

IMPACT ASSESSMENT REPORT of Association for Nature, Environment and Sustainable Development Sunce 2015 – 2025

**Analytical overview of the findings of the comprehensive Impact
Assessment Study of Association for Nature, Environment and
Sustainable Development Sunce**

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SUMMARY

This *Impact Assessment Report of the Association for Nature, Environment and Sustainable Development Sunce* presents the key findings and insights from the comprehensive Impact Assessment Report of Sunce, covering the decade from 2015 to 2025. The study and report were prepared by Marina Škrabalo, expert for evaluation of non-profit and developmental programmes and organisations; the study was commissioned by association Sunce. The research was conducted in the second half of 2025 and builds upon the previous external evaluation for the period 2005–2015. This ensures longitudinal comparability of the organisation's development, while simultaneously focusing on a new phase of the Croatian environmental and nature conservation system: a phase in which the core issue is no longer the establishment of formal regulations, but their actual implementation.

While the previous decade was marked by the alignment of Croatian legislation with the EU *acquis*, the 2015–2025 period was defined by the struggle to implement these regulations in practice – in the conditions of implementation deficit, institutional weak capacity, low level of supervision, pressures on space and natural resources and a growing gap between formally accepted green objectives and their operational implementation. It is precisely in this gap between form and practice that the social significance of Sunce becomes evident: the organisation operates in areas where European standards need to be transposed into local implementation, and where citizens require accessible information while institutions need an expert, independent, and persistent corrective.

The purpose of assessment was not merely to understand what Sunce implemented, but to identify the changes brought about by its work, the mechanisms through which these changes were produced, and the contextual conditions under which they were achieved. The analytical framework, therefore, does not view Sunce merely as a project-implementing organisation, but as an actor of long-term social changes, that contributes to development of public policy, institutional practices, professional standards, models of collaboration, civic awareness and the social legitimacy of environmental and nature conservation as a public interest.

The overall assessment of the study is that Sunce underwent a key evolutionary phase during the observed period: transitioning from a robust regional environmental organisation into one of the most prominent expert, social, and advocacy actors in Croatian nature and environmental protection. The organisation has outgrown framework of classic environmental association and positioned itself as an actor that simultaneously generates knowledge, develops operational models, educates, mobilizes citizens, participates in public policy, supports local communities, cooperates with institutions, and acts as a corrective of system's weaknesses.

The effect of Sunce in the observed decade is visible on several key levels: expert knowledge creation, environmental literacy enhancement, public communication, civic activism, nature conservation, impact on public policy and organisation development.

Summarised overview of Sunce's impact, complete with performance indicators and impact evaluations, is presented in Table 1. The table also integrates empirical findings on organisational development and long-term sustainability.

Table 1. Overview of Impact Assessment Findings of Association Sunce 2015 – 2025

Impact dimension	Performance indicators of Sunce	Evidence / Example from the Impact Assessment Study of Sunce	Assessment of Achievements and Impact
Environmental awareness and education	14,386 beneficiaries of educational programmes; 85 educational institutions; 1,699 educators and mentors	In the period from 2015 to 2025, educational activities covered 12,687 children and youth, including 1,699 educators and mentors , that is, a total of 14,386 direct beneficiaries . Programmes were implemented in collaboration with 85 educational institutions , which is a multiple-fold increase compared to the previous period.	Sunce almost doubled direct educational reach and developed a more systematic, vertically integrated model of environmental education. The impact is not evident only in a number of beneficiaries, but also in the expansion of methodologies: experiential learning, service-learning, STEM, digital tools, fieldwork, and the empowerment of teachers as multipliers of knowledge.
Public communication	2,605 media releases, 501 media outlets, 245 public events, 36,072 participants	The Study states that Sunce organised 245 public events with an estimated 36,072 participants . At the same time, there were 2,605 media releases across 501 media outlets , representing more than a threefold increase in total communication volume compared to the previous decade.	Sunce developed a stable public visibility and communication autonomy. Public communication is no longer mere support to the projects, but an independent driver of impact that transposes environmental topics into publicly understandable discourse and sustains them in the media space.
Civic activism	> 2,600 reports submitted to the Green Phone, 230–260 annually submitted reports, an average resolution rate of 70–80%; strategic litigation and legal protection	The Green phone received more than 2,600 reports , with an average annual volume of 230–260 reports and an average resolution rate of 70–80% . The Study highlights that the Green Phone represents a trusted channel for citizens and links individual concerns with institutional procedures.	Civic concern is transformed into structured action, institutional pressure, and the defence of the public interest. The impact was reflected not only in the resolution of individual reports, but also in building a bridge between citizens, competent authorities, legal mechanisms, and public advocacy.
Nature conservation	> 350 km ² of mapped seabed, > 1,000 diving profiles, > 50 research field trips, 11 management plans, 79 ecological network sites for <i>Posidonia</i> conservation, two conservation areas for seabirds, and the Cape	The Study states that more than 359 km² of seabed was mapped, over 1,000 diving profiles were prepared, and more than 50 research field trips were carried out . In the period between 2021 and 2023, the preparation of 11 management plans for 26 protected areas and 71 Natura	Sunce generates data, expert studies, standards, and management models that strengthen the nature conservation system. The impact is particularly strong because field data is transposed into official plans, management decisions, and the expansion of marine habitat protection.

	Stupišće Special Marine Reserve	2000 sites was coordinated. Based on the new map and collected data, in 2025, 79 ecological network sites were designated for <i>Posidonia</i> conservation, along with two conservation areas for seabirds and the Cape Stupišće Special Marine Reserve.	
Environment protection and sustainable development	61 registered activities, 47 projects, 14 specialised services, 2.38 million EUR portfolio	In the field of nature conservation and sustainable development, the portfolio includes 61 registered activities , out of which 47 projects and 14 highly specialized services .	Its work evolved from education and advocacy towards implementation of normative, infrastructural and locally applicable solutions. Sunce connects waste management, reduction of plastic, sustainable tourism, responsible behaviour at sea, and local sustainability practices.
Public policy	117 policy interventions, 37 self-initiated contributions, 110 formal interactions, more than 35 working bodies	In the period between 2015 and 2025, 117 policy interventions were recorded, 37 of which were self-initiated contributions . Sunce held 110 formal interactions and meetings through more than 35 working bodies at the local, regional, national, and international levels. Thematic focus included 36 interventions in nature conservation; 35 in civil society, education and human rights; and 28 in environment protection and waste management .	Sunce operates in the early stages of policymaking and strongly influences the implementation, operational, and regulatory "fine details" of regulations and public decisions. Its greatest contribution does not consist only of providing comments to documents, but in the expert shaping of standards, plans, procedures, and implementation solutions.
Organisation development and organisation sustainability	+275.9% of income growth, 22.61 FTEs, 172 projects, > 11 million EUR project portfolio, 498 members, 4,875 volunteer hours	Total income grew from 389,000.00 EUR in 2015 to 1,463,168.00 EUR in 2025 , representing a growth of 275.9% . The staffing capacity grew from 10.57 to 22.61 FTEs , the number of projects grew from 82 to 172 , and the total value of the project portfolio exceeded 11 million EUR . Number of members increased from 222 to 498 , and a number of volunteer hours grew from 1,848 to 4,875 .	Organisation capacities, professionalization and social base were considerably strengthened. At the same time, this growth increases complexity of organisation and requires more systematic management of knowledge, internal communication, succession, leadership capacities, and overload prevention.

INTRODUCTION: PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT

This external impact assessment was prepared for the purpose of providing comprehensive analysis of social contribution of the Association during a decade from 2015 to 2025, with preservation of analytical and methodological comparability in relation to previous external assessment. The assessment builds on the evaluation approach used in the previous cycle, that viewed work of the organisation as closely connected to the development of system for environment and nature conservation in the Republic of Croatia.

The assessment is structured around interconnected dimensions: the relevance of Sunce's work within the context of green policy of the Republic of Croatia, impact on environmental awareness and responsibility, development of civic activism, nature conservation system, environment protection and sustainable development, public policy, and organisation development and sustainability. Media and digital space were addressed within the scope of public awareness, in accordance with the structure of the comprehensive study, as in Sunce's operations, communication is not a separate function of visibility, but an integral mechanism of education, mobilization, and changing social norms. In each dimension not only outcomes, but drivers of change were observed, which implies answering questions such as how practice developed from projects, how active citizenship developed from education, how policy argument developed from expert data, and how a question of public interest arose from a local problem.

The Study was based on triangulation of several data sources and research methods: programme and project documentation, annual reports, monitoring tables, evaluation reports, internal analyses, publications, website archives, results of public opinion survey that was carried out by company Ipsos in 2025, taking into account four Dalmatian counties, and research on the attitudes of stakeholders from the broad collaborative network of the Sunce association. Public opinion survey entails research of perception of ecological problems and civic engagement, as well as determining the public recognition and perception of Sunce. Research on the attitudes of stakeholders was conducted using survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The participant breakdown by sector and data collection method is shown in the Table below.

Table 2. Structure of Sunce stakeholders that were included in impact assessment

Sector	Survey	Interviews	Total
Public sector (education, units of local self-government, public institutions, state institutions)	28	9	37
Non-profit sector (associations, trusts, donors)	6	10	16
Business sector (nautical tourism, consultants)	8	2	10
International organisations and independent experts	5	8	13
TOTAL NUMBER OF STAKEHOLDERS	47	29	76

The special value of the assessment stems from Sunce's highly developed internal monitoring system, which over the course of a decade has enabled the systematic tracking of the organisation's activities, outcomes, partnerships, public policy interventions, media presence, and social reach of the organisation.

There were additional surveys of employees and volunteers of Sunce, each including 22 respondents, focus groups with members and volunteers, and three focus groups with citizens of Split. Validation workshops with the management team were conducted in July and December 2025, and preliminary findings were presented at the Sunce Association Assembly in December 2025. Data collection process lasted from July 2025 to February 2026. Such methodological framework made it possible to combine quantitative indicators, institutional memory, and external stakeholders' experiences into a comprehensive picture of impact.

1. RELEVANCE OF SUNCE IN THE CONTEXT OF DIFFICULT GREEN TRANSITION

The reality of green policies in Croatia and the European Union between 2015 and 2025 is marked by a dual dynamic: on the one hand, strong normative development of environmental and climate policies, and on the other, an increasingly visible gap between declared goals and their actual implementation. The European Green Deal, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, new framework of biodiversity policies, circular economy, and climate neutrality raised the level of formal expectations. However, the Croatian experience has shown that transposing of European *acquis* into national legislation does not automatically imply the state's operational capacity to enforce such obligations.

Empirical data from European Commission Environmental Implementation Country Report: Croatia (EIR 2025)¹ showed a large gap between commitments made and their implementation. **Annually, 2.9 billion EUR** is needed for protection of waters and biodiversity, prevention of pollution, circular economy, and waste, while estimated investment gap amounted to approximately **1.2 billion EUR on an annual basis**.

Nature protection sites – Natura 2000: Croatia distinguishes itself by the scope of land protection: Natura 2000 encompasses **36.7% of land territory** – nearly double than EU average – special preservation objectives were determined for all **38 special protection areas (SPA) for birds**. However, the objectives were determined for only **143 out of 745 special areas of conservation (SAC)**, that is, about 19%, while management plans for 365 areas cover about 65% of the network area. The Commission, therefore, requires finalisation of conservation objectives and measures, and their efficient implementation, particularly in order to reduce pressures from agriculture, forestry, fisheries, energy, and water management. An infringement procedure under EU law is also ongoing regarding the evaluation of modifications to wind farm projects that could impact Natura 2000 sites.

Waste and circular economy: Croatia achieves good results in recycling of construction and demolition waste, with the rate at **81.8%**, but considerably lags behind when it comes to communal waste management. The preparation for re-use and recycling rate stood at only **36% in 2023**, while according to 2022 data, as much as **56% of municipal waste** ended up in landfills. As a result, Croatia has requested a postponement of the 55% municipal waste recycling target and part of the packaging targets from 2025 to 2030. The circular material use rate fell to 6.2%, compared to the EU average of 11.8%, and Croatia still lacks a unified circular economy strategy. In the waste sector, several proceedings were initiated due to EU rights infringements, while annual investment gap for circular economy and waste amounts to **118 million EUR**.

Waters and financial risks: The overall compliance rate with the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive stood at just **7% in 2020**. A total of 68 agglomerations, with a load equivalent to approximately 3.51 million inhabitants, failed to meet the requirements of the Directive, and numerous infrastructure projects are

¹ European Commission, *2025 Environmental Implementation Review – Country Report: Croatia*, Commission Staff Working Document, SWD(2025) 303 final, Bruxelles, 7 July 2025., in particular pg. 3–16, 32–44.

https://environment.ec.europa.eu/law-and-governance/environmental-implementation-review/country-reports_en

progressing too slowly. At the same time, non-revenue water stands at around **49%**, placing Croatia among the EU member states with the highest public water supply losses. Estimated annual investment needs in water sector amount to about 680 million EUR, with the investment gap of about **272 million EUR annually**.

The most direct example of financial consequences of non-implementation of environmental law is the "Black Hill" case in Biljane Donje, where approximately **140 000 tonnes of waste generated from processing ferromanganese and silicomanganese slag was deposited**. Since Croatia did not enforce the EU Court Judgement from 2019, in March of 2025, the Court ordered Croatia to pay **a lump sum in the amount of one million EUR**, and additional **6,500.00 EUR for each day of delay** until full remediation, at the expense of state budget².

Table 3. Overview of the state of environmental and nature conservation policy in the Republic of Croatia

Policy area	State in Croatia	Key issue for policy implementation
Natura 2000 and biodiversity policy	Conservation goals determined for 143 out of 745 special areas of conservation (around 19%).	Clear goals and management framework missing for more than 80% of areas, formal protection does not always result in actual conservation.
Waste and circular economy	Due to its low initial municipal waste recycling rate, Croatia was granted a five-year extension to meet part of the EU recycling targets; the circular material use rate stands at 6.2% compared to the EU average of 11.8% (2023).	The system remains overly reliant on landfilling, with insufficiently developed infrastructure for separate collection, composting, and advanced recycling.
Water purification	Compliance with EU Directive was only around 7% in 2020, with active infringement procedures for breaches of EU law.	One of the most obvious examples of underperformance in accession commitments that require major infrastructure interventions.
Field supervision	The State Inspectorate is filled to roughly 60% of its planned capacity.	Deficit of human resources and politically sensitive supervision create space for unpunished violations of environmental rules.
Access to judiciary	Impeded application of suspensive effect in environmental litigation.	Claims based on Aarhus Convention often do not prevent irreparable damage during court proceedings.
Digitalization of environmental data	Significantly better compliance of databases with EU reporting standards.	Positive shift, but with no implementation capacities, data remain an insufficiently used management tool.

