

CONCEPT NOTE

ASTEROUSIA HYBRID UNIVERSITY 2025-2026:
PHASE A: 28th OCT - 1st NOV 2025, ASTEROURIA BR, CRETE
PHASE B: JAN 2026
*Natural and Cultural Heritage in Biosphere Reserves and
other Designated Sites in the Mediterranean*



MEDITERRANEAN INFORMATION OFFICE
FOR ENVIRONMENT, CULTURE AND
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

SUMMARY

The Concept Note outlines the organisation of the 11th edition of Hybrid University of Asterousia (2025-2026) for post graduate students, young researchers, educators and junior managers of existing and candidate Biosphere Reserves (BRs) of the MAB/UNESCO Programme and other designated areas, such as Global Geoparks, World Heritage Sites (WHS), Protected Areas (PAs), Natura 2000 sites, etc., from South-Eastern European and Mediterranean countries. The event will take place in Asterousia from 28 October to 1st November 2025.

BACKGROUND

The proposal builds on a long-standing collaboration and joint commitment between MIO-ECSDE, the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe (Venice Office), the UNESCO Chair and Network on Sustainable Development Management and Education of the UoA, and in recent years, the Asterousia Biosphere Reserve, the Heraclion Development Agency and the Region of Crete, with the support of which the Asterousia Hybrid University (AHU) is evolving to an annual regional gathering, that is expected and welcomed by the international BR and educational communities, and beyond.

Specifically, the proposal builds on previously run initiatives & projects:

- the series of successful trainings and summer / hybrid universities on how to design and implement sustainable development initiatives in Biosphere Reserves and other designated areas, specifically the [Asterousia Hybrid 2024-2025](#), the [Asterousia Hybrid \(2023-2024\)](#), the [Asterousia & Cyprus Hybrid \(2022-2023\)](#), the [Asterousia \(Hybrid\) \(2021-2022\)](#), [Asterousia \(Hybrid\) \(2020\)](#); The summer Universities in [Central Balkan BR \(2019\)](#); in [Parnon \(2018\)](#); in [Sardinia \(2017\)](#); in [Samothraki \(2016\)](#); and in [Amfissa \(2014\)](#).
- the [joint UNESCO/MAB & MIO-ECSDE publication](#) “Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in Biosphere Reserves and other Designated Areas: A Resource Book for Educators in South-Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean” (2013).
- the Youth engagement in MAB Youth Forums (Po Delta BR, 2017; Changbaishan BR, China 2019) and other events (UNCC Conference, NY, 2019), the EuroMAB and MAB conferences

This Activity is under the aegis and constitutes a concrete contribution to the work of the Mediterranean Committee on Education for Sustainable Development (MCESD), operating formally since 2016, which guides and monitors the implementation of the [Mediterranean Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development \(MSESD\)](#) and its revised [Action Plan towards 2030](#) (Nicosia, 2022). UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe (Venice Office) is an active member of MCESD while MIO-ECSDE / MEDIES facilitates the operation of its Secretariat.

THE GLOBAL AND THE REGIONAL CONTEXT

Admittedly, progressing towards **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** through the 2030 Agenda requires qualified professionals equipped with a broad interdisciplinary and intercultural understanding of the diverse development issues, global environmental challenges. Moreover, achieving the SDGs, requires a deep understanding of the inseparable connection between natural and cultural heritage, at the global and local context. Biosphere Reserves serve as ideal laboratories where traditional knowledge systems, cultural landscapes, and biodiversity conservation strategies can be developed and tested together.

