

# Planning and Development of Tourism in the Protected Areas of Bulgaria

## Introduction

**Relevance of the research.** Planning in tourism plays an important role both at national and at regional and local level. Experience shows that especially in times of financial and economic crisis, in the stage of turbulence and chaos, business planning requires new patterns of behavior in order to minimize the risks and to quickly increase their opportunities (Kotler, 2009). Over the last programming period, in Bulgaria organizations, companies and municipalities that have real strategies and business plans for tourism development achieved positive results such as positioning and realization on the market (Kotler, Caslione, 2009). The planning of tourism in areas with special conservation status has its own peculiarities, as it on one part requires seeking a balance between tourism development and environmental protection, and on the other – co-ordination between interested parties from different institutions, non-governmental organizations, individuals and representatives of business.

**Problem of the research.** What are the instruments to optimize the planning and the development the tourism

in the protected areas of Bulgaria in the context of sustainable development?

**Object of research:** the tourism management in the protected areas of Bulgaria.

**Goal of the research:** to analyze the existing legislation and regulations and to seek ways to manage the tourist flows, improving the quality of tourism products and balancing of economic development and nature conservation.

**Methods of research:** comparative analysis, empirical method, study of legislation relating to protected areas in Bulgaria, a survey of best practices related to branding in protected areas, analysis of management plans for specific national and nature parks.

## Legal status of protected areas in Bulgaria

The areas of nature conservation in Bulgaria are determined by the Protected Areas Act (PAA) and the Biological Diversity Act (BDA).

**The Protected Areas Act** was passed in 1998, promulgated in the SG, issue 133 of 11.11.1998. It defines six categories of

protected areas: strict nature reserves<sup>1</sup>, managed nature reserves<sup>2</sup>, national parks<sup>3</sup>, nature parks<sup>4</sup>, protected sites<sup>5</sup> and natural monuments<sup>6</sup>. Protected areas occupy about 5 % of the territory of the country, while the largest and most important for tourism are the national and nature parks (Table 1). On their territory several types of zones are differentiated, regulated by Management plans (MP): reserves and managed nature reserves, touristic zone, chalets zones, the administrative centers for management and maintenance of parks and sports facilities, other zones under the specific conditions in the parks. Land in national parks is exclusively state owned, and there are no urban areas on their territory. Natural parks are with a more relieved management and use regime. Nucleated settlements, dispersed settlements and resorts may be located within their boundaries, and any production and activities which do not pollute the environment may be pursued therein (Article 30, paragraph 1, PAA). Any protected areas of other categories, falling within the boundaries of national and nature parks shall retain the regimes thereof, as established by the designation order thereof.

**The Biodiversity Act** was promulgated in SG, issue 77 of 09.08.2002. It outlines the conditions and regulations for the construction of the National Ecological Network, including protected areas as part of the European ecological network "NATURA 2000". The law aims to regulate the conservation of natural habitat types representative of the Republic of Bulgaria and of Europe and habitats of endangered, rare and endemic plant, animal and fungal species within a National Ecological Network, the conservation of genetic resources and the diversity of plant and animal species outside the natural surroundings thereof, to regulate the introduction of non-native and the reintroduction of native plant and animal species into the wild, the regulation of trade in specimens of endangered species of wild flora and fauna, conservation of centuries-old and remarkable trees, etc. The direction is fully to conservation, which is why in the MP of protected areas they can not be considered as an instrument for planning and development of tourism, and the areas themselves – as tourist destinations. Provisions are made for the two types of protected areas: **Special protected areas (SPA)** and **Special areas of**

Table 1

**Categories and hectarage of the protected areas**

Category	Total number	Area in Hectares
Strict Nature Reserves	55	76,979
Managed Nature Reserves	35	4,517
National Parks	3	150,362
Nature Parks	11	256,455
Natural Monuments	346	16,737
Protected Sites	492	73,434
<b>Total</b>	<b>942</b>	<b>578,484</b>

**conservation (SAC).** In total, 336 protected areas from Natura 2000 (118 SPA and 231 SAC) occupying a total of 34.3 % of the territory of the country have so far been adopted in Bulgaria by the Council of Ministers.

### **Instruments for planning tourism activity in protected areas**

The protected areas in Bulgaria under the PAA can be defined as classic tourist destinations that attract millions of visitors annually. They are designed both to protect biodiversity, natural resources and associated cultural values, and to provide opportunities for recreation and tourism. This, in turn creates a need to find and use the right instruments for their effective management. International practice imposes the Management plan as a document, developed to regulate the activities on environmental protection and the sustainable use of its resources for a particular period of time, and forms a long-term vision on the development of the protected area. The planning and management of protected areas includes a number of activities, among which: the construction of tourism infrastructure, security of visitors, educational and scientific activities.