² Maja Bilić Paulić, *European Union Court passed multimillion financial sanction to Croatia for failing to comply with a judgment regarding the remediation of hazardous waste in Biljane Donje*, Attorney-at-Law Office of Maja Bilić Paulić, 18 March 2025, <https://ou-mbp.hr/sud-europske-unije-hrvatskoj-izrekao-visemilijunsku-financijsku-sankciju-zbog-nepostovanja-presude-o-sanaciji-opasnog-otpada-u-biljanima-donjim/>

Political context within European Union additionally alters the space for action. After European Parliament elections in 2025, a gradual slowing down of some previously adopted green policies is visible, alongside greater pressure from industrial lobbies on climate ambitions. For Croatia this means that already existing implementation deficit may further deepen if green agenda continues to be observed primarily as a channel for absorbing European funds, and not as a mandatory framework for public administration. In the comprehensive Study, this pattern is defined as “*check the box*” approach, that is, the directives are formally transposed and adopted, but implementation often remains slow, selective and dependant on the political will.

The problem in Croatia is not so much a lack of policies, but rather their implementation. This is where organisations like Sunce play a crucial role, as they continuously apply pressure and remind institutions of their obligations. In the context of tourism, we face increasing pressure on the coast and sea — from cruise ships to waste and pollution—and the system often reacts only after a problem becomes publicly visible.

Journalist, non-profit media outlet

Precisely because of this, Sunce's relevance stems not only from its thematic alignment with European and national green priorities, but from the fact that the organisation operates at the intersection of three levels understands the regulatory framework, knows local institutional weaknesses, and has the capacity to transpose complex legal, scientific, and governance issues into understandable arguments, educational tools, expert studies, campaigns, and policy interventions.

Public opinion research conducted by Ipsos in 2025 confirmed that the residents of Dalmatia did not experience environmental problems only as technical or municipal issues; they perceived them as governance issues. They pointed out pollution, waste accumulation, coastal concreting, and projects that violate environmental rules as the most critical threats. Equally important, residents identified weak supervision, lack of implementation and negligence of authorities in relation to environment. Environmental protection is thus clearly linked in the public mind with institutional transparency, accountability, and the rule of law.

Table 4. Indicators of views and engagement of Dalmatian citizens related to environment and nature conservation, 2025

Indicator of view and engagement of Dalmatian citizens related to environment and nature conservation	Share of citizens (N=603)	Relevance for Association Sunce
Pollution and waste accumulation identified as a critical threat	89%	The waste remains most visible environmental problem and a strong entry point for education, local practices and advocacy.
Coastal concreting identified as a critical threat a	84%	The protection of space and maritime domain remains one of the central topics of public concern.
Projects that violate environment protection rule identified as an urgent issue	83%	The citizens connect environmental issues with quality of decision making, permits and impact assessments.

Weak supervision in the field and lack of law implementation identified as an urgent issue	78%	The need for independent supervision, the Green Phone, legal interventions and public pressure is confirmed.
Government neglect of the environment identified as an urgent issue	76%	The environment is perceived as a matter of institutional responsibility, rather than merely individual behaviour.
Weak education identified as a priority issue	72%	Strategic role of Sunce in transposing complex issues into publicly accessible discourse is confirmed.
Work of environmental organisations is perceived as important	78%	There is broad social legitimacy for the work of civil society in environmental protection.
Citizens that share information about environmental associations	44%	Informal support can turn into a public advocacy and local pressure network.
Citizens that sign petitions	42%	There is an activation potential for targeted campaigns and public processes.
Citizens that donate to environmental initiatives	34%	There is a foundation for the development of philanthropic tools and civic funding for mission functions.
Citizens that are formal members of environmental organisation	5%	There is a gap between support and organised engagement: Sunce plays a key role in structuring of participation.

These results explain why the democratic function of civil society during this period became just as important as its professional function. High concern of citizens, High support for environmental organisations paired with low formal membership indicates that there is significant activation potential in society, but lacks a sufficiently developed infrastructure for sustained and organised participation. In this space, Sunce acts as a transposer, mediator, and organiser, meaning that it transforms individual citizen concern into reports, public consultations, campaigns, educational activities, legal interventions, and policy proposals.

The relevance of Sunce additionally arises from structural limitations of the public nature and environmental protection sector. When public institutions lack sufficient staff, field data, monitoring continuity, or capacity for participatory management, organisations like Sunce become producers of knowledge and drivers of operational models that strengthen the entire system. This is particularly evident in coastal and marine protection, waste management, *Posidonia* conservation, protected areas management plans, and public advocacy based on the Aarhus Convention.

In conclusion, the strategic development of Sunce in the upcoming period should focus on bridging precisely those implementation gaps that citizens and external sources clearly identify: **between EU standards and local implementation, between formal regulations and actual enforcement, between public concern and organised civic action, and between data and decision-making**: This implies further strengthening of Sunce as a bridge between European green policies and local practice, more intensive work on climate and fair transition, development of capacities for strategic legal interventions, monitoring of operationalization of environmental policies, and collaboration with local, regional and implementing institutions without losing political and economic autonomy. Exactly this combination of expertise, independence, local embeddedness and ability for transposition of complex topics in public action makes Sunce a stabilizer of democratic environment management.

2. IMPACT ON ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS AND RESPONSIBILITY

In the last decade, Sunce systematically developed educational work as one of basic levers of social impact. Education did not function only within framework of separate projects focused exclusively on education, but as a linking component of various areas of action, including nature conservation, waste and plastic, civic activism, sustainable tourism, marine protection and public advocacy. In the concluding insights of the comprehensive study, it was particularly emphasized that this is not merely about "raising awareness," but also about building environmental literacy, practical skills, and capacity for participation in protecting the public interest.

Quantitative reach confirms strong growth in the number of participating children and youth, as well as educational staff and mentors, as shown in Table 4. In the preceding decade, approximately 7,500 participants were included in the programmes, mostly primary school children, meaning that Sunce almost doubled direct educational reach. An equally important shift relates to the beneficiary structure. The expansion of work with young people over the age of 15 demonstrates **a strategic leap forward and a clear plan** for developing active citizenship competencies at an age when patterns of social participation are formed.

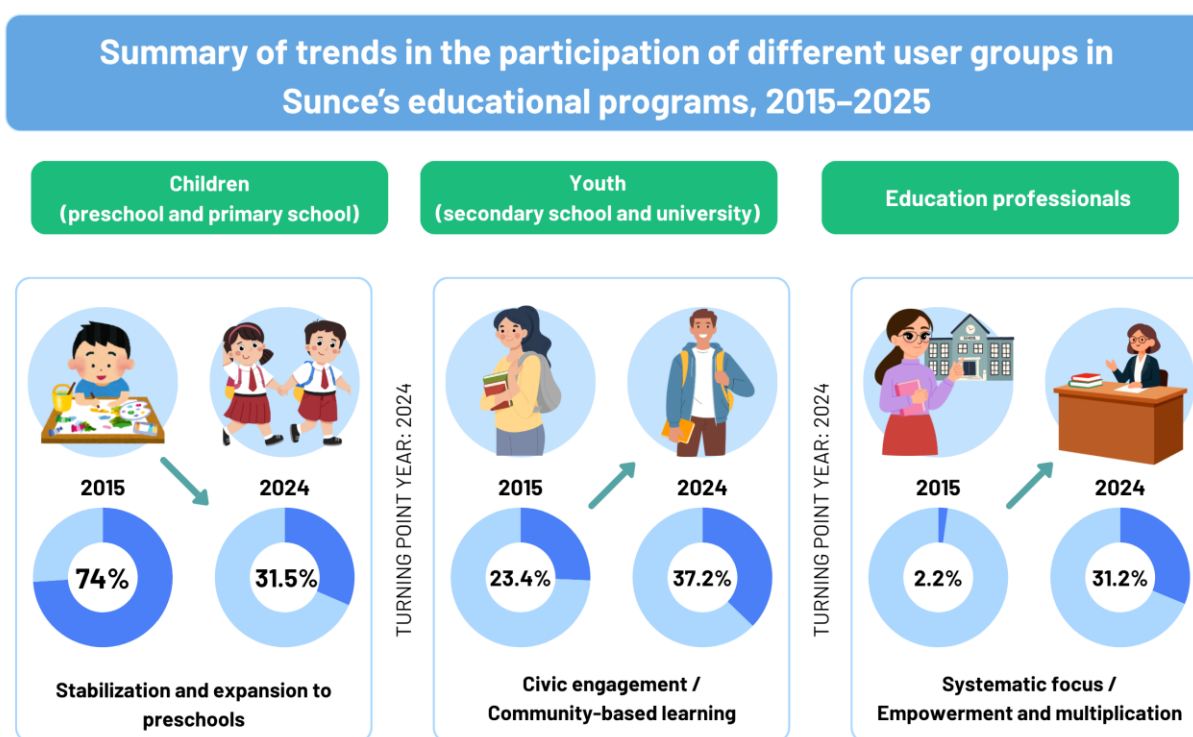
Table 5. Success indicators of the educational work of the Sunce Association 2015–2025

Educational achievements	Cumulative result 2015–2025	Interpretation
Children and youth involved in educational programmes	12,687	Almost doubled reach in relation to preceding decade.
Educators and mentors	1,699	A pool of multipliers of environmental knowledge was created in educational institutions.
Total number of direct beneficiaries	14,386	Education became one of the widest channels of Sunce's social impact.
Educational institutions	85	Number of collaborating institutions is now 4.5 times higher than in 2014 (19 institutions).
Volunteer hours in 2025	4,875	A considerable share of beneficiaries shifts from the role of participants to the role of active stakeholder.
Quality of programmes	84% of SKOCKANO criteria (quality standard for civil society organisations constructively engaged in non-formal education), verification by the	Formal certificate of methodical maturity and quality of non-formal education.

	Education and Teacher Training Agency.	
Sunce as a teaching base for service learning	5 faculties	Collaboration with the University of Split and service-learning model become permanent educational infrastructure.

Development of educational system was of a structural type. Sunce achieved almost complete educational vertical coverage: 14 kindergartens, 46 primary schools, 13 secondary schools, and 12 high education institutions. Thus, educational work no longer covers only specific age groups, but extends from early childhood education to the university level. Such vertical integration enables continuity of environmental learning during various phases of development and increases probability of transforming knowledge into long-term behaviour patterns.

Graph 1



Source: Internal tables for monitoring activities of Association Sunce 2015-2025

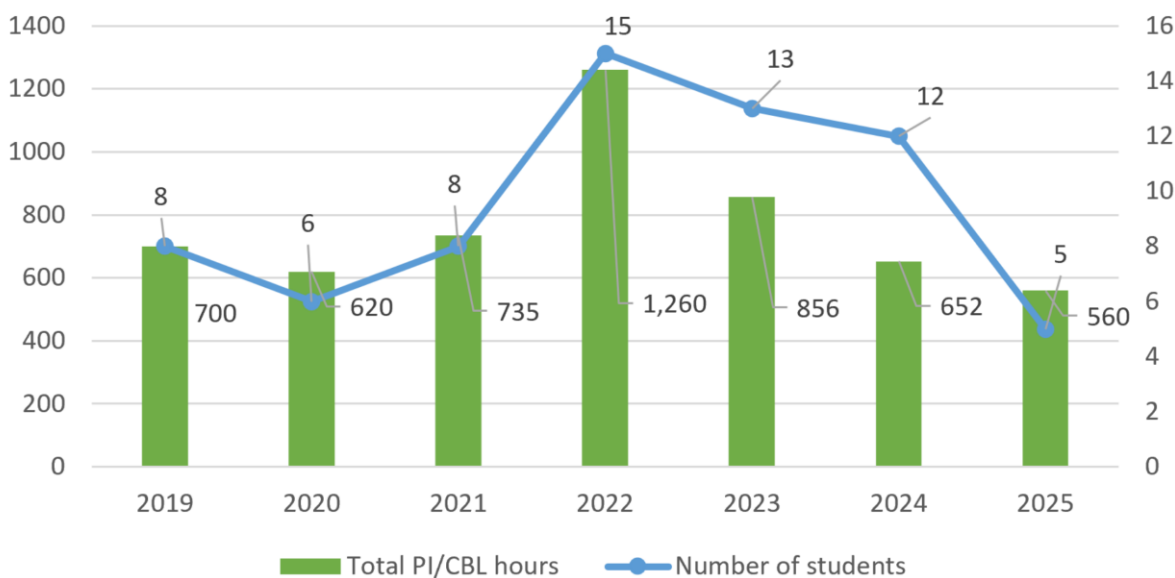
The geographical expansion is as important as numerical growth. While earlier educational work was predominantly concentrated on Split and the Split agglomeration, the decade in matter showed a strategic expansion towards island communities, including Vis, Hvar, Šolta, Lastovo, Korčula, and Brač, as well as

towards the Dalmatian hinterland and the Neretva Valley, including Knin, Trilj, Otok, Metković, and Kula Norinska. Thus, education gains a dimension of territorial inclusiveness: Sunce enters communities that are often exposed to specific environmental pressures while having limited access to non-formal educational and participatory content.

The methodical development of programmes shows that Sunce built a mature model of non-formal environmental education. The programmes are based on experiential, participatory, and problem-oriented learning: field work, service-learning, and internships in Sunce as a learning base, volunteering, school projects, digital tools, workshops, and concrete community actions. The quality of such approach is confirmed by 84% fulfilment of criteria for SKOCKANO quality mark, and the formal accreditation of one programme by the Education and Teacher Training Agency, as well as positive opinions of experts. An important indicator of resilience was the ability to adapt during the pandemic, when operational continuity was maintained due to adapted and hybrid work formats.

Graph 2

Dynamics in the number of hours and students involved in community-based learning programs and professional internships



Source: Internal documentation of the Association Sunce

Qualitative findings point to effects that go beyond individual workshops. Feedback from educators show higher motivation of children and youth, better connection between theory and practice, and changes in everyday behaviour. More importantly, a portion of the impact is transferred into the institutions

themselves: schools and kindergartens introduce or continue implementing environmental activities after collaborating with Sunce.

„As a representative of the donor and somebody who follows the work of Sunce for many years, I am impressed by their relations in the community, approach to local authorities, all stakeholders, and true collaborative spirit.”

Representative of international donor

Empowerment of educators also took place by connecting educational institutions with public nature conservation bodies, civil society organisations, and other expert stakeholders, making educational content more relevant, practical, and applicable.