At a regional level, the **Mediterranean** is a biodiversity hotspot and a cradle of some of the world's oldest and greatest civilizations, and forms to this day a rich mosaic of cultures, with similarities in traditions, lifestyles, diets, and gestures. The Mediterranean region uniquely embodies the interconnection of natural and cultural heritage - from terraced agricultural landscapes that have shaped ecosystems for millennia, to water resistant agriculture; traditional water management systems that sustain both biodiversity and cultural practices; as well as the Mediterranean Diet (intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO). As a biodiversity hotspot its land is home to about 30,000 plant species, (with more than 13,000 endemic), and its sea is home to 7% of all marine species worldwide,

However, the region faces significant challenges in sustainable development, including water scarcity, environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, over tourism and urbanization (particularly on its coasts) unsustainable agricultural practices, and above all, climate change. It has become a particularly dry area vulnerable to forest mega-fires; its sea is the second warming system, coming second only to Arctic. These difficulties put a lot of strain on terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, deplete natural resources (e.g. water, land, fish stocks, etc.), cause alien species intrusion, generate pollution and threaten ecosystems' vulnerability.

In its efforts to protect biodiversity and sustainable development UNESCO, all around the world and particularly in SE Europe and the Mediterranean promotes **Biosphere Reserves (BRs)**, a central component of the UNESCO MAB (Man and the Biosphere) Programme. Through them a sustainable balance between the frequently at odds goals of "conserving biological diversity," "promoting human development," and "maintaining associated cultural values."

The UNESCO Venice office and MIO-ECSDE, through numerous initiatives, and especially through the series of 10 editions of successful Summer (or Hybrid) Universities, have always stressed the importance of Biosphere Reserves (BRs) as "living laboratories" for sustainable development and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). They are perhaps the most appropriate settings to develop and test exemplary solutions to challenges that society faces, i.e. problems of land use,

demographic changes, and resource management. Within a BR, environmental protection could be harmoniously, or at least more easily combined with research, education, management, local development, and citizenship, thus ‘modelling’ and ‘demonstrating’ sustainable development in tangible ways.

Today (2025) the World Network of Biosphere Reserves includes 759 BRs from 136 countries, three of which are located in Greece: in Olympus, in Samaria Gorge, and in Asterousia (2021), and in September 2025 the new BR of Parnon area is expected to formally join the List.

THE LOCAL CONTEXT: ASTEROUSIA BIOSHERE RESERVE

In many ways, the relatively new Biosphere Reserve of Asterousia (2021) embodies the values, diversity, contrasts, and interlinks of a Biosphere Reserve, more or less typical for SE Europe and for the Mediterranean region. The BR combines coastal and mountainous features (Kofina peak is 1,231 meters high), with a remarkable richness of terrestrial, but also aquatic ecosystems.

Asterousia exemplifies this natural-cultural heritage integration through its ancient Minoan archaeological sites nestled within pristine landscapes, traditional Cretan shepherding practices that have maintained biodiversity for centuries, and local knowledge of drought-resistant agriculture and water management systems that are increasingly relevant for climate adaptation.

The local inhabitants view the BR as an opportunity to preserve and enhance nature, link culture, environment, and economy, safeguard and enhance heritage, explore practical solutions, encourage the resilience of local communities, provide well-paying jobs for local youth, and foster a sense of pride in their region and local products. Read more on the website of the [“Association of the Protection of Asterousia.”](#)

The local community has a strong commitment towards the BR and the opportunities it offers for international collaborations, networking, branding and sustainable development. Supported by Region of Crete since the BR’s designation, the Asterousia Hybrid University offers a unique opportunity for young managers and researchers of BRs and other designated sites from SE Europe and the Mediterranean region to meet annually or biannually and exchange practices, methodologies on a specific topic of concern.

“The road to the development of the Asterousia Biosphere Reserve area goes through the protection and strengthening of its natural and cultural capital. But the path of protecting the area also goes through its sustainable development.”