The need for an effective, sustainable and environmentally consistent planning and management of each protected area requires the elaboration of a long-term MP specified for the particular territory, which reports their activities, introduces procedures and prohibitions in the medium term, determines ways and means of their implementation. In

different parts of the world every Management plan of a given protected area has a various duration, depending on the relevant legislation. After the expiration of this time limit it is required that the MP is updated or a new plan is worked out based on the so-far effective one. The main purpose of the update is to ensure the continuity of the process of sustainable management, preservation and restoration of the protected area.

In accordance with the national legislation of Bulgaria MPs are developed within three years of their announcement and are updated every ten years (Art. 55, para. 2 of PAA). Currently, the MPs of the three national parks have been developed and adopted – “Rila”, “Pirin” and “Central Balkan Mountain” and the nature parks “Vitosha”, “Vratsa Balkan”, “Golden Sands”, “Shumen Plateau”, “Ruse Lom” and “Rila Monastery”. For the purposes of this study the MPs were analyzed of some of the nature and national parks in Bulgaria, applying established mechanisms for planning and development of tourism in protected areas. As a basic legal act regulating the MP of protected areas in Bulgaria a special Regulation was created for the development of MPs of protected areas, promulgated in SG, issue 13 of 15.02.2000. It establishes the terms and conditions for their development. The Act and the Regulation do not create commitments in the MP for the development of tourism and the management of tourist flow. Article. 47, item 3 of PAA indicates that MPs contain norms, regimes, conditions or recommendations for the implementation of the objectives and activities, including infrastructure development and

construction, management organization or others ensuring the achievement of goals set.

Management plans for protected areas, included in Natura 2000 are developed and approved under the terms and conditions specified by an ordinance adopted by the Council of Ministers. They are updated every 10 years, and for protected areas, which are predominantly wetlands – every 5 years (Art. 28 BDA).

Each MP includes general characteristics of the protected area and its components, objectives of Management, norms, regimes, conditions and recommendations for their implementation, as well as short-term and long-term programs associated with the achievement of these goals. The main mechanisms of tourism management can be grouped into six categories: 1. collection of detailed information in the preparation of every plan; 2. preparing estimates of tourism and recreation activities; 3. zoning of park categories; 4. establishment of regimes, norms, conditions and recommendations for the implementation of the objectives and activities; 5. planning of programs, projects, operational tasks and 6. allowing the inclusion of a wide range of interested parties in tourism management<sup>7</sup>. The information provision and the creation of a network of visitor centers are crucial to the promotion of protected areas and their adaptation to tourist markets. The optimal functioning of visitor's centers largely depends on proper planning, the analyses and evaluations in the MPs of particular protected areas.

Another instrument for planning and quality improvement is branding.

The aim of the brand is to distinguish the product from those of competitors, to increase the perception of value and the satisfaction from the experience. Due to the ever increasing choice for consumers, the importance of branding progressively increased during the years. Customers are willing to pay more for established and popular brands. The establishment of successful identity is a competitive advantage and a form of leverage to increase sales and profits. The need for voluntary certification is required due to the fact that for tourists from economically developed countries the guarantee of good quality of services is very important and in some cases it is crucial in deciding on the choice of destination and accommodation.

For the purposes of this study an analysis is made of the management plans for natural and national parks in Bulgaria. Specific examples are given of the application of each of said instruments. Good practices as well as problems caused by omissions and errors in the planning of tourism activity in protected areas are analyzed.

### **Analysis of detailed information for planning of tourism activity in Rila National Park**

The collection of detailed information is an instrument that allows for planning of tourist sites, the construction of tourism infrastructure and regulation of tourism flows. The management plan of Rila National Park was adopted with decision № 522 of the Council of Ministers on 04.07.2001. The planning,

management and development of tourism is dealt with primarily in Section II "Prescriptions". In the management objectives of the park a separate section "Tourism Management" is differentiated and in the "Programs and Projects" part – visitors management. A good example of the importance of the information gathered is present also in Section I "Description" from the MP of Rila National Park, which deals with "Tourism and visitors profile". In this part of the MP attention is paid to the tourism infrastructure, the distribution of visitors, the network of visitor infrastructure, the profile of tourists and their lifestyles and trends, services for visitors, visitor information and interpretation, specially organized groups and specialized tourism. Based on a socio-economic survey the weaknesses are reported in underdeveloped transport and communications infrastructure, shelter and accommodation facilities, most of which offer only basic tourist services and make no efforts for development. The fact is acknowledged that the proximity of the national park to lodging facilities is not evaluated as a factor in attracting vacationers. The distribution of visitors is even, lasting 5-6 days, while the main reasons for the visits are the need for cleanliness, quietness, wild nature, contact with people of similar visions, observation of animals and plants, sports events and improvement of the physical fitness.