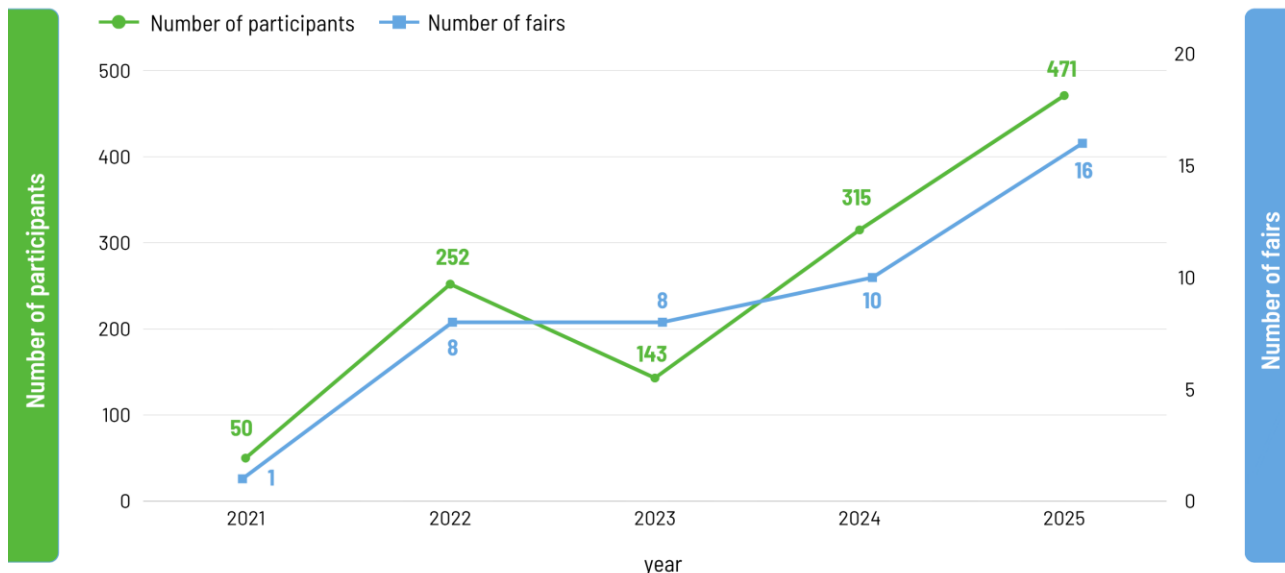
Table 6. Key public events of association Sunce 2015-2025

Event / campaign	Reach	Educational effect
Plasticamente	18,000+ visitors	Visualized problem of plastic and changes the perception of everyday consumption.
Splitska biciklijada (<i>The Split Bike Ride</i>)	2,500+ participants	Sustained mobility became visible city practice.
Sajmovi razmjene (<i>swap fairs</i>)	1,231 participants, 43 events	Circular economy transposed to daily habit.
Volunteering actions	4,875 hours in 2025	Practical entry to long-term engagement, especially for young people.

In the area of public awareness raising and communications, Sunce additionally expanded its educational reach beyond formal education. In the period between 2015 and 2025, 245 public events were organised or co-organised with an estimated number of 36,072 participants. The Split Bike Ride, Earth Day celebrations, swap fairs, pub quizzes, exhibitions, workshops, and volunteer actions functioned as spaces for service-learning. Their value was not only in number of participants and the trend of growth and expansion, but also in presenting sustainability as a practice: exchange, movement, volunteering, clean-ups, habit changes, and local solidarity.

Graph 3

Dynamics of Swap fairs – number of events and participants, 2021–2025



Source: Internal tables for monitoring activities of Association Sunce 2015-2025

2.2.4. Media and digital production in the service of public education and awareness

In the period from 2015 to 2025, and particularly during last three years, Sunce has entered the phase of communication reality, in which targeted media visibility and own digital channels complement each other. At the same time, communication is not reduced to project promotion, but serves as an educational and advocacy mechanism that explains environmental issues to the public, offers solutions, and opens up space for participation. In relation to the preceding decade, a shift from being present from time to time in local media to stable multichannel system of public awareness is evident.

Table 7. Comparable indicators of visibility and presence of Sunce in the last two decades

Indicator	2005–2014	2015–2025	Interpretation
Media coverage	≈ 650–700 total, 70 – 90 annually	2,605 total, 237 annually	Growth for 3-4 times (objective of 200–250 releases annually was achieved and surpassed).
Maximal annual visibility	≈ 150 releases in 2014	378 releases in 2025	Visibility reached the highest level at the end of the period.

Number of media outlets	Not systematically monitored	501 media outlets (54% local, 14% national)	Reach was diversified towards local, national and specialized channels.
Public events	≥ 5,000 participants	245 events, 36,072 participants	Events became a primary space for experiential education and service-learning.
Digital community	6 636 followers in 2015	16,435 followers in 2025	Growth for 2.5 times with expansion from Facebook to Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube.
Web page	12,421 users, 57 texts	25,363 users, 145 texts	Web page became a reference space for knowledge, archive, and organic traffic.

Source: internal media monitoring data from Association Sunce

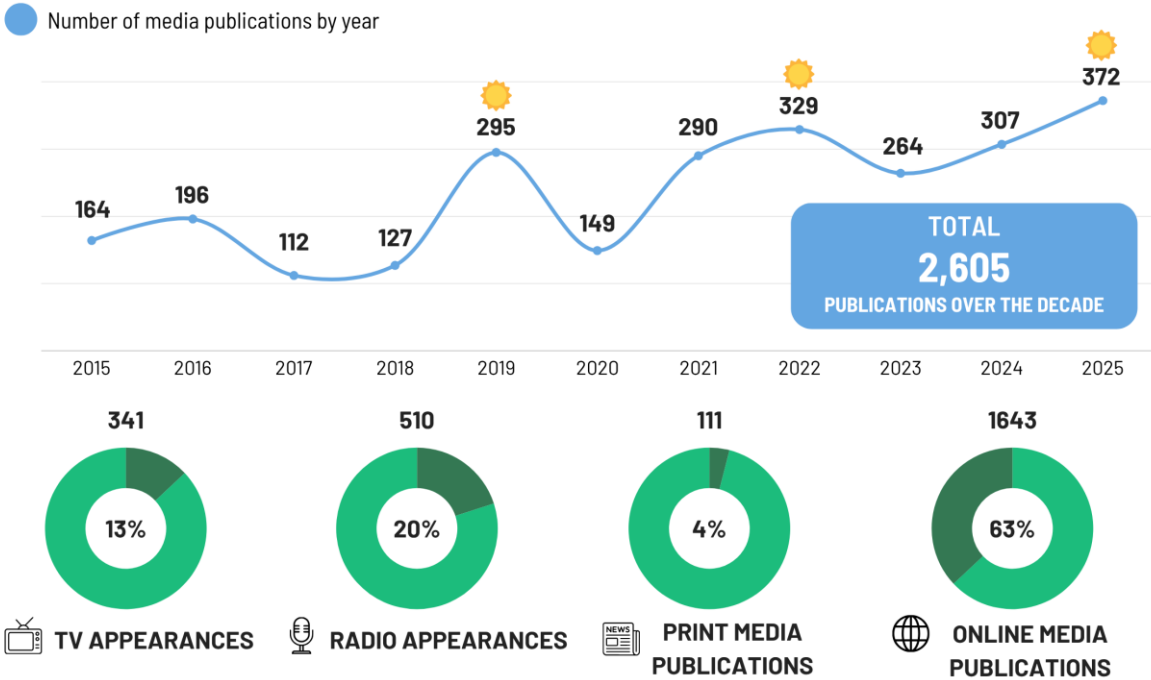
Local and regional media make 53.8% of releases and act as operative public service for daily environmental conflicts in Dalmatia; national media provide wider public legitimacy with a share of 14%; specialized media, accounting for 14.5% of publications, deepen the understanding of more professional and 'blue' topics, particularly the sea, coast, fisheries, and biodiversity. *Online* portals have become a backbone of fast reaction, while television, radio and specialized portals provide a combination of reach, credibility and professionalism.

Thematic structure of 2,320 coded media releases show that visibility of Sunce is primarily focused on several mutually connected areas. Most often represented topics are civic actions, volunteering, waste management, circular economy, and reduction of plastic use. Also very present are the topics of nature and marine protection, fisheries, biodiversity of sea and land habitats, as well as broader advocacy framework covering the maritime domain, coastal management, over-construction, tourism, spatial policies, energy, and climate change. A significant portion of the publications also relates to project and communication occasions, such as announcements, conferences, and presentations of results, confirming Sunce's ability to turn its programmatic work into publicly visible events. Although activities with youth, schools and kindergartens, workshops, and civic consultations are set apart as a distinct educational module, the educational function of Sunce is present horizontally across virtually all areas of activity—from cleanup drives, volunteering, and anti-plastic campaigns to zero-waste practices, marine and nature conservation, climate issues, and advocacy for more responsible coastal management.

Graph 4

Association Sunce in the media, 2015–2025

ANALYSIS OF MEDIA PRESENCE OVER THE DECADE



Source: Internal tables for monitoring activities of Association Sunce 2015-2025

Crucial organisational precondition of considerable expansion and growth of presence in the media was a decision to strengthen capacities of human resources for communication and advocacy. First such step forward was made in 2015, when PR was engaged, and additional consolidation occurred in 2024 by establishment of a separate Communication and Advocacy Department. Thus, a growth of project results achieved more systematic public transposition: expert findings, field work, and campaigns could have been turned into messages, content, and call for action much faster.

The digital growth of Sunce cannot be seen as a simple linear expansion, but more as a channel transformation. The 2021 pandemic was a turning point: 104 articles were published on the web page, number of views reached 72,877, and number of single users 21,300, with a total digital community growing to 18,892 followers. Following the shutdown of the Sinjaj.hr website in late 2021 – which had 4,187 followers and functioned as a local participatory tool for reporting environmental and municipal issues – the total follower count temporarily decreased. Therefore, that decrease cannot be attributed to a decline in interest for Sunce, it was simply a change of digital channels’ structure.

Table 8. Sunce on digital networks, data for 2025

Channel	in	Value	Primary function
2025			

Facebook	12,985 followers, about 79% of digital community	Stable community, broader and more mature audience, local embeddedness.
Instagram	2,508 followers, about 15%, highest reach 38 301 user	Visual campaigns, younger and middle age generation, short educational formats. Actual reach might quite surpass the formal number of followers.
LinkedIn	769 followers, about 5%	Professional, institutional and project visibility, and visibility of organisation as an employer and an opportunity for development of professional career.
YouTube	173 subscribers, 98.3% of viewers that are not subscribers	Educational archive and more long-term life of multimedia content.
Website	25,363 users, 50% of organic traffic	Reference space for knowledge, publications, new and campaigns, partners, associates, and donors.

The structure of audience shows that Sunce engages a predominantly female, urban, and strongly locally connected community: women account for 67.7% of Facebook and 74% of Instagram followers. The most represented age groups on Facebook are 35–44, 25–34, and 45–54 years of age, while the most represented cities are Split and Zagreb. That confirms a strong local base, but also a national reach. In comparison with other environmental organisations, Sunce occupies a stable middle position: it is more visible than Zelena Istra, but less so than Zelena Akcija and Biom in terms of total follower count. However, it clearly profiles itself as a regionally rooted and thematically specialized organisation focusing on the sea, coast, marine litter, *Posidonia*, and the sustainable use of coastal areas.

The most critical growth challenge is no longer merely increasing the follower count, but converting reach into sustained engagement. The largest part of audience consumes content produced by Sunce without formally following its profile: 50% of the website's traffic comes organically via search engines; the most successful posts on social networks increase the number of followers manifold. That is why future communication decisions have to be measured according to quality of engagement, in content clicks, sign-ups for activities, usage of educational materials, volunteering, campaign support, and involvement in advocacy processes.

From the point of view of stakeholders, public impact of Sunce does not primarily arise from the communication skill itself, but from a combination of expert work, education, and continuous presence in concrete environmental issues. Stakeholders perceive Sunce as a professional, reliable and proactive actor that successfully connects education, advocacy, and field work. At the same time, they warn that legal and policy effects are often less visible than public actions, confirming the need to more systematically highlight slower, technical and institutional forms of effect in the future period.

Key strategic challenge in the future period is not only informing young people, but activating their civic potential. Research on secondary school seniors conducted by Sunce in cooperation with the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split during the 2023/2024 academic year—based on a sample of 892 respondents from 14 secondary schools in Split-Dalmatia County—showed that social media is the dominant news source for 39.4% of young people, followed by television at 18.8%, school at 16.9%, and family/peer circles at 16.3%. This means that educational system remains important, but is not sufficient. Hybrid approach, that connects digital reach, school, and local action, is needed for youth.

Findings on youth attitudes reveal a selective perception of environmental issues. More than 60% of secondary school seniors expressed high level of concern regarding the state of the environment; however, this concern is mostly linked to locally visible and immediate issues: waste from ships and tankers (75.1%), hazardous waste (70.3%), and river pollution (68%). Similarly, youth in the age group 18–34 in the research conducted by Ipsos Croatia regarding views of Dalmatian citizens on environment in 2025 assigned the highest urgency to litter and marine waste (4.46/5), while climate change is perceived as more abstract and less urgent (3.59/5). This indicates to need that global issues, particularly climate, should be transposed to local and experientially easily relatable challenges: sea, waste, fires, droughts, over-concretization, tourism, and availability of space³.

Table 9. Overview of findings on attitudes and behaviours of Dalmatian youth regarding environment, September 2025

Key finding	Indicators and source	Strategic implication for Sunce
Social networks are main informative channel for youth	Social networks 39.4%, TV 18.8%, school 16.9%, family and peers 16.3% (research conducted on secondary school seniors, 2023/2024, N = 892)	Develop hybrid programmes that connect digital content, school and activities in local community.
Level of concern is high, but focused on visible, local problems	More than 60% of secondary school seniors expressed high level of concern regarding the state of the environment: waste from ships and tankers 75.1%, hazardous waste 70.3%, and river pollution 68% (research conducted on secondary school seniors, 2023/2024, N = 892).	Connect climate and environmental issues with sea, coast, waste and other local experiences.
Local problems are perceived as more urgent than climate changes	Litter and marine waste 4.46/5, over-concretization and coastal land reclamation 4.25/5, climate changes 3.59/5 (Ipsos, 2025, age 18–34, N = 129).	Transpose abstract global issues to concrete local consequences and possibilities for action.
Formal civic engagement of youth remains low	55.3% of secondary school seniors never participated in nature conservation activities (research conducted on secondary school seniors, 2023/2024, N = 892) only 14.2% of youth reports environmental issues, and willingness to take part in public consultations is 2.77/5 (Ipsos, 2025, age 18–34, N = 129).	Lower the barriers to entry and offer simple first steps toward public and advocacy action.
Young people are motivated for practical and field-based engagement	Willingness to volunteer in environmental actions stands at 3.38/5, above the total sample average of 3.13/5 (Ipsos, 2025, age 18–34, N = 129).	Prioritise field actions, local monitoring, problem research, and volunteer programmes.

