of many water

courses. In spite of the increase in surface area, the quality of forests has been jeopardised due to air pollution as well as promotion of monoculture stands of conifers.

As elsewhere in Europe, the industrialisation of agriculture, especially since the Second World War, has had a decisive impact on biodiversity. There has been a direct loss of species and habitats due to land reclamation, particularly in floodplains. Over 70,000 hectares of lowlands were drained between 1973 and 1991. Water courses were straightened, canals built and vegetation along waterways cleared and large areas ploughed for mono-cultural crops. Construction of hydropower plants has significantly damaged the nature value of the Drava river.

Though accession to the EU can be expected to drive forward some of these processes, including intensified use of most productive land, other

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## Useful links:

**WWF EU Accession site**  
[www.panda.org/accession](http://www.panda.org/accession)

**Ministry of the Environment,  
Spatial Planning and Energy**  
[www.sigov.si/mop/en](http://www.sigov.si/mop/en)

**Republic of Slovenia Nature  
Protection Authority**  
[www.sigov.si/uvn/  
indexeng.html](http://www.sigov.si/uvn/indexeng.html)

**The Council for the  
Environmental Protection  
of the Republic of Slovenia**  
[www.sigov.si/svo/  
innovo\\_e.htm](http://www.sigov.si/svo/innovo_e.htm)

**General environmental  
information on Slovenia**  
[www.grida.no/enrin/biodiv/  
biodiv/national/slovenia/#A](http://www.grida.no/enrin/biodiv/biodiv/national/slovenia/#A)

**Triglav National Park**  
[www.sigov.si/cgi-bin/spl/  
tnp/naslovna.htm](http://www.sigov.si/cgi-bin/spl/tnp/naslovna.htm)

**Website devoted to Natura  
2000 (in Slovene)**  
[www.natura2000.gov.si](http://www.natura2000.gov.si)

areas will benefit, e.g. from application of the Water Framework Directive as well as Natura 2000 network of special conservation areas.

Photo 1: Julian Alpe

Photo 2: Brown bear

Photo 3: Mura river