Based on the information collected the standards and recommendations of the MP of Rila National Park are formed. They include restrictions on the number of visitors and overnight stays, as follows: up to 1 night in shelters, except in

case of deteriorating weather conditions; on average, between 2 and 5 nights stays in chalets, depending on the season; up to 10 nights in holiday homes; up to 20 people and 3 nights in bivouac sites; up to 50 people and up to 7 nights in camping sites. In some places of short rest only one night is allowed or such is not allowed. The locations and standards for the conduct of specialized tourism (passing on horseback, with mountain bikes, ski-trekking) are determined by a planning project that must be coordinated with the headquarters of the park. For the preparation and approval of the planning projects it is recommended: up to 4 horses in a group in routes up to 2000 m asl in horse riding; up to 5 people together along routes up to 2000 m asl for cycling tourism; in the part of the routes passing through the reserves, the groups have to number up to 5 people, and in their part through the Zone of limited human impact, the groups have to number up to 7 people. The main problem, connected with their compliance is the lack of real control over the limitations of the number of night stays and the number of visitors in the different regimes.

### **Analysis and evaluation of tourist activity in Vitosha Nature Park**

Assessments of tourism make it possible to achieve the balance between nature conservation and tourism. As one of the main instruments for planning and management of tourism we can point the **First assessment – tourist infrastructure of the Vitosha NP**. The

MP of Vitosha NP was adopted with a resolution by the Council of Ministers № 305 of 22.04.2005. The Assessment of the status of the territorial system for recreation and tourism is a result of the analysis of the material-technical base as accommodation fund, the specialized tourist infrastructure, tourism staff and marketing of the tourist product. It has been reported that in the structure of the material and technical base the mountain hostels, holiday homes and hotels are approximately equally distributed. The total capacity of accommodation facilities in Vitosha is about 3,990 beds and the maximum capacity of lift equipment is 6,000 persons / hour. This proves the right balance between the two types of capacity. The specialized tourist infrastructure dominates that which is associated with hiking – 270 km of paths and trails. For the practicing of skiing the well-developed system of lifts with a total length of 10,011m is important. These circumstances lead to the conclusion that the further expansion of accommodation base and the facilities for winter sports is inappropriate. The specialized tourism infrastructure is developed one-sidedly – mainly facilities for skiing. The northern part of the mountain is full of well-marked hiking trails. The tourism product offered is with a clearly expressed mass and seasonal nature, strongly dominated by the importance of hiking. In the southern part of the mountain a lack of modern infrastructure for an active summer recreation is reported – playgrounds, lawns equipped for overnight stay. There is no infrastructure for ecotourism – themed landscapes, a network

of information and directional facilities for the need of specialized types of natural and cognitive tourism, eco-trails, etc. Account is taken of the need for constant maintenance of trails and restoration works on areas damaged by human activity.

An essential omission in the evaluation of the development of tourism is that they are not made on the basis of clear and thoughtful matrices. This leads to information gaps and poor quality of the assessments themselves. Along with the positive aspects of the first assessment – tourism infrastructure in Vitosha Nature Park, there are also gaps in the analysis of information related to the daily visits of tourists or the so-called trippers. Similarly, also other protected areas are mostly used as a place for recreation and stationary tourism, and this is regarded the least in the MP.

Despite these deficiencies, thanks to the estimates made and the underlying norms in the MP of Vitosha Nature Park no disastrous investment projects have been admitted. During the last few years there is an increased pressure from an investor to realize a large-scale project for the expansion of the “Aleko” ski center. The preliminary assessment of the expected impact on the forests and forest lands on the territory of Vitosha NP, on the anthropogenic load, erosion and protected habitats in the park showed that its implementation will cause irreversible damage to biodiversity and landscape. The analysis of the designed routes of some runs and lifts, designed on the boundaries of the “Torfeno branishte” and “Bistrishko branishte” reserves has shown that

their construction will have a direct negative impact also on the reserves themselves (Stratieva, 2002). Based on the assessment, it was concluded that the creation of a wider network of ski equipment that will be used an average of 3 months of the year, will question the development of a quality summer tourism product in the mountain. The project lacks data on the construction of summer attractions, the expected human flow, the share of road transport, the size of the design capacity for the parking and lift facilities planned. There are no data on the available network of winter hiking trails, the integration of the project with systems of public transport in Sofia, information and comprehensive assessment on the part of the investor. All of this calls into question the effectiveness of the equipment. (Kostadinov, 2008) In accordance with the MP it is concluded that for the extreme burden of infrastructure and human flow the Aleko tourist center is inconsistent with its limited capacity (Alexova, 2012; Kostadinov, 2008).