³ Ipsos, Croatia, public opinion research *Perception of Association Sunce in four Dalmatian counties*, commissioned and owned by: Association for nature, environment and sustainable development Sunce, data available on request.

Daily habits are important starting point	Willingness to separate waste collection 54.8%, readiness to conduct waste reduction activities 48.4% (research conducted on secondary school seniors, 2023/2024, N = 892).	Use changes in lifestyle and consumer habits as an entry point into a broader understanding of collective responsibility and civic action.
Private and peer networks have strong impact on youth	30.8% of secondary school seniors is willing to educate family and peers on nature conservation (research conducted on secondary school seniors, 2023/2024, N = 892) , 31.2% of young people found out about Sunce from friends and family, and 29% got the information via networks (Ipsos, 2025, age 18–34, N = 129).	Develop peer educators, ambassadors, green reporters and peer-for-peer programmes.
A systematic transition from awareness to action is needed	High level of concern for the environment is accompanied by low involvement in formal forms of participation (synthesis of research conducted on secondary school seniors in 2023/2024 and Ipsos research in 2025).	Establish engagement path: informing → experiential learning → volunteering → peer actions → advocacy

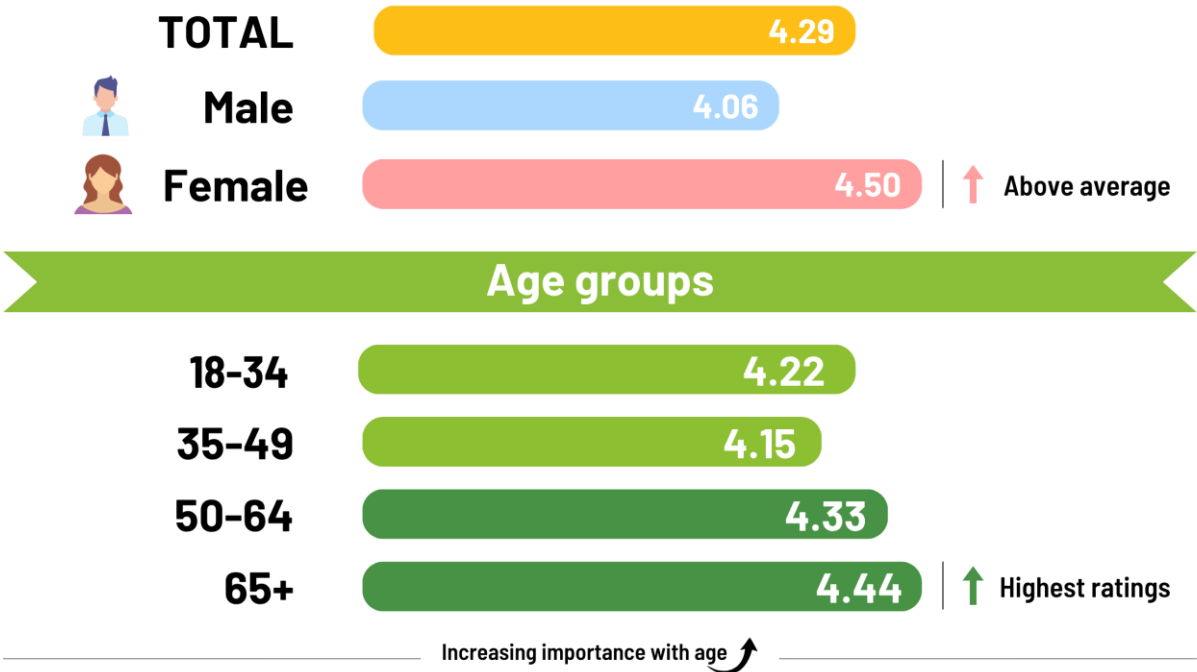
Specific recommendations for educational work can be most logically embedded into the final strategic recommendations, as they pertain not only to the educational programme, but to Sunce's broader model of social impact. Content wise, they include: territorial expansion of educational activities towards islands, hinterland, and subregional centres; activating trained educators as local multipliers; engaging students, volunteers, and youth as peer-to-peer knowledge transmission leaders; designing digital content according to an online-to-offline logic; developing a follow-up system after educational activities; linking locally anchored learning with climate, tourism, and spatial challenges; and establishing a unified database to track users, activities, reach, and long-term impacts.

3. IMPACT ON CIVIC ACTIVISM

Civic engagement in nature conservation still exists in Dalmatia, but is of a limited scope and mostly happens outside of formal associations. Although 78% of citizens perceive the work of ecological associations as important or extremely important, only a minor share of citizens has actual experience with organised action, while a large number of respondents cannot name a single concrete environmental organisation (Ipsos, 2025). In that context, recognizability of Sunce's brand recognition of 32% represents significant capital, particularly because among those familiar with the organisation, 83% have a positive or very positive impression, and 85% would support its work. The same survey from 2025 confirmed that citizens most often participate in environment protection through simpler, fast, and low-risk forms of action, including dissemination of information about work of environmental associations, signing petitions, donating from time to time, volunteering or taking part in events. The more demanding forms of action, such as reporting ecological problems and long-term volunteering, are rare because they require more time, knowledge, trust and willingness for exposure. Therefore, these findings may be read as indicators of latent support base, but not as proof of stable mobilization platform.

Graph 5

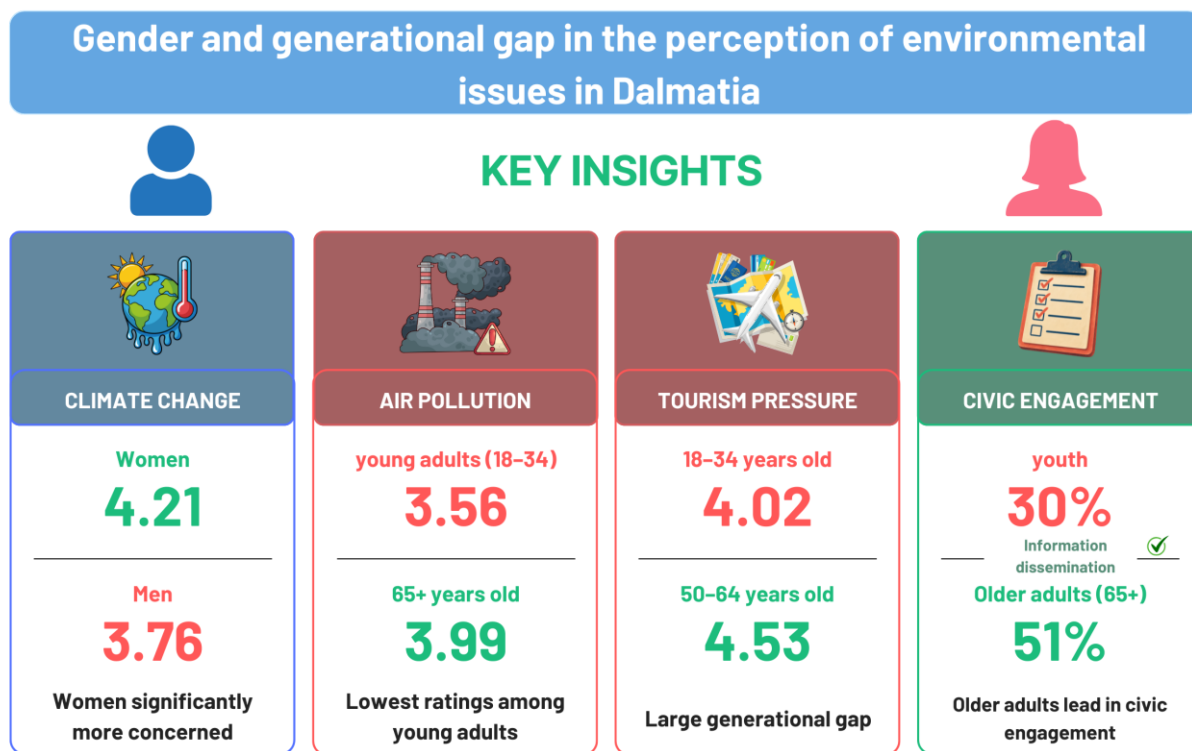
Perception of the importance of environmental NGOs' work in Dalmatia
(average ratings, 1-5)



Source: Public opinion research, Ipsos 2025

At the same time, the research showed a prominent gender and generational gap. Women consistently see environmental issues as more urgent than men, particularly when it comes to climate changes, air pollution, loss of biodiversity, and protection of urban green areas. Similarly, persons older than 50 years of age, and particularly those older than 65, show higher level of concern and are more inclined towards low-threshold forms of engagement, whereas younger age groups—particularly young men—express lower levels of both concern and actual involvement.

Graph 6



Source: Public opinion research, Ipsos 2025

The findings confirm the effectiveness of targeted, systematic approaches to long-term mobilization. Declarative willingness does not automatically mean future engagement. First of all, it indicates to existence of latent support base that can be activated only subject to: clear information, direct call for action, support in approach to institutions and public, visible results, and feeling that individual contribution makes sense.

Civic activism in Dalmatia does not suffer from lack of concern or problems, but from lack of capacities for long-term, organised, and legally established operation. Within this framework, Sunce built mechanisms of support for citizens with focus on legal activism, without which most of mentioned environmental local battles would be difficult to implement, except for public pointing finger at a problem. The Green Phone, public campaigns, support to local initiatives, legal activism, and communication support for environmental struggles were Sunce's primary mechanism for turning individual concern into collective, organised, and structured action. In that sense, Sunce did not only respond to individual reports, but recognized patterns based on individual cases, opened systemic questions, and built-up public pressure.

The Green Phone functions in four steps, as a processor of civic activism: identifying issues, framing cases within legal frameworks and relevant authorities, initiating procedures, and conducting monitoring and escalation. High share of anonymous reports does not indicate unreliability, but rather actual social relations and the need for intermediary in communities where there is fear of local power-brokers.

Table 10. Performance indicators for the Green Phone of Association Sunce

Green phone performance indicators	Value
Total number of reports (2015–2025)	> 2,600
Average annual number of reports	230 – 260
Average report resolution rate	70– 80%
Tipping trend (since 2023)	Category Sea exceeded category Waste
New topics – in accordance with Sunce’s public campaigns (since 2024)	New category of reports under Sea for <i>Posidonia</i> , anchoring, discharge of waste from ships due to growing number of reports.

The structure of received reports shows changes in perception of environmental problems and priorities of citizens. While earlier years were dominated by issues of waste, illegal dumpsites, and municipal order, over time there was a sharp increase in reports related to unauthorized construction, wastewater discharge, and coastal and maritime domain. This shift cannot be explained only by a growing number of problems, but also with long-term campaigns of Sunce that made recognizable public issues of maritime domain and privatization, nautical tourism, anchoring and coastal land reclamation.

Support to local initiatives and legal activism are the most demanding, the slowest, and the most intensive resource-wise form of action of Sunce, but it is also an area in which structural weaknesses of the nature protection system in Dalmatia are most clearly visible. Unlike campaigns with clear deadlines and project-based logic, local environmental struggles last for years, rarely end in complete victories, and unfold within a stark power asymmetry between citizens, investors, political actors, and an administrative system prone to delay, fragmentation of responsibility, and procedural formalism.

The power of Sunce is in understanding the system and knowing how to impact it through concrete mechanisms at the same time.

Representative of civil society organisation

Case analysis showed that three functions of Sunce intersect in local environmental battles: the Green Phone as an early warning and problem documentation mechanism, the media as a citizen ally during phases of conflict, and legal activism as a tool to confront institutional inertia. Conflicting and spatially visible cases – Plano, Vruja, Marjan, Sjeverna luka, Dugi Rat or Moby Drea – may produce a strong media interest, but often it weakens when these procedures enter into technical, long-term, and legally complicated phases. It is precisely at that moment that Sunce steps in to maintain the continuity of the narrative—reminding the public that the case is not over, that the consequences persist, and that institutions remain accountable.

The bottom line is that Sunce enjoys a high level of trust among citizens, experts, and the general public, who expect the organisation to actively advocate for the public good in the sphere of environmental protection—which serves as the primary foundation of its legitimacy.

Graph 7

Public and stakeholder trust in association Sunce, 2025



SOCIAL LEGITIMACY (general public)

STRONG ALIGNMENT BETWEEN SUNCE'S TEAM AND CITIZENS' CONCERNS: ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES ARE PERCEIVED AS PRIORITIES.



RECOGNITION IN DALMATIA

32% CITIZENS ARE FAMILIAR WITH SUNCE'S WORK.



REPUTATION AMONG CITIZENS

83% OF RESPONDENTS HAVE A POSITIVE IMPRESSION **85%** ARE READY TO SUPPORT THE ORGANIZATION



PROFESSIONAL LEGITIMACY (stakeholders)

SUNCE IS RECOGNIZED AS A LEADING EXPERT IN DALMATIA AND BEYOND.



KEY VALUES

POLITICAL INDEPENDENCE, EXPERTISE, CONSISTENCY, AND COMMITMENT TO THE PUBLIC INTEREST.

Source: Internal survey of stakeholders (N=47) in 2025 and public opinion research, Ipsos 2025

In the area of civic activism, Sunce cannot be limited to serving solely as the operational bearer of individual battles. Its role should gradually shift towards acting as a strategic backbone and mentor to local initiatives, with clear involvement criteria for landmark cases, protocols for drawn-out matters, phased planning, communicating expectations, and tools providing local stakeholders with greater autonomy. This minimises the risk of capacity overload and disconnects from the grassroots base, while boosting the collective resilience of the grassroots environmental ecosystem in Dalmatia.

At the same time, it is precisely Sunce's success in this area that introduces key structural challenges for the coming period. The first challenge relates to a sensitive balancing act between acting as a watchdog that publicly challenges authorities and developers, and serving as an expert collaborator with public entities, municipalities, and other institutions in development and governance processes. The second one concerns capacities: long-term legal and civic battles exhaust organisational resources, increase employees' burnout risk and is difficult to incorporate into project cycles because it often evolves reactively, *ad hoc*, and, depending on the persistence of individuals. The third challenge arises from the strength of Sunce itself: it is precisely because it is expected that Sunce would react to many individual cases that it requires investment in horizontal coalitions, local platforms, and transfer of knowledge. Without it there is a risk of overload and distancing from *grassroots* base; in doing so, Sunce can progressively evolve from being the primary driver of standalone battles into a strategic anchor and resource hub for the grassroots environmental movement in Dalmatia, built on informed, invested, concerned, and empowered citizens and groups committed to their local communities and region.

