



**CONCEPT NOTE**  
**ASTEROUSIA HYBRID UNIVERSITY 2026-2027:**  
**PHASE A: 4-8 OCTOBER 2026, ASTEROURIA BR, CRETE**  
**PHASE B: JAN 2027**  
*Climate Resilient Communities  
in Mediterranean Biosphere Reserves*



MEDITERRANEAN INFORMATION OFFICE  
FOR ENVIRONMENT, CULTURE AND  
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

## SUMMARY

The Concept Note outlines the organisation of the **12<sup>th</sup> edition** of Hybrid University (2026-2027), run since 2020 in Asterousia, for postgraduate students, young researchers, educators and junior managers of existing and candidate Biosphere Reserves (BRs) of the MAB/UNESCO Programme and other designated areas from South-Eastern European and Mediterranean countries.

## 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 since 2020, the Asterousia Biosphere Reserve. Thanks to the kind support of the Heraklion Development Agency and the Region of Crete, the Asterousia Hybrid University (AHU) has evolved into an “institutionalised” annual training and peer exchange, that is expected and welcomed by the BR related communities of the Mediterranean and beyond.

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

- the series of successful trainings and summer / hybrid universities on how to envision, plan and implement sustainable development initiatives in Biosphere Reserves and other designated sites such as Global Geoparks (GGs), World Heritage Sites (WHS), Protected Areas (PAs), Natura 2000 sites, etc., from South-Eastern European and Mediterranean countries. (Table 1).
- The significant [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), which is used extensively worldwide.
- 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 constitutes a concrete contribution and is under the aegis 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, MIO-ECSDE/MEdIES serves its Secretariat while its executive work is supervised by the corresponding UNESCO Chair and Network at the University of Athens.

<b>When</b>	<b>Where</b>	<b>Focus theme</b>
<b>2025-2026 (Hybrid)</b>	<a href="#">Asterousia BR and online</a>	Natural and Cultural Heritage in BRs
<b>2024-2025 (Hybrid)</b>	<a href="#">Asterousia BR and online</a>	Integrated Management in BRs and other designated areas in South East Europe and the Mediterranean
<b>2023-2024 (Hybrid)</b>	<a href="#">Asterousia BR and online</a>	Water Management in BRs of the Mediterranean and beyond
<b>2022-2023 (Hybrid)</b>	<a href="#">Asterousia BR &amp; Cyprus</a> , and online	Biosphere Reserves as sites to develop Ocean Literacy
<b>2021-2022 (Hybrid)</b>	<a href="#">Asterousia BR and online</a>	Biodiversity and ecosystems' threats due to plastic pollution, in marine & coastal BRs
<b>2020 (Hybrid)</b>	<a href="#">Asterousia and online</a>	A super year for nature and biodiversity
<b>2019</b>	<a href="#">Central Balkan BR</a>	Integrated Management, Sustainable Tourism, and Promotion of BRs
<b>2018</b>	<a href="#">Parnon Candidate BR</a>	Integrated Approaches for Sustainable Development Management, Tourism & Local Products in BRs
<b>2017</b>	<a href="#">Sardinia</a>	Integrated Management Approaches and Sustainable Tourism Strategies for BRs
<b>2016</b>	<a href="#">Samothraki</a>	Integrated Water and Coastal Management–Educational and Participatory Approaches
<b>2014</b>	<a href="#">Amfissa</a>	Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in Protected Areas and BRs

## THE GLOBAL AND THE REGIONAL CONTEXT

With only four years remaining until 2030, global progress on the **Sustainable Development Goals** remains critically off-track. The UN's 2024 SDG Progress Report reveals that only 17% of SDG targets are on course, while progress on nearly half has stalled or reversed. Achieving the SDGs requires accelerated action, particularly on climate (SDG13), life on land (SDG15), and international partnerships (SDG 17). This urgency demands professionals with interdisciplinary understanding who can bridge policy and practice, manage areas in an integrated manner and mobilize local communities. Biosphere Reserves serve as essential laboratories where integrated management, biodiversity and cultural heritage conservation (tangible and intangible) strategies are developed, tested, and utilized for sustainable local development.

At a regional level, the **Mediterranean** is 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. The region has developed wise natural resource management systems, from dry stone walls and terraces on the slopes of mountains where natural and agricultural ecosystems have been maintained for millennia, to rain-fed agriculture; traditional water management systems that help maintain biodiversity.