*Prof. Michael Scoullas,
Chair, Greek National Committee of MAB/UNESCO*

YEARLY FOCUS

The main **theme** this academic year will be the mutual support of **Natural and Cultural Heritage** in BRs, within the context of Sustainable Development. Specific sub-topics to be covered through the dedicated lectures, workshops and field-visits are:

- Good practices in BRs and other sites in protecting both natural and cultural heritage
- Traditional governance systems integrated with modern BR management approaches
- Freshwater management combining traditional harvesting techniques with modern non-conventional water resources
- Degraded Habitat Restoration e.g. reforestation, wetland restoration, and artificial sea reefs to enhance marine biodiversity
- Circular economy in agriculture: the case of wool
- How special forms of tourism (e.g. agro-, star-watching-, religion-, fishing-related etc) offer unique experiences and contribute to mild local sustainable development
- Intangible heritage documentation and transmission (traditional songs, stories, practices related to natural resources and landscapes)
- The role of local products within the BR: A win-win for producers and visitors.
- Community engagement through traditional knowledge holders, youth, and citizen science approaches, and ESD bridging past and present.

DESCRIPTION

The 2025-2026 University will take place in a Hybrid Format with Phase A (live) taking place within and around Asterousia, and Phase B online.

The **target group** of the Hybrid University includes post graduate students, educators, young scientists and managers, studying or working (or otherwise engaged) in existing, candidate or potential Biosphere Reserves, Geo-parks, and connected Natura 2000, Heritage Sites, and other designated areas with a priority given to participants from SE Europe and Mediterranean countries.

The **aim** is to equip those that take part, with the knowledge, skills, and methodology tools to bridge the Natural and Cultural Heritage, and inspire them in rendering their BRs living sustainability labs.

The working language of both Phases will be **English**.

A symbolic registration fee of 100 EUR will apply for the selected participants.

Phase A (live) is planned as **three full day compact event in October 2025** (Tuesday 28/10 arrivals to Saturday 01/11 departures, 4 nights), to take place within the Asterousia Biosphere Reserve. It will entail lectures, field visits, demonstrations and joined activities with the local inhabitants. All participants will be asked to present their Site (5 min) and are encouraged if they so wish to hold an interactive peer learning exercise or workshop (30 min) in order to share a practice. Find the outline of the preliminary agenda below.

Phase A is designed for **approximately 25 trainees (16 international and 9 Greek)**. Priority will be given to participants from SE European and Mediterranean Countries.

Phase B (online) is scheduled for **January 2026**, as a 3-week long event to capitalize and broaden the outcomes of Phase A and to provide learning opportunities to a wider audience. The content of Phase B will build on previous e-courses, properly adapted and enriched with this year's themes. The learning content will include: Video lectures from invited experts; existing online videos, toolkits, presentations; three (3) live sessions with experts (once a week, each lasting 60 – 90 min); recorded material and interviews from Phase A. The e-course will be developed on MIO-ECSDE's e-learning platform: <https://envirolearning.net/>

Based on previous years' attendance, it is expected that approximately 100 international practitioners will apply to take part in Phase B, and those who successfully complete tests and exercise will receive a certificate of successful attendance and completion by the UNESCO Venice Office and the UNESCO Chair of the University of Athens.

EXPECTED RESULTS

The Participants of the 2025-2026 Hybrid University (Phase A and B) are expected to:

- Become aware of the global, UN, EU and Mediterranean Policies, on sustainable development and climate change
- Be informed of outcomes of the World Congress on BRs (China, Sept 2025)
- Understand the importance of sustainable/integrated management for all SDGs;
- Exchange best practices on integrated management of cultural landscapes, traditional ecological knowledge, and heritage-based conservation approaches
- Be familiarised with principles, methods, tools and cases of BR management
- Discuss Climate Change adaptation and mitigation measures applicable in their regions;
- Be introduced to cases of Non-Conventional Water Resources (NCWR), esp. of Crete;
- Interact with stakeholders and professionals of the Asterousia BR;
- Get inspired on integrating traditional knowledge systems with modern citizen science
- Design their own Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) or citizen science activities.