Table 11. Overview of prominent local environmental battles

Case	Period	Role of Sunce	Key insight / effect
Plano near Trogir – quarry	2016–2024	Legal support to local battle, substantiation of cumulative impacts, and the continuous monitoring of administrative dispute procedures.	High Administrative Court Judgement stopped expansion of quarry and set an important standard in the interpretation of cumulative impact. This court victory did not close the issue of land remediation and its implementation.
Overconcretization and coastal land reclamation of Central Dalmatia	2015–2025	Processing of the reports received via the Green Phone, submission to various inspectorates, public disclosure of illegal interventions.	Continuous conflict shows that coastal devastation is often resolved partially. The effect lies in leaving a legal paper trail, slowing down the damage, and maintaining pressure on the institutions.
Waste Management Centre Lečevica	2006–2025	Long-term advocacy, participation in public consultations, legal interventions, and addressing European institutions.	This case shows boundaries of legal activism when it comes to infrastructural projects backed by political consensus, but also the value of sustained pressure on transparency, separate waste collection, composting, and secondary raw materials.
Dugi Rat – Crno brdo	2018–2025	Expert and legal support to local initiative for resolution of a slag hill next to the sea, an attempt at a class-action lawsuit for the right to a healthy environment.	The dismissal of the lawsuit exposed a legal loophole: citizens lack an effective mechanism for the collective protection of the right to a healthy environment. Legal battle has its value even when it discloses a systemic problem.
Wind power plants	2019–2025	Support to Biom and local actors in analysis of administrative legal proceedings, cumulative effects and impact on habitats.	It opens a new line of green transition: renewable energy sources are not automatically acceptable without strategic planning, cumulative effects assessment, involvement of local community.
Marjan Forest Park	2016–2024.	Expert corrective input, legal remedies, and engagement with actors regarding the management of protected areas.	Paradigmatic case of balancing between expert credibility and activist solidarity. It shows the relevance of clear communication of your mandate, capacities, and scope of action to stakeholders and public.
Vruja	2015–2025	Background legal and expert support to local activists, analysis of documentation and routing of reports.	Vruja became a national symbol of illegal construction. A combination of civic pressure, media and legal arguments revealed a case of institutional irresponsibility.
North Port and Vranjic	2015–2025	The Green phone, advisory and legal support to citizens with requests for information, environmental measurements, and health protection.	This long-standing case highlights the connection between the environment, public health, and industrial interests in close proximity to residential areas, as well as the need for transparent monitoring.
Moby Drea – asbestos	2025	Reaction to citizens' reports, public warning of discrepancies in documentation, and about risks of asbestos removal.	Quick synergy of local mobilization and expert arguments provided contributed to the decision of the competent authorities that the

			ship should leave Croatian waters. An example of efficient short cycle of civic pressure.
Maritime Domain Act / Sea, beaches, and coast are 100% owned by us!	2022–2023	Coalition advocacy, citizen mobilization, and legal submissions in public consultations.	More than 900 of submissions and public pressure softened the most problematic provisions. From a technical topic, maritime domain became an issue of public interest and right to sea.

4. IMPACT ON NATURE CONSERVATION

In the decade from 2015 to 2025, Sunce established itself as an organisation that positively impacts the capacity of system for conservation in the first place. Its key contribution is not formal political power, but continuity of knowledge and intelligence for implementation: ability to transform EU obligations and national objectives into data, plans, standards, processes, and social support. In this period, Sunce demonstrated that it can be corrective, partner, and a solution provider at the same time, while producing a multiplier effect through capacity building of institutions, the sector, and a new generation of specialists.

In relation to strategic objectives set for period from 2021 to 2026 and focused improving the management effectiveness of protected and Natura 2000 sites, as well as conducting research and developing expert studies for the management of natural values, the Association has achieved outstanding results that have directly shaped the nature conservation system in Croatia. The organisation clearly demonstrated its key comparative advantage: the ability to bridge the gap between advocacy and implementation by transposing obligations and national objectives into concrete data, management tools, legal frameworks and field practices.

Table 12. Contributions of Association Sunce to nature conservation system from 2015 to 2025

Area of contribution	Key results and insights
Research and expert studies	Independently mapped over 350 km ² of the seabed, created more than 1,000 diving profiles, conducted over 50 research field trips, including status monitoring of species and habitats.
National map of sea habitats	In many instances, data provided by Sunce constituted the sole relevant source of information regarding the condition of marine habitats. This data served to rectify national estimates and lay the groundwork for the national Adriatic Mapping Plan, leading directly to the official 2024 National Marine Habitat Map.
Seabed condition monitoring	Developed the monitoring design for <i>Posidonia</i> meadows and continuously executed monitoring across marine national parks, nature parks, and several ecological network sites. Conducted monitoring of marine reefs at several locations across the Adriatic, serving, among other things, as the data foundation for the designation of the Special Marine Reserve Cape Stupišće. Conducted pilot-projects for establishment of detailed monitoring system for anchoring pressure in the protected areas. Monitoring for the presence of the noble pen shell.
Marine protected areas	Five new internationally significant seabird areas were identified (IBA), two of which were included in Natura 2000 network, contribution to establishment of Special Marine Reserve Cape Stupišće. Based on the new sea habitat map, a total of 79 new ecological network sites were designated for the conservation of <i>Posidonia</i> in 2025.

Management plans	Coordination and support to preparation of management plans for 26 protected areas and 71 Natura 2000 sites, standardization of participatory management approaches.
Strengthening capacities of the system	Transfer of knowledge was conducted through joint field work, development of methodology, and continued support to the institutions: tools, standards, and data bases remain embedded in work of the institutions.
Work with stakeholders and communities	Projects such as SASPAS and BIOPRESSADRIA showed that it is possible to protect sensitive habitats, such as <i>Posidonia</i> , and enable commercial activities, particularly in nautical tourism.
Synergy within organisation	Nature Conservation Department closely collaborated with Education and Communication Departments, the topic of marine litter profiled itself as integrative backbone within projects ML-REPAIR, <i>For Plastic-Free Croatian Islands</i> , and <i>LIFE Artina</i> .

The SASPAS project stands out in particular as a paradigmatic example of the shift from pure advocacy to technical implementation. Development of protocols for ecological anchoring showed that Sunce has knowledge needed to provide doable solutions that protect nature and change actual patterns of space use at the same time. In doing so, Sunce acted as a mediator between the system, the economy, and local communities.

Through expert studies and stakeholder processes, Sunce played a key role in establishing the Cape Stupišće Special Marine Reserve – the first no-take marine zone in Split-Dalmatia County and one of the few such zones in Croatia overall. In its work with the fisheries sector, Sunce positions nature conservation as a long-term investment in resource recovery and community resilience.

The important qualitative insight of the study is that Sunce did not replace institutions, but at its best, enhanced the capacity of the nature conservation system. Through management plans, workshops for stakeholders, development of volunteer programmes, and expert studies, Sunce helped public institutions to develop operative practices and work standards. Thus, the impact of the Association went far beyond the individual projects and shaped how the system manages protected areas.

Strategic challenge: quality management of protected areas

Quality management of protected areas is one of the biggest strategic challenges in the nature conservation sector in Croatia. According to insights from public institution representatives and independent experts, the system faces deep structural issues that impede its full functionality: political dependence, leaving institutions as 'captives of the hierarchy,' a lack of sensitivity at management levels, staff inertia, and a shortage of capacity to execute key projects.

Efficiency of management in practice remains the critical issue. Achieving strict protection goals requires a more inclusive model where civil society organisations and local communities participate as equal partners, as public institutions cannot carry out this task alone. These issues are further compounded by exceptionally poor monitoring and institutional resistance, understaffed field inspections, lack of duty shifts, and a system where institutions pass the buck to one another.

For further advocacy work of Sunce it is of crucial importance to rely on the findings of the *Analysis of the Institutional and Legal Framework of Existing Capacities in Coastal and Marine Protected Areas and Natura 2000 Ecological Network Sites in the Republic of Croatia*, produced in October 2023 under the EFFICIENT2K project. That analysis was based on review of legal framework and scientific literature, field survey encompassing 44 stakeholders from competent authorities, semi-structured interviews, and a virtual focus group.

Table 13. Structural problems of nature conservation system relevant for Sunce

Structural problem	Why is it relevant for future work of Sunce?
Vagueness of regulations and overlapping of competences	Enables shift of responsibility and weakens implementation of nature conservation measures.
Deficit and weak capacities of nature wardens and inspectors	Control of illegal actions, particularly at sea, remains practically the most important, though the weakest developed segment of the system.
Inadequate equipment and lack of vessels	Protected marine areas cannot be efficiently supervised without field presence and technical equipment.
Political staffing and inertia of management	Public institutions remain vulnerable to political vertical axis of power and have difficulty developing proactive management.
Conflict of interest in environmental impact procedures	Environment impact studies are often prepared just formally, and the monitoring system remains exposed to pressure of investors.
Insufficient involvement of communities and CSOs	Without local support and a partnership model, strict protection rarely transposes from document to practice.

The analysis mapped in a very detailed way specific problems of the systems: vagueness of regulations and overlapping of competences among institutions, serious lack of human resources, particularly lack of wardens and inspector from the area of nature conservation, as well as their lack of professional capacities, inadequate technical equipment, e.g. lack of vessels that could work at sea, low salaries and insufficient financial funding. The document undoubtedly indicates that the neuralgic point of the entire system is inefficient control of illegal actions, particularly at sea. In many cases, these problems are saturated with corruptive elements, with competent authorities knowingly and without sanctions allowing individuals to engage in illegal activities in protected areas, as well as projects with a significant negative impact on nature.

Focus of future advocacy

Based on these findings and recognized watchdog role, the future monitoring of the condition and advocacy of better implementation of nature conservation policies should be focused on three specific objectives. The first is professionalization and strengthening of warden services by changes of the law that would ensure highly trained expert wardens, with minimum prescribed number of procedures and provided legal support, strengthening of collaboration of warden service with other authorities for sea surveillance and raising their awareness about better control of crime against nature.

The second priority includes infrastructural and technological improvements for reduction of various pressures on marine environment, such as anchoring, waste waters, non-selective fishing tools and similar, with legislative and institutional environment enabling implementation and support of private sector and broad public.

The third objective is to better use existing and develop new mechanisms – within framework of the Sea Fishing Act, the Nature Conservation Act, the Maritime Code—to further restrict anchoring, fishing, and other pressures in protected areas through systematic research and a clear identification of risks (their scope, location, and impact on the seabed) in order to strengthen advocacy directed at institutions and the public.

At the same time, the objective is to prompt changes and amendments of regulations that would enable more participatory governance, in which civil society organisations and local community participate as equal partners.

In spite of its positive impact to institutional practices and contribution of local communities to nature conservation, there still remain several structural risks that Sunce cannot resolve instead of the system, but it can keep them visible and build future strategy on them: political staffing in public institutions, disproportion between investment in tourism infrastructure as opposed to actual protection, weak implementation of the laws and insufficient number of inspectors for field work.

Sometimes we are asked by experts from the institutions to be critical because they are not allowed to speak out independently in public consultations—at which point organisations like Sunce step in to take on that role in public consultations and the public sphere.
Representative of national environmental association

Additional challenge for the future is stronger and stronger overlapping of nature conservation and green transition agenda, in which energy and infrastructure solutions must be reconciled with biodiversity preservation. In this context, no-take zones, management of visitors, seabed protection, and management of cumulative pressures become issues of critical importance requiring science, governance, and social agreement, all at once.

The next decade will not be of paramount importance because of the number of management plans produced, but by the tangible impact extracted from existing ones: the degree of measure implementation, the reduction of pressures, the restoration of habitats, changes in practices on the ground, the benefits and sense of fairness experienced by local communities, and the measurable recovery of natural systems. It is precisely here that Sunce aligns most strongly with the new European and global strategic frameworks, emphasizing citizen science, nature restoration, climate resilience, and the management of cumulative pressures.

5. IMPACT ON ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Analysis of Sunce’s impact on nature conservation cannot be viewed only through prism of technical solutions or a number of implemented projects. In the system, in which institutions often act as a service for investors, Sunce took on a role of key social corrective. Strategic shift that characterized this period was an evolution from the role of primary educator to proactive corrector of the system that offers and directly implements finished infrastructural and normative solutions. The organisation does no longer want just to warn about the problems, but to implement solutions and monitor their implementation through partnerships and legal pressure.

Table 14. Contributions of Association Sunce to environment protection, circular economy and sustainable development

Area of contribution	Key results and insights
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Research and monitoring of marine litter and expert studies	Taking part in the implementation of continuous monitoring of marine litter since 2014 in collaboration with the scientific institutions. Marine litter data base. Diving and trawling marine litter clean-ups, beach clean-up actions, and the development of protection measures. Expert study for transition of National Park Brijuni to plastic-free concept.
Work with stakeholders and communities	Promotion and education for the implementation of the Protocol for organising cleanup actions among schools, local government, and the business sector (30 organisations/institutions). Training for units of self-government on waste management and sustainable development. Organisation of two conferences on the topic of marine litter with relevant international and national speakers. Education and youth mobilization for addressing the issue of marine litter as part of the ML-FREE and FishNoWaste projects.
Advocacy for improvement of waste management system, and particularly for implementation of priority “reduce waste generation”	Plastic reduction zones. Multiannual action plans for reduction of plastic pollution and obliging acts on plastic reduction for cities (Dubrovnik, Trogir, Stari Grad) and a municipality (Sali), training of stakeholders from hospitality sector. Decisions to reduce single-use plastics in institutions under the jurisdiction of cities/municipalities and in public institutions for protected areas Lake Vrana and Cetina Canyon. Plastic-free Advent with reusable solutions in Split since 2024.
Raising awareness and broadening the scope of key topics within the community and among stakeholders, circular economy and nature-based solutions (NBS)	Education and inclusion of business sector in Sunce’s activities, encouraging application of the circular economy principle. Education of youth within scope of the project AWASTER. School gardens as nature-based solutions within scope of the project DesirMED.
Encouraging introduction of sustainable infrastructure and smart technologies	Infrastructure for waste collection in fishing ports and smart technologies in protected areas.
Education, informing, and encouraging civic activism in the area of marine protection	Application of environmental law in the protection of marine ecosystems, transparency, active citizenship, strengthening of the Green Phone for reporting incidents related to marine protection (land reclamation, illegal construction, sea pollution), and linking with local communities.
Synergy within organisation	Nature Conservation Department closely collaborated with Education and Communication Departments, the topic of marine litter profiled itself as integrative backbone within projects ML-REPAIR, <i>For Plastic-Free Croatian Islands</i> , and <i>LIFE Artina</i> .