However, the region simultaneously faces significant challenges in sustainable development, such as 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 with frequent phenomena of water scarcity, but also frequent floods, surface soil erosion, and forest mega-fires, while its sea warms very quickly, coming second only to Arctic. As a result, great pressure is exerted on terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, natural resources are being depleted and/or polluted] (e.g. water, land, fish stocks, etc.), and invasive species are increasing].

On top of that, the escalating armed conflicts in the Middle East exacerbate the multiple challenges of the region's, displacing millions of people, straining resources destroying infrastructure, while disrupting regional cooperation on environmental issues. Energy and food security concerns have intensified, while damaged infrastructure and environmental contamination from conflict add new layers of vulnerability to already climate-stressed ecosystems.

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 is achieved between the frequently at odds goals of "conserving biodiversity," "promoting human development," and "maintaining associated cultural values."

The UNESCO Venice office and MIO-ECSDE, through numerous initiatives, and especially through the past editions of the 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). These 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 (2026) the World Network of Biosphere Reserves includes 759 BRs from 136 countries, four of which are located in Greece: in Olympus, in Samaria Gorge, in Asterousia (2021), and in Parnon (2025).

## 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.

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 recognises also the opportunities the BR offers for international collaborations, networking, and training. 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.

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*"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*

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## YEARLY FOCUS

The main **theme** this year is **Climate Resilient Communities in Mediterranean Biosphere Reserves**. Specific sub-topics to be covered through the dedicated lectures, workshops and field-visits are:

- Bridging the UN/EU Climate Change 'Policy to Practice gap'
- Climate adaptation and mitigation practices in Mediterranean BRs. Examples of CC action:
  - o Freshwater management combining traditional harvesting with modern non-conventional water resources (NCWRs)
  - o Non-irrigated rain-fed crops e.g. as olives& carobs, as a basis for local agricultural production
  - o Nature-Based Solutions, e.g. reforestation & stone-walls restoration
  - o Climate-resilient tourism & local sustainable development,
  - o Community-based adaptation planning,
- Circular economy in agriculture: the case of olive residues
- The role of local products within the BR: A win-win for producers and visitors.
- Community led climate action: traditional knowledge holders, youth, citizen science and ESD.

## DESCRIPTION

The 2026-2027 University will take place in a Hybrid Format with Phase A (live) taking place within Asterousia, and Phase B online.

The **target group** of the Hybrid University includes postgraduate students, educators, young scientists and managers, studying or working (or otherwise engaged) in existing, candidate or potential Biosphere Reserves, Geoparks, and connected Natura 2000, 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 practices of Biosphere Reserves that have in place adaptation and mitigation measures and inspire them in rendering their BRs living sustainability labs.

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

A **registration fee of 200 Euro** will apply for the selected participants. (\*Applies to those outside Crete, that will need air-ticket).

**Phase A (live)** is planned as **three full day compact event in October 2026** (Sunday 04/10 arrivals to Thursday 08/10 departures, 4 nights), to take place within the Asterousia Biosphere Reserve. It will entail lectures, field visits, peer exchange sessions and meetings 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 (45 min) in order to share a practice. Find the outline of the preliminary agenda below.

Phase A is designed for **approximately 25-30 participants** (with at least 15 internationals). Priority will be given to participants from SE European and Mediterranean Countries.

**Phase B (online)** is scheduled for **January 2027**, 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 and 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 from Phase A. The e-course will be set up 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 assignments 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 2026-2027 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;
- Understand the importance of sustainable/integrated management (WEFE Nexus) for SDGs;
- Be informed of the principles of the new Hangzhou Action plan for BRs (2026-2035);
- Exchange best practices on sustainable agriculture, integrated management of natural resources, traditional ecological knowledge;
- Be familiarised with principles, methods, tools and cases of BR management;
- Exchange on 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;
- Be inspired to design their own Action Plan in their BR to combat climate change.