**Zoning of park territories after the example of the Pirin National Park**

Zoning as an instrument for planning and management of protected areas in Bulgaria is expressed best in the MP of Pirin National Park. The management plan for the Pirin National Park was developed with the financial support of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. It was realized by the Bulgarian “Biodiversity” foundation and represents a special plan for the conservation of nature and landscape, balanced use of recreational opportunities and natural resources of the territory, as well as the conversion of the protected area into a socio-economic factor for the regional development. The planning and development of tourism in the park is regulated under the zoning, where for the needs of tourism 3 zones are present: zone of sustainable use, zone for tourism and zone for buildings and facilities. In the other areas conditions are also created for recreational use, but the goals are secondary (Table 2).

Table 2

**Functional zoning of Pirin National Park**

Zone		Management objectives	Area
Ia	Reserve Zone	Preservation of natural ecosystem processes	14.8%
Ib	Zone of limited human impact	Protection of places of threatened habitats	20.3%
IIa	Zone for conservation of forest ecosystems and recreation	Providing conditions for the natural development of forest ecosystems, creation of conditions for recreational use	45.2%
IIb	Zone for sustainable use of open spaces and recreation	Stimulation of long-term sustainable use of resources, support of regional development	16.9%
III	Zone for tourism	Creating conditions for sports, tourism and recreational use and development of specialized tourism	2.2%
IV	Zone for buildings and facilities	Provision of opportunities for recreation and residence of visitors, residence of herdsman, provision of opportunities for park guards of optimal management, informational services and interpretations	0.6%

In the reserve zone (Ia) and the zone with limited human impact (Ib) the only permitted activities are scientific research and passing along marked routes. In the other zones the permitted activities include hiking and recreation, supporting and restoration, amateur fishing, and in the hiking zone specialized tourism is essential (cycling, skiing, riding), as well as sporting activities. In zone IIb maintaining hiking trails and the safety facilities, and hiking and recreation are permitted, and in zone IIa also skiing-passages are permitted, but only on marked trails. The regimes and norms of different activities in different zones are described in detail in the MP. In sports activities it is expressly prohibited: using technologies for artificial snow that pollute the environment; movement of machinery and equipment on the ski slopes during the time when they are not covered with snow; tourists stay in tent camps in excess of their capacity; cycling and riding outside designated routes. A real problem is to regulate freestyle skiing, which the MP drastically limits and creates conflicts, unlike alpine skiing, where regimes are encouraging. For the needs of hiking it is possible to build picnic sites and to extend the zones for a longer stay. As a whole, the regimes are liberal and allow carrying out activities related to services improvement: construction of new tourist shelters, tent camps and reconstruction of existing buildings. The opportunities for placement of picnic areas and short holidays in different regions, set out in regime 31 are actively used<sup>8</sup>.

Tourist sites within the park are 137 in number and 27 of them are public,

22 municipal, 7 belong to individuals, 29 – to legal entities under the Commerce Act and 52 – to legal entities under the Law on non-profit legal entities. The largest share, as the owner of sites within the Pirin National Park, has the company Ulen JSC. The company was awarded a concession for 30 years over an area of 99.55 hectares of exclusive state property for “Ski Zone with center in Bansko”. Despite the regimes and measures set in the MP from 2001 until now it has been allowed that Ulen AD unlawfully uses public lands, forests and facilities in nearly 64.7 hectares outside the concession area. These facilities were built in violation of existing zoning and the regimes of separate zones. Much of the violations in the construction of the ski area are sanctioned by acts of administrative violations, but the facilities have not been removed and continue to function despite the provisions of the MP.

### **Creation of regimes, norms, conditions and recommendations – gaps in the MP of Rila National Park**

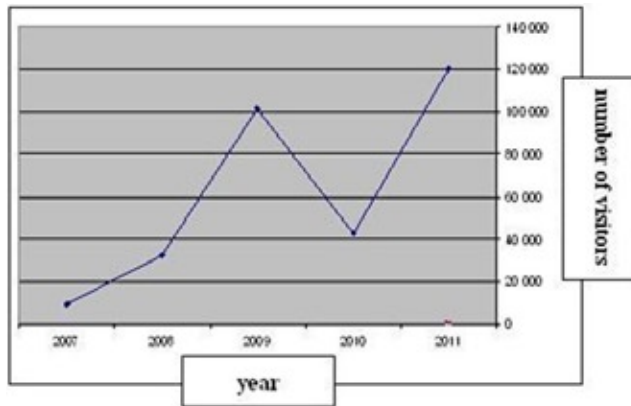
The threats to the sustainable development of tourism in the Rila National Park are concentrated in the most visited areas of the lakes circus, such as “Rilski ezera” chalet and “Sedemte ezera” chalet, where the access is primarily executed through two major entry and exit points for the visitors – from “Pioneska” chalet (by a lift) and from the village of Panichishte – through the “Zeleni Preslap” area. The lift “Panichishte – Rilski ezera chalet” is not listed in the MP of the