In the area of waste and single-use plastic, Sunce often acted as a testing ground for solutions that the state was not yet ready to implement. Proof of this is the pilot door-to-door waste collection project in the Dubrovnik settlements of Zaton and Orašac, which effectively debunked the myth of an unprepared mindset, proving that citizens are willing to separate waste when provided with the appropriate infrastructure. Such examples show that Sunce does not treat green transition as an abstract objective, but as a concrete set of local practices, public decisions, and changes in behaviour. Projects *Plastic Smart Cities* and *For Plastic-Free Croatian Islands* were a proof that European policies may be transposed into local binding decisions, action plans, changed public procurements, training of human resources in the hospitality sector, municipal companies, and citizens.

In the area of sustainable tourism and responsible behaviour at sea, Sunce demonstrated that environmental policies cannot be separated from the sectors that actually shape the space and put pressure on nature. Collaboration with cities, islands, hospitality sectors, fishermen, yachtsmen, and public institutions confirmed

that the green transition was not just a technical or infrastructural issue, but one of resources management, local accountability, public health, and quality of life.

Work on marine litter evolved from monitoring and cleanup activities toward sectoral and infrastructural solutions. Analyses of collected litter showed that plastic makes more than 80% of total collected marine litter, while earlier work within DeFishGear and other projects established standardized monitoring protocols, the involvement of fishermen and coastal communities, and arguments for stricter legislative solutions. In the last years, this direction deepened through the projects ML-FREE, FishNoWaste, WASTEREDUCE, and AWASTER, in which Sunce no longer focuses solely on education, but actively participates in establishing infrastructure, smart technologies, and models where waste is treated as a resource.

A modern shift towards adaptation to climate changes is seen in the project DesirMED, in which Sunce is a part of an international consortium and participates in the development of nature-based solutions for climate resilience of the Mediterranean region. The results of these projects are still expected, but they already show that the environmental programme of Sunce gradually expands from waste management towards a deeper connection between waste, tourism, spatial planning, water resources, energy, and climate risks.

The evolution of activities in this domain went hand in hand with organisational changes. Alongside the Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development Programme in 2019, the Environmental Law Department was also established, while the 2024 restructuring formed the Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development Department and the Communication and Advocacy Department. Thus, the programmatic work is more clearly separated from public participation, environmental law, and the Green Phone, while the topic of sustainable tourism is further linked with waste, the sea, and climate resilience.

The concluding insight of this chapter points to a new development frontier: tourism, energy, waste, and spatial planning will increasingly need to be considered together. In the context of growing climate complexity, it is precisely at this intersection that the real extent of environmental sustainability in Dalmatia will be determined. Sunce can maintain its role as a corrective force, while also increasingly developing its role as an actor that tests, documents, and scales up feasible local models of change.

The difficult implementation of environmental policies remains strategic challenge for this area, a step away from crawling obstruction. Laws and policies are formally harmonized EU *acquis* and new European green agendas, but their application in practice is often slow, difficult or impeded by lack of political will, administrative inertia, and institutional weaknesses. In this context, cases Dugi Rat – Crno brdo a Waste Management Centre Lećevica manifest not merely as local conflicts, but rather as symptoms of a broader system that impedes access to justice, dilutes the waste management hierarchy, and shifts liability as risks pile up.

Sunce has established itself as a professional, trustworthy, and proactive entity, actively engaging in public consultation procedures and policy-making processes.

Environmental expert, local self-government

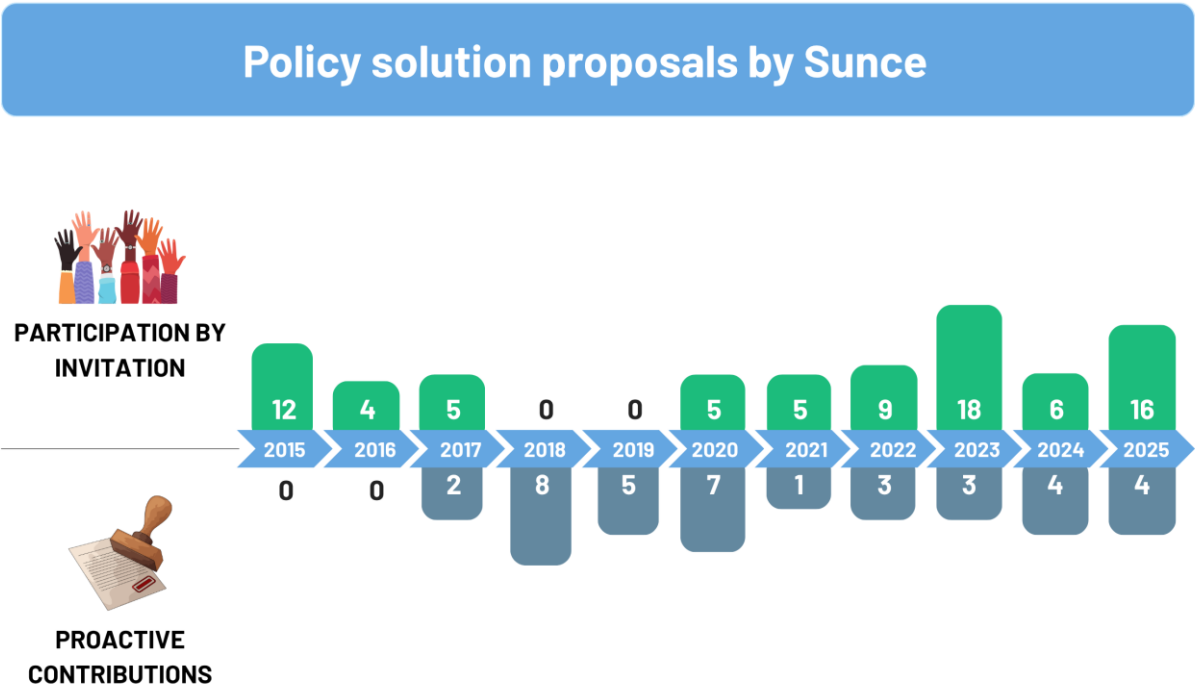
Stakeholders perceive Sunce as an entity connecting the system with civil society: in marine protection, working with fishermen, nautical tourists, hospitality providers, cities, and schools, as well as in applying legal pressure on institutions. It is precisely for this reason that the greatest value of this area lies in combining operational solutions with public corrective. Sunce has the most impact when the local model may at the

same time demonstrate that the change is possible, produce data on impact, and serve as an argument for broader public policy.

6. IMPACT ON PUBLIC POLICY

Sunce achieved one of its most important long-term contributions in the domain of public policy. Over the reporting period, a total of 117 policy interventions were documented through comments and proposals addressed to public authorities via public consultations, debates, and legislative procedures, of which unsolicited contributions represented almost one-third, totalling 37 interventions. At the same time, Sunce conducted 110 formal interactions and meetings within more than 35 working groups and committees at the local, regional, national, and international levels.

Graph 8



Source: Internal tables for monitoring activities of Association Sunce 2015-2025

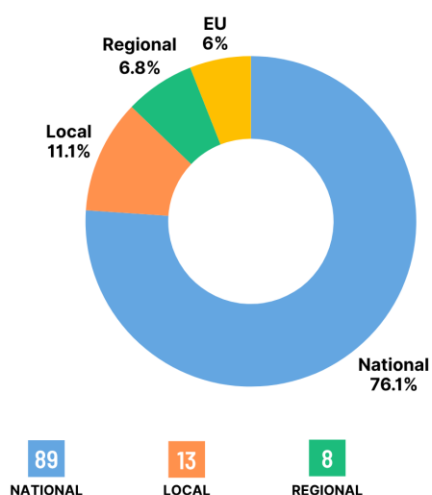
A more detailed breakdown by document type and their distribution is shown in Graph 9.

Graph 9

Overview of Sunce's interventions, 2015–2025

TOTAL NUMBER OF INTERVENTIONS: 117

INTERVENTIONS BY LEVEL



INTERVENTIONS BY DOCUMENT TYPE

Laws/regulations	19	16%
Bylaws / secondary legislativ	33	28%
Plans or programs	31	27%
Strategies / frameworks	12	10%
Reports / strategic studies	12	10%
Public calls for funding	10	9%

Source: Internal tables for monitoring activities of Association Sunce 2015-2025

The highest number of interventions targeting bylaws confirms that Sunce finds its greatest scope of influence in the 'fine print' of the implementation process—that is, where legal norms are transposed into concrete operational instruments and working standards.

Thematic structure of policy interventions shows clearly profiled and relatively balanced approach (Table 15). Sunce monitors the condition in a number of relevant areas and connects nature conservation, environment, education, civil society, human rights, tourism, fishery, energy, and space management through spatial planning and regulation of maritime domain (Table 16). This reinforces the fact that environmental policies cannot be isolated from the wider development and democratic framework.

Table 15. Thematic structure of policy interventions conducted by Association Sunce (public consultations, submissions)

Thematic structure of policy interventions of Association Sunce, 2015– 2025	Number of interventions	Share
Nature conservation	34	29 %
Environment protection and waste management	28	24 %
Civil society, education, and human rights	32	27 %
Interconnected sectoral policies: maritime affairs, fisheries, tourism, and agriculture	14	12 %
Strategic development, space management, and climate changes	9	8 %

TOTAL	117	100 %
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At the same time, the study warns of the limitations of institutional participation, particularly the phenomenon of inactive working bodies and the risk of instrumentalizing public participation. Therefore, it is recommended to continue with selective, strategically oriented participation in processes that shape public policy, alongside stronger communication towards the public and process stakeholders in instances where institutions fail to genuinely utilize expert contributions. In such circumstances, Sunce operates as an expert actor that enters into the system gaps and tries to achieve maximal public policy effect out of it.

6.1. Impact asymmetry and the "glass ceiling" of public policy

The impact of Sunce is not uniform, but strongly dependent on power distribution and interests in particular sectors. The biggest impact is achieved in the areas where there is a lack of knowledge, data, and operational capacities in the institutions, and Sunce's expert and legal arguments bear specific weight. The smallest impact is achieved in the areas where there are strong economic and investment interests, and where the strategic decisions are most exposed to political compromises, particularly in the sector of spatial development, maritime concessions, large infrastructural projects, and some parts of the waste management system. This does not lessen the importance of Sunce's work; it only demonstrates the organisation's actual boundaries of work and the need for further strengthening of strategic advocacy, alliances, and communication towards the public and stakeholders in these processes, in which the institutions do not use truly expert contributions.

Sunce is an example of the organisation that manages to transpose complex environmental topic into concrete policy proposals understandable to decision makers.

Researcher from academic community

In these areas, the environmental arguments, even when scientifically undisputed, often remain secondary to development paradigms, while participatory mechanisms are predominantly formal in nature. These constraints are not primarily the weakness of the approach taken by Sunce, but a reflection of structural characteristics of the Croatian system: weak integration of environmental objectives into the sectoral policies, insufficient political accountability for long-term environmental impacts and the tendency to close strategic processes to the public.

In such circumstances, Sunce has an important role of stabilization, actin as an expert corrective of the but it cannot just replace structural deficits or turn around investment priorities without broader social and political changes. Thus, future work on public policy cannot only be based on the quality of experts' comments; it has to connect legal precision, public communication, alliances, and mobilization pressure.

Table 16. Examples of Sunce's impact on public policy

Topic	Outcome
Moratorium on Adriatic drilling	Campaign <i>SOS for the Adriatic</i> , in which Sunce also actively participated, led to the halting of the strategic state project for

	drilling across the Adriatic for the purpose of oil exploration and exploitation.
Packaging and single-use plastic	Local action plans and recommendations for reduction of single-use plastic were designed, including guidelines for public events and stakeholders who operate in these commercial sectors.
Ban on small coastal beach seines	A complaint to the European Commission resulted in Croatia gradually banning fishing gear that destroys <i>Posidonia</i> meadows and fish populations.
Protected areas	Advocacy for the establishment of fully protected marine areas; Cape Stupište as the first example. Establishment of strictly protected zones in the Nature Park Telašćica and adoption of Bylaw on Regulation of Fishing in Marine Protected Areas. Designation of new Natura 2000 sites for <i>Posidonia</i> and seabirds.
Posidonia meadows	Promotion of eco-friendly anchorages as one of the tools to reduce pressure on marine habitat; results of monitoring are used for national reporting and policy-making; the preservation of <i>Posidonia</i> is gradually becoming a standard in sustainable nautical tourism management.
Waste management	Expert inputs into 19 legislative processes covering waste management plans, city council decisions, law, regulations, and bylaw, comments accepted in a number of instances.

6.2. Qualitative reach: from expert support to guardian of standards

The analysis of a ten-year cycle confirms that Sunce modernized and solidified its operational model in line with recommendations from the previous strategic period and changes in the environment. From an organisation that provided primarily expert support in the context of harmonization with the European standards in an early phase, Sunce grew in a mature and operationally strong actor that acts as a creator of implementable solutions and a guardian of environment protection standards, procedural warranties, and rule of law at the same time.

In the public sphere, Sunce maintains credibility because it operates expertly and factually rather than ideologically.

Specialized journalist from non-profit media outlet

Key added value of Sunce does not come from formal political power, but rather from the continuity of knowledge, the ability to transpose the European framework into national practice and persistently monitor its implementation. The impact is often not seen as one big decision, but rather as a series of cumulative, technical and procedural shifts that change governance standards, increase the quality of implementation and predictability of the system in the long run.

The impact is most visible in the areas in which public policy leans on strictly binding European obligations, high technical complexity, and the need for expert intermediation between the normative framework and

implementation in the field. In these key domains—managing protected areas, implementing Natura 2000, protecting marine environments, addressing marine litter and plastic pollution, and facilitating public participation and access to justice—Sunce stands out as a trusted, long-term technical partner for public institutions.

The important element of that outreach is strengthening of internal capacities of the organisation. By establishment of specialized functions, particularly in the Environmental Law Department (active from 2019 to 2024), Education and Information Department (active since 2019), and Communication and Advocacy Department (including legal work since 2024), Sunce standardized the preparation of well-founded arguments, legal responses, and expert contributions to public policy. In doing so, it assumed the role of an actor within the environmental system that compensates for the lacking capacity of public administration and ensures that implementation standards do not collapse under the pressure of daily priorities. Establishment of the Finance, Organisation and Administration Department in 2024, it additionally contributed to the continuation of responsible, efficient, and transparent management in the growing organisation.