## TIMEFRAME

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

### PHASE A (live)

May 2026	June 2026	July -Aug 2026	Sept 2026	Octo2026	Nov 2026
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concept note &amp; budgeting</li> <li>• Drafting the Agenda</li> <li>• Contracts with funders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Announcement Call with Draft Agenda</li> <li>• Circulation of the Call through Venice Office and MIO's channels.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selection of participants based on the set criteria.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Logistics to facilitate itineraries and hotels.</li> <li>• Finalisation of the day to day agenda</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitation of Phase A in Crete, including field visits, lectures &amp; Workshops</li> <li>• Evaluation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Narrative and Financial Report of Phase A.</li> <li>• Process of video recordings of Phase A to be used in Phase B.</li> </ul>

### PHASE B (online)

Nov 2026	Dec 2026	Jan 2027	Feb -March 2027
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curriculum finalisation for Phase B</li> <li>• Contacts with experts / speakers</li> <li>• Collection of online resources</li> <li>• Video material from Phase A</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Call for applications</li> <li>• Registrations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• January 2026: Facilitation of Phase B in a three-week long format with synchronous and asynchronous learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Closing of Phase B</li> <li>• Narrative and Financial Report of Phase B.</li> </ul>

## DRAFT DAILY AGENDA - PHASE A

This year's University focuses on how communities in Biosphere Reserves apply adaptation and mitigation measures to develop resilience toward Climate Change. The relevant lifelong ESD extending beyond classrooms and addressing also productive sectors and the needed frameworks and methods for effectively engaging the local community will be also included in the event.

The outline of the 3-day event is presented below: Day 1 will focus on management approaches of SD and Climate Change, i.e. the WEFE approach and circular economy, Day 2 on Best practices Natural and Cultural Heritage, and Day 3 on Education and awareness. Each day will combine key lectures and presentations, workshops and field visits.

Sun 04 Oct	Mon 5 Oct- MAB PROGRAM   SD & MANAGEMENT   CIRCULAR ECONOMY	Tue 6 Oct PEER EXCHANGE ON CLIMATE ACTION ECOSYSTEMS	Wed 7 Oct LOCAL PRODUCTS, EDUCATION & AWARENESS	Thu 8 Oct
<i>Where</i>	<b><i>Kapetaniana village (old school)</i></b>	<b><i>Village TBC</i></b>	<b><i>Village TBC</i></b>	
<b>ARRIVALS</b> <i>Informal welcome dinner</i>	<p>Welcome, Scope, MaB program   Climate Change in the Mediterranean   Integrated management - WEFE nexus approach</p> <p>Best practices</p> <p><i>Outdoor session:</i> <i>Study visit to Olive pomace oil mill (Converts olive pomace to biomass)</i></p>	<p>Indoor session: Peer exchange workshops on BR climate practices</p> <p><i>Outdoor session:</i> <i>Ag. Ioannis to Koudoumas and back: Following a path of religious pilgrimage, in this walking tour we will explore the local ecosystem (flora and fauna). Along the way we meet caves, waterways, terraces, etc.</i></p>	<p><i>Study visits to selected producers (e.g. wine-Strataridakis, rusks-Tsiaknakis)</i></p> <p><i>*Indoor session could be hosted at a local school</i></p> <p>Presentation and workshops on ESD   Community engagement practices</p> <p>Workshop based on PARCCE material on Climate Change Education</p> <p>Return &amp; farewell dinner</p>	<b>DEPARTURES</b>

## CO-ORGANISERS | STAKEHOLDERS

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

- Asterousia Biosphere Reserve
- Association for the Protection of Asterousia
- Region of Crete
- Heraklion Development Agency (HDA)
- UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe (Venice Office)
- UNESCO Chair & Network on Sustainable Development Management and Education at 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:

- Archaeological Museum of Messara
- Natural History Museum of Crete
- HCMR Hellenic Centre for Marine Research
- Local Associations of professionals & Women

**Under the aegis of:**

- Mediterranean Committee on Education for Sustainable Development (MCESD)

## 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

## INDICATIVE SOURCES

2026 People and nature in UNESCO-designated sites: Global and local contributions [LINK](#)

2022 Ecotourism and Sustainable Development in BRs (Workshop outcomes, Canada 2022) [LINK](#)

UNESCO & MIO-ECSDE, ESD in Biosphere Reserves and other designated Areas (2012), [LINK](#)

MAB/UNESCO: Local Good Practices on SDGs, [Link](#)

Discover more about the Asterousia BR, [in this website](#).

UNESCO (2022) Technical guidelines for Biosphere Reserves [Link](#)

Promoting sustainable development through UNESCO's programmes and sites [Link](#)

Exploring sustainable development: a multiple-perspective approach [-LINK](#)

Learning about water: multiple-perspective approaches – [LINK](#)

Greening Curriculum Guidance: teaching and learning for climate action - [LINK](#)