TIMEFRAME

The organisation of this year's University (Phase A and Phase B) follows the below timetable:

PHASE A (live)

June 2025	July 2025	Sep 2025	Oct 2025	November 2025
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concept note & budgeting • Drafting the Agenda • Contracts with funders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Announcement Call with Draft Agenda • Circulation of the Call through Venice Office and MIO's channels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selection of participants based on the set criteria. • Logistics to facilitate itineraries and hotels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finalisation of the day to day agenda • Facilitation of Phase A in Crete, including field visits, lectures & Workshops • Evaluation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phase A Narrative and Financial Report. • Collection of Video recordings of Phase A to be used in Phase B.

PHASE B (online)

Nov 2025	Dec 2025	Jan 2026	Feb -March 2026
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum finalisation for Phase B • Contacts with experts / speakers • Collection of online resources • Video material from Phase A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call for applications • Registrations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • January 2025: Running the full Phase B in a three-week long format with synchronous and asynchronous learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Closing of Phase B • Phase B Narrative and Financial Report.

DRAFT DAILY AGENDA - PHASE A

The outline of the 3-day event is presented below: Day 1 will focus on management approaches of Sustainable Development and Heritage, Day 2 on Sustainable Farming and Day 3 on Education and Circular economy. Each day will combine key lectures and presentations, workshops and field visits.

<i>Tue 28 Oct</i>	Wed 29 Oct- MAB PROGRAM SD & MANAGEMENT	Thu 30 Oct SUSTAINABLE FARMING & CULTURE	Fri 31 Oct EDUCATION & CIRCULAR ECONOMY (WOOL)	Sat 1 Nov
<i>Where</i>	Kapetaniana village	Messara valley	Charakas village	
<i>ARRIVALS Informal welcome dinner</i>	<p>Welcome, Scope, MaB program Theory on integrated management WEFE</p> <p>Best practices</p> <p>Guided tour to Thalori ecotouristic Farm & discussion on ecotourism's dynamic & challenges</p> <p>*Star-Watching event (*depends on the weather)</p>	<p>Guided visit to olive oil association (Famelia) & Olive groves in Mesara</p> <p>Guided visit to the Messara Museum Oil in art ? Culture as a tool for SD</p> <p>Lectures and Workshops on water saving in olive groves & vineyards, to be hosted in the Farm School of Messara</p>	<p>Move to the Cultural Association of Charaka village:</p> <p>Lectures and workshops on ESD Community engagement practices</p> <p>Circular economy: The case of sheep wool</p> <p>Return & farewell dinner at Thalori</p>	<i>DEPARTURES</i>

CO-ORGANISERS | STAKEHOLDERS

The **main organisers** & sponsors of the Hybrid University are

- Region of Crete
- Heraclion Development Agency (HDA)
- UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe (Venice Office)
- UNESCO Chair and Network on Sustainable Development Management and Education at the University of Athens (UoA)
- Mediterranean Information Office for Environment, Culture and Sustainable Development (MIO-ECSDE) through the MEDIES initiative

Other contributors: The Hybrid University will bring together a series of actors in and around the Asterousia BR, including:

- The Mediterranean Committee on ESD (MCESD)
- Association for the Protection of Asterousia
- Agricultural School of Messara
- Agricultural Cooperative of Olive Producers of Asterousia - FAMELIA
- Archaeological Museum of Messara
- Cultural Association of Charakas Village
- Natural History Museum of Crete
- HCMR Hellenic Centre for Marine Research
- Local Associations of professionals & Women

ACRONYMS

BR(s) Biosphere Reserve(s)

CC Climate Change

ESD Education for Sustainable Development

ICZM Integrated Coastal Zone Management

IWRM Integrated Water Resources Management

MSESD Mediterranean Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development

NCWR(s) Non-Conventional Water Resource(s)

SDGs Sustainable Development Goals

WEFE Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystems nexus approach

WNBRs World Network of Biosphere Reserves