Sunce's work was characterized by perseverance and an expert approach. The Association did not act solely by offering general remarks, but regularly provided concrete solutions and amendments to draft tenders, regulations, plans, and laws. The contribution is visible not only from the number of accepted proposals, but in enhancement of the quality of communication with the public authorities, particularly in areas that the institutions recognized as the areas in which they lack specialized expertise and feedback from the field.

6.3. Tourism, energy and space as new strategic field for advocacy

This framework also includes one of the greatest structural challenges of the Dalmatian region: the strong and growing ecological, energy, and social pressure of tourism, which spills over onto the coast, sea, utility systems, land use, energy consumption, and waste management, alongside increasingly pronounced climate risk. This is an area where Sunce has not previously acted with the same impact on a strategic level as in implementation issues, with a key illustrative example being its attempt to influence the Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy until 2030, in which Sunce's critical proposals regarding the definition of destination carrying capacities were rejected or ignored.

This very example shows how, in sectors marked by heavy political and economic dependencies, well-founded and reasoned proposals can fail to produce an impact when there is a lack of political will to introduce restrictions or change the development model. However, current processes of preparation and adoption of destination management plans open a new opportunity for strategic advocacy: incorporation of systematic tourism ecological footprint monitoring, strengthening of transparency and accountability mechanisms, and introduction of protective clauses and quotas in these plans.

However, as with majority of other planning documents, there is an actual risk that these processes may remain on a declarative level only, while at the same time using organisational energy with limited implementation impact. That is precisely why the backbone tourism–energy–waste–space becomes one of the crucial fields for determination of the actual reach of environmental sustainability in Dalmatia.

6.4. European framework as a leverage point of influence and protection of the space for action

One of the main reasons for the resiliency of Sunce in unfavourable national environment is the ability to use European framework as a leverage point of influence. Amid a shrinking civic space and growing obstacles to domestic compliance, Sunce leverages EU laws, reporting requirements, and monitoring mechanisms to exert pressure and drive policy corrections at the national level. This is how its position as a guardian of standards and an intermediary between local problems and higher governance levels is strengthened.

Looking towards the future, the biggest challenge remains bridging the gap between the high technical acceptance of Sunce's proposals and the low political will to implement structural reforms in sectors that require a shift in economic paradigms. The first developmental direction is to capitalize on the capacity-substitution role by preparing expert study foundations, plans, and implementation models, particularly in the context of implementing the Regulation on Nature Restoration, which will demand large amounts of data, analyses, and plans.

Sunce – they are experts who have conquered the marine problem matter. Their strength lies in broadness of approach and work on providing multiple solutions.

Representative of national environmental association

The second direction is to strategically strengthen presence in climate and energy policies. The climate becomes a horizontal priority that needs to be consistently integrated into work on waste, nature, sea, and tourism, with more active monitoring of the National Energy and Climate Plan and related implementation instruments. The third direction is to strengthen mobilization and communication capacities of the organisation because in sectors with strong interests, changes rarely occur without visible public pressure.

In more and more complex European context, it is further important to protect the space in which the civil society operates. Defenders of environment in Europe are more and more exposed to pressures, attacks and restrictions, and negotiations on a new EU financial period from 2028 to 2035 will be conducted under the circumstances in which the strengthening of the defensive capacities becomes a strategic priority with possible consequences on investments in social cohesion and civil society. That is why Sunce should be ready to continue deepening of its strategic operations in public policy on national and European levels for which the collaboration through networks and coalitions is of crucial importance.

Quotes from selected stakeholders further reinforce this profile of Sunce. Stakeholders describe it as an organisation that “operates expertly and factually rather than ideologically”, that “manages to transpose complex environmental topic into concrete policy proposals understandable to decision makers”, and whose legitimacy arises from the “combination of professionalism and ability to collaborate with institutions without losing critical distance”. These views confirm that the credibility of Sunce is one of its strongest resources in advocacy.

To conclude, in the past decade, Sunce confirmed itself as an unavoidable actor of Croatian environment and nature conservation system that successfully balances between the role of an expert partner to the institutions, but also a sharp, but necessary, corrective of the system. Its strength lies in consistency, professionalism, and ability to produce cumulative changes by its long-term, precise, and well-grounded work – often out of the public spotlight, but with permanent impact on the quality of implementation, protection of public interest and preservation of environmental standards.

7. ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Organisational development of Sunce in the period from 2015 to 2025 took place within two consecutive strategic cycles—the Strategic Plan 2016–2020 and the Strategic Plan 2021–2026—which form a coherent, yet developmentally differentiated framework for strengthening organisational capacity, governance practices, and the long-term sustainability of the organisation.

Strategic plan 2016–2020 was focused on consolidation of the organisation in the conditions of the programmatic scope and project dynamics growth. In that period the focus was on stabilization of internal procedures, strengthening of financial management, human resources development, and the preservation of operational functionality within the context of high dependency on project funding. Strategic plan 2021–2026 is a qualitative step forward because it directs organisation more strongly towards outcomes and effects, introduces more clearly defined performance indicators, and highlights multidisciplinary and interdepartmental work.

Analysis of the organisational development of Sunce shows a significant and multidimensional transformation of the organisation – from relatively small, project-oriented association towards structurally complex organisation with the capacity of long-term impact on public policy, expert practices, and social processes. This transformation is not only reflected in the increased scope of work, but in the change of the organisation’s nature itself: Sunce now acts in the conditions of significantly higher operative, financial, and social responsibility, while in parallel managing expert, advocacy, and implementation functions.

When employee survey results, stakeholder perceptions, and longitudinal evaluation data are considered collectively, Sunce's organisational sustainability cannot be evaluated purely in terms of internal processes, financial stability, or formal team architecture. The accumulated social capital of the organisation is equally important, and even crucial in some moments: network of trust, reputational relationships and long-term professional credibility built over a decade of work in politically and interest-sensitive areas of spatial, marine, and environmental protection.

Table 17. Comparison of key indicators of Sunce’s organisational development in 2015 and 2025

Indicator	2015	2025	Change
Total income	389,000.00 EUR	1,463,168.00 EUR	+ 275.9 %
Average annual income (last 3 years)	—	≈ 1 – 1.3 million EUR	Stabilization
Full-time equivalent (FTE)	10.57	22.64	+ 113.9 %
Productivity (EUR/FTE)	37,009.00	64,701.00	+ 74.8 %
Number of projects	82	169	+ 106.1 %
Total portfolio value	—	> 11.18 EUR	Cumulative
Staff costs	151,268.00 EUR	682,626.00 EUR	+ 351.3 %
Staff cost percentage	39 %	47 %	+ 8 p.p.
Average gross salary	998.69 EUR	2,113.95 EUR	+ 111.7 %
Lowest gross salary	471.65 EUR	1,395.64 EUR	+ 196.0 %
Number of members	222	498	+ 124.32 %
Volunteer hours	1,848	4,875	+ 163.79 %
Project partners	—	≈ 140	—
Collaborative network (total)	—	> 200 (≈ 250)	Considerable growth

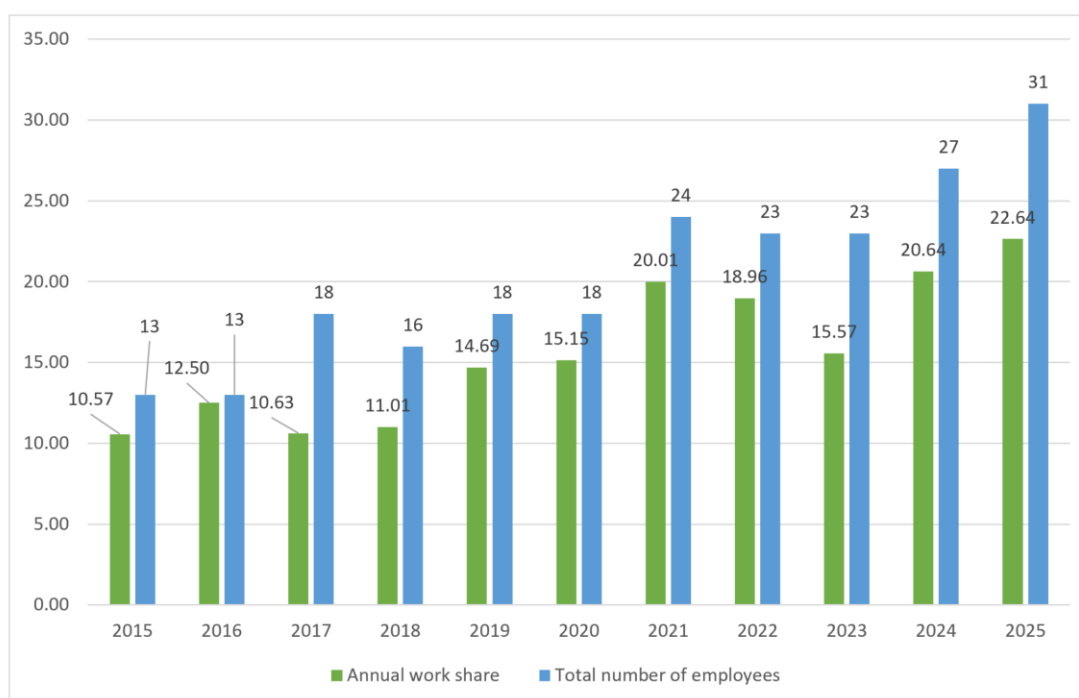
Educational institutions	19	85	+ 347 %
Organisational structure	3 areas	5 departments	Increased complexity
Management model	Centralized	Multilevel	Transformation

Comparison of indicators for 2015 and 2025 shows that the organisation significantly increased operational capacity and productivity, stabilized annual financing, and enhanced efficiency of resource use, all at the same time. Particularly important is the shift toward a more stable financial framework, in which the organisation demonstrates the ability to manage fluctuations between surpluses and deficits and to gradually strengthen its reserves. At the same time, financial growth and programme scope increase operational complexity and raise minimal threshold of funds required for maintenance of the organisation.

Strong programmatic and financial growth was accompanied by investment in employees through salary increases—particularly at lower levels—pointing to a deliberate effort to ensure more stable and higher-quality working conditions. By doing so, the organisation responded to critical weaknesses from the previous period, and the results of employees’ self-evaluation confirm high level of motivation, sense of purpose, and identification with the organisational mission.

Graph 10

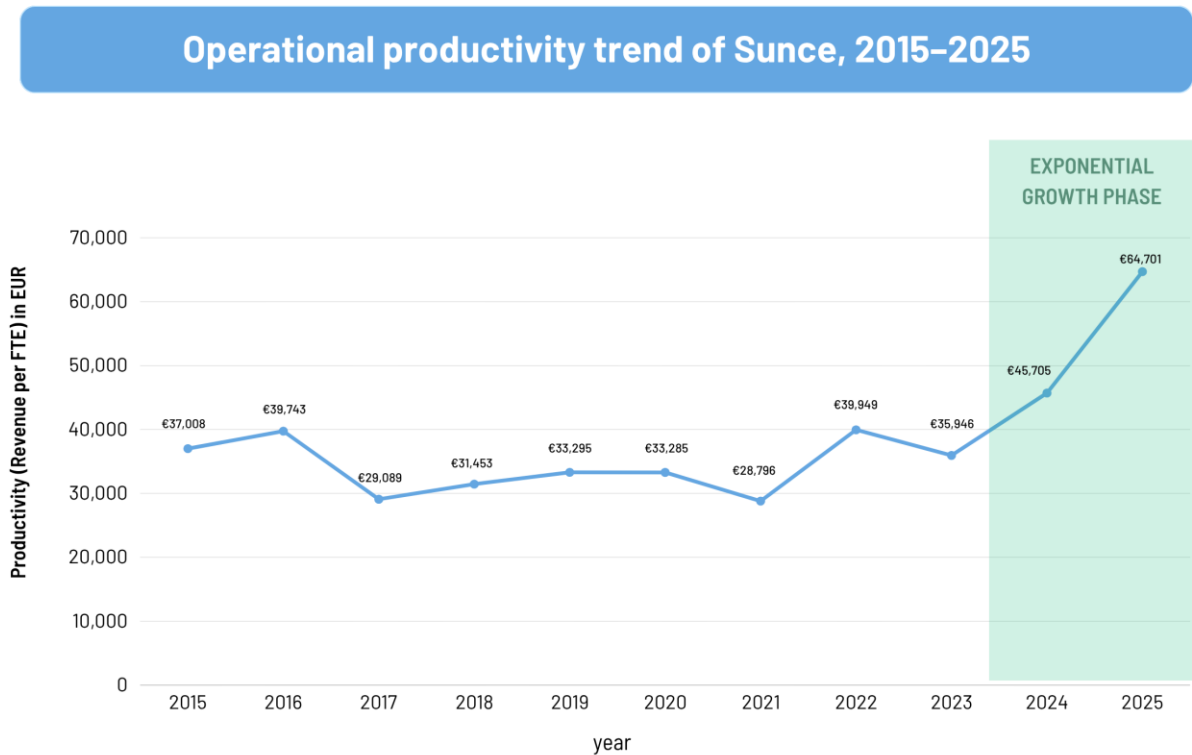
Trend in the number of employees and FTE at Sunce, 2015–2025



Source: Official administrative data of the association Sunce

In parallel with the significant growth of staff and productivity, a need has been identified for more systematic management of internal communication, relationships, and organisational culture amid the growing size and complexity of the organisation.

Graph 11



Source: Financial and administrative data of the Association Sunce

Development of collaborating and social capital additionally confirms that the organisational strength of Sunce exceeds the capacity of its expert team. A broad network of partnerships, long-term consortium relationships, and growth of the members and volunteers base and volunteers show that the organisation acts as a platform connecting various actors and sectors. The network of members, volunteers, and the broader community is not just a source of support, but also a potential for active participation in advocacy efforts.

Analysis of stakeholders, as well as open replies of employees and volunteers, are very consistent in describing Sunce as an organisation that functions as an expert authority, reliable partner, and socially responsible actor at the same time remaining close to the citizens. It is exactly this double legitimacy – social and professional – that is one of the most important invisible pillars of the organisation’s long-term sustainability.

