

## **“Center of excellence - Cerovačke caves; sustainable management of natural heritage and karst underground”**

The project “Center of excellence - Cerovačke caves; sustainable management of natural heritage and karst underground” (**MIS code: KK.06.1.2.01.0011**) was submitted for Competitiveness and Cohesion operational programme 2014-2020 (Theme 62C) and successfully passed evaluation procedure. The main goal of the project is to improve sustainable use of natural heritage, primarily in Nature park Velebit with focus on Cerovačke caves (Upper and Lower Cerovačke caves). The main problems that were identified through the project preparation were that these show-caves are located in undeveloped Lika region, near the town of Gračac, which has poor tourist offer in general, and that the lack of proper long-term development plan for show-caves and complementary activities resulted in poor management of the caves and in the end, a degradation of cave inventory and its surrounding landscape. The caves had inadequate approach trails, obsolete lighting system, poorly planned tourist trails, and generally were not sufficiently explored (archaeology, biology, geomorphology...). The core activities of the project involve development of a new “state of the art” regional scientific/educational center and revitalization of show-caves Cerovačke caves. To be able to revitalize Cerovačke caves and secure long-term sustainability, various activities were planned to enrich the tourist offer of the region. Aside from the show-caves and educational and hiking trails around the caves, big part of the planned activities focus on education programmes and scientific explorations (schools in nature, trainings for cavers, various workshops and courses, on-site laboratory...) and creation of strong network of potential users from many communities - public, caving, scientific as well as public or private institutions that can use these facilities and programmes. For this to be possible in the project activities, the whole caving community of Croatia and its regions will be involved as well as a numerous experts and scientists because the project needs to be identified by this community as their own so its activities continue after the formal end of the project implementation. To achieve sustainable use of the caves and the surrounding area, modern solutions in IT visitor management will be implemented, monitoring of tourist impact will be done and newest technical solutions for show-cave inventory will be used. The start of project implementation is planned for April 2018 and duration of the project is 3.5 years.