The success of Sunce at the same time creates a new level of pressure. Having established itself as a leading reference point, the organisation faced rising expectations to undertake more sophisticated roles: serving as

an expert partner in major EU programmes, contributing to public policy formulation at both national and European levels, and assisting community initiatives during local disputes. The fundamental structural tension of Sunce's modern model lies in the need to simultaneously maintain high professional credibility, activist relevance, and operational capacity to execute complex, multi-year programmes.

In the context of growing engagement in major EU projects, ensuring their complementarity with the organisation's core mission is of paramount importance. There is a real risk of “projectivization” of the organisation's mission, that is, a gradual shift in the organisation's focus from the public interest to administrative and project-driven requirements. Long-term sustainability of Sunce will depend on its ability to transform technical and project excellence into social and advocacy impact, rather than being subordinate to it.

A growth of employees, the expansion of programme areas, and the increased scale of parallel projects create a new organisational reality where the spontaneous transfer of knowledge, relationships, and organisational culture is no longer possible without systematic mentoring mechanisms, structured internal communication, and deliberate development of mid-level leadership. Long-term sustainability of Sunce will not depend only on financial stability or programme relevance, but also on its ability to internalize knowledge, relationships, and reputation capital into organisational processes, rather than relying solely on individuals.

Additional layer of organisational complexity arises from intensive acting through networks, coalitions, and platforms. Networking is becoming not only an advocacy tool, but also a specific organisational competency that requires planned investment in the development of people and structures. When team's capacities, institutional memory, professional standards, social capital, members' base, volunteer infrastructure, and the position in network are viewed as an integrated system, it becomes clear that Sunce enters a phase, in which the organisational strength means less the capacity of its expert team and more the ability to activate and orchestrate broader social infrastructures for action.

Based on the results of evaluation, a strategic shift is recommended from managing growth to managing long-term social impact. This includes four crucial segments of the organisation: development of human potential and mid-level leadership, financial stability and protection of autonomy by development of flexible funding sources, systematic focus on social impact and territorial expansion of work, and data management, monitoring of results, and technological adaptation, including central data and customer relationship management architecture, and ethical framework for application of advanced digital tools and artificial intelligence.

8. FINAL ASSESSMENT AND STRATEGIC GUIDELINES

The observed period from 2015 to 2025 represents key evolutionary phase for Sunce, during which the organisation grew out of framework of the classic type of environmental association and positioned itself as an unavoidable expert and social actor in the sphere of environment and nature conservation in the Republic of Croatia.

Legitimacy of Sunce comes from the combination of professionalism and ability to collaborate with institutions without losing critical distance.

Independent expert, member of managing body

While the previous decade was marked by the alignment of Croatian legislation with the EU *acquis*, the 2015–2025 period was defined by the struggle to implement these regulations in practice – in the conditions of implementation deficit, institutional weak capacity, low level of supervision, pressures on space and natural resources and a growing gap between formally accepted green objectives and their operational implementation. In that context, Sunce took on a role of the system’s corrective. Faced with the phenomenon of crawling obstruction, in a state where the government formally adopts high environmental standards but fails to operationalize them or passively sabotages them, the Association *de facto* compensated for the deficient capacity of public institutions through its actions. Whether we talk about monitoring marine litter, the Green Phone, preparation of plans, management plans for protected areas, education, or advocacy and legal interventions, Sunce did not merely highlight problems, but actively developed and implemented the solutions that the system failed to provide.

Sunce achieves the largest impact when expertise, data, citizens, and advocacy connect into an integrated operational model. In such instances, Sunce serves as producer of knowledge, transposer of complex problem matter, support to citizens, partner to institutions, and a critical corrective of the system. In this sense, Sunce is not only an organisation that implements, but a social stronghold of environmental expertise, democratic participation, and civic responsibility and resilience in Dalmatia, all at the same time.

The impact of Sunce on public policy has become strong, but asymmetric. In technically complex and regulated areas, institutions can hardly ignore Sunce’s expert comments and analyses, however in sectors marked by strong economic interest, such as spatial planning, energy, mass tourism, and large infrastructural projects, there is a clearly defined glass ceiling of impact. This does not lessen the importance of Sunce’s work, it rather demonstrates the actual boundaries of operation and the need for additional strengthening of alliances and public pressure.

The most visible quality step forward was achieved in nature conservation sector. Sunce transformed itself from an external observer and corrective to an active creator of governance arrangements, particularly through management plans, participatory processes, *Posidonia* protection, mapping of sea habitats, *no-take* zones, and development of eco-friendly anchorage standards. However, this very success reveals institutional vacuum: the state and public institutions often rely on expertise and operation ability of the Association instead of systemically strengthening their own capacities.

Educational work and civic engagement confirm that rad Sunce builds social capital, rather than only implements projects. However, the data on support of the public and actual engagement show a certain paradox. Citizens hold environmental organisations in high esteem, but only a small number of citizens get involved on a long-term basis. The next step in the development is turning support into more structured and permanent patterns of civic action.

Organisational maturity of Sunce nowadays is beyond any doubt, but it brings some new risks with it. Growing budget, team, number of projects and public accountability enabled specialization and quality of work, but also opened questions of distribution of leadership, transfer of knowledge, and preservation of mission. One of the strongest results of evaluation is that Sunce professionalized, but at the same time became more vulnerable to dependency on a small number of key people. Without a structured succession, internal mentorship, knowledge management, and systematic support to emotional sustainability, the risk of overload increases.

8.1. Lessons learned

In the sector of civil society organisations, Sunce also stands out by conscious investment in own institutional memory, self-reflexion, and organisational learning. This is visible not only from the developed system of internal monitoring and documenting of work, but also from the fact that the organisation conducted two consecutive external impact assessments in the last two decades of its work, thus enabling longitudinal understanding of own development and social contribution. The process of this assessment additionally involved the entire team through validation of results and forming recommendations. Therefore, it is likely that lessons learned and recommendations arising from this comprehensive analysis will have real practical value for the further strategic development, organisational resilience, and social impact of Sunce.

Table 18. Summary of lessons learned based on the impact assessment of the association Sunce 2015–2025

Lesson	Explanation
Data is the most powerful weapon	You fight political platitudes and flawed studies with hard data. Mappings, monitoring, and documented cases are not just a proof of activity, but a strategic resource and a pivotal argument in legal and advocacy processes.
From “against” towards “how”	It is often not enough to say “NO” to devastation. The biggest step forward occurs when, in addition to opposition, you offer expert, feasible and socially acceptable solution that beats arguments, such as that the environment protection is expensive, unfeasible, or opposed to development.
Local practices bring policies to life	Concrete solutions tested in practice (such as pilot-projects in the cities) are more credible than general recommendations. Successful local models become the strongest political argument for advocacy of more efficient implementation of environmental policies on national level.
Expertise and mobilization come hand in hand	Top class legal and biological arguments are a solid base, but they do not guarantee impact by themselves. Only by pairing technical accuracy with media pressure, public visibility, and civic mobilization does an environmental issue turn into a public interest issue strong enough to create political will.
Strategic litigation	Legal battle is exhausting, but also extremely important. Even when it does not bring fast victory, strategic litigation unveils weak spots in the system, mobilizes the public, and builds necessary foundations for future legal and institutional reforms.
Irreplaceability as a success trap	To be “a surrogate state” that constantly patches failures of a bad system is unsustainable in the long run and leads to overload. Sunce has to clearly distinguish between supporting the system and assuming its responsibility, while transferring knowledge to other stakeholders.
Value of integrated approach	Isolated activities have limited reach. The biggest social impact is realized by a combination of field work, expert data, education, communication and policy advocacy (knowledge creation, transposing to the public, and practical application).
Education as a link to activism	It is not enough only to raise awareness. The most valuable educational formats include field work, service-based learning and volunteering, by which the environmental awareness is directly transformed into active civic competences and problem solution.

Local symptoms, systemic causes	Problems such as over-concretization and bad waste management cannot be taken into consideration separately. They come as consequences of deeper crises – lack of transparency, clientelism, and weak surveillance – and require integration with spatial planning and public administration.
Credibility is a capital	Preserving professional and political independence, transparency, and the capacity for collaboration alongside critical oversight are core resources. This is a prerequisite for continuing to act as a partner, educator, and public advocate.

8.2. Strategic recommendations for future period

Recommendations in this summarized version are grouped in seven main directions in order to reflect recommendations from the entire study and additional thematic guidelines from each chapter. This prevents fragmentation into detailed operational recommendations, ensuring full alignment with findings on education, media, civic activism, nature conservation, environmental protection, public policy, and organisational development.

Ther advantage is in a combination of field, expert knowledge, and advocacy.
Representative of an international environmental organisation

Recommendation 1: Decentralization, networking, and mentorship network of local environmental initiatives

Gradually exit from operative model, in which every intervention comes from the core of organisation. Developed structured network of local initiatives, individuals and associations with mini-academies for local leaders, protocols for long-term cases, procedural templates, local working groups, and field teams. This recommendation synthesizes findings on civic activism, polycentric action, expansion into islands and the hinterland, and the need for Sunce to serve as a strategic pillar rather than the sole bearer of these efforts.

Recommendation 2: Digitalization of knowledge, data, and tools as public good

Develop open digital repository – Sunce-Wiki – with legal models, guides, GIS data, training materials, templates, examples of good practice, and monitoring data. Additionally, develop central data and CRM architecture that connects project results, members, volunteers, donors, partners, local initiatives, and policy outcomes. Digital and AI tools should have a clear ethical framework and continue serving the mission, instead of replacing field work and contact with local community.

Recommendation 3: Preventive action in spatial planning, tourism, and climate resilience

Shift focus from reactive fire extinguishing towards early firefighting toward early engagement in spatial plans, legislation, strategic assessments, EIA procedures, destination management plans, and tourism carrying capacity assessments. This recommendation includes stronger integration of space, tourism, energy, waste, and climate risks, as well as advocacy for safeguard clauses, quotas, ecological footprint monitoring, and real limits to the carrying capacity of the coast and islands.

Recommendation 4: Climate, energy, tourism, and sustainable development as a new frontier of growth

Integrate all sectoral policies – waste, sea, nature, space, education, and public policy – through prism of climate crisis and just transition. Sunce can more closely monitor the implementation of the Integrated

National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP), the Nature Restoration Regulation, and climate resilience plans, develop nature-based solutions, and continue integrating Dalmatia's climate, environmental, and development policies through projects.

Recommendation 5: Integration of environmental policies with other sectors and broader social alliances

Build bridges towards healthcare, urban planning, architecture, energy, education, local development, fisheries, tourism, and social policies. In the coming period, the environment must also be defended using arguments of public health, quality of life, social justice, democratic decision-making, and long-term public interest. Networks and coalitions should be treated as strategic infrastructure for influencing public policy and safeguarding civic space.

Recommendation 6: Strategic development of human resources, transfer of knowledge, and preservation of organisational culture

Continue investments in mid-level leadership, handover of responsibilities, internal mentoring relationships, onboarding, knowledge archiving and transfer, succession plans, emotional well-being, and burnout prevention. It is especially important to manage the risk of mission projectivization, preserve activist and civic component of work, and develop targeted strategies for broader team diversity, including higher participation of men in a female-dominated organisation.

Recommendation 7: Development of self-sustainable and flexible financing models for work on the organisation's mission

Develop educational, consulting and expert services as revenue-generating activities that can fund harder-to-monetize mission-driven functions: legal activism, watchdog activities, public support, strategic advocacy, innovation, and mentoring support for local initiatives. In addition to EU projects, institutional grants and services, it is necessary to develop community-oriented philanthropic tools—such as membership fees, donation campaigns, charitable events, and dedicated funds—in order to strengthen the organisation's autonomy. In order to secure sustainability, strengthen collaboration with foundations and the private sector, while taking into account the environmental and social responsibility of the chosen partners.

APPENDIX 1: OVERVIEW OF KEY SOURCES USED IN STUDY

Primary documentary sources: Sunce Strategic Plans 2016–2020 and 2021–2026; annual progress reports 2015–2025; internal monitoring tables for activities, outputs, and impacts; evaluation reports and internal analyses; project documentation (LIFE Artina, ML-FREE, VolonTERRA, ESF projects, etc.); archives of websites and digital communication channels

Primary research data: public opinion research (Ipsos, 2025, N=603, four Dalmatian counties); survey conducted on stakeholders (N=47); semi-structured interviews with stakeholders (N=29); survey of employees (N=22) and volunteers (N=22); focus groups with members/volunteers (N=6) and citizens of Split (N=12); validation workshops with management team, and internal researches:

Radman M., Medunić Orlić G., Goreta D., Spetič M., Buzov I., Bulić M., Bisaku T., Tomasović T., & Bralić L. (2026). Research on the Ecological Awareness of High School Graduates in Split-Dalmatia County (2024-2025). Unpublished research.

Ipsos, Hrvatska, 2025. Public opinion research Perception of the Sunce Association in Four Dalmatian Counties, commissioner and data owner: Sunce – Association for Nature, Environment and Sustainable Development, data available upon request. The research was conducted by using the computer-assisted

telephone interviewing (CATI) method in households. The sample is a representative one on the level of four Dalmatian counties, including 603 persons older than eight years of age, selected at random. Data collection lasted from 26 August to 5 September 2025.

External European and international sources: Environmental Implementation Review EC (2025); EEA reports (2025); OECD Economic Survey of Croatia (2023); EU legislative framework (EU Birds and Habitats Directives, EU Waste Framework Directive, SUP Directive, the Aarhus Convention, the European Green Deal, Biodiversity Strategy, Nature Restoration Law); EPPO reports.

National and institutional sources of the Republic of Croatia: documents of Ministry of Environment and Energy, Environment Protection and Energy Efficiency Fund, the State Inspectorate, Parliamentary Committee for Environment and Nature Protection, Ombudswoman; National Recovery and Resilience Plan; court and administrative practice in the field of environment protection

APPENDIX 2: PARTICIPANTS IN IMPACT ASSESSMENTS THROUGH INTERVIEWS

SeCtor/instituTION	Number of interviewees	Key profiles
Civil society organisations and networks	7	Biom, Zelena akcija (Green Action), Centre for Peace Studies, Ecological Association Krka Knin, Marjan Society, Institute for political ecology, Climate portal
Trusts and donors	4	Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt (DBU), Hans Wilsdorf Foundation, Sigrid Rausing Trust, MAVA Foundation
Public institutions and public authorities	6	The Ministry, public institutions for nature conservation, the City of Split, regional and local self-government
Higher education institutions and researchers	5	the University of Split (the Faculty of Economy, the Faculty of Philosophy, Department for Maritime Studies, the Faculty of Science, the Institute for Oceanography and Fisheries
International organisations and independent experts	7	WWF Adria, BirdLife Europa, Seas at Risk, EEB, independent experts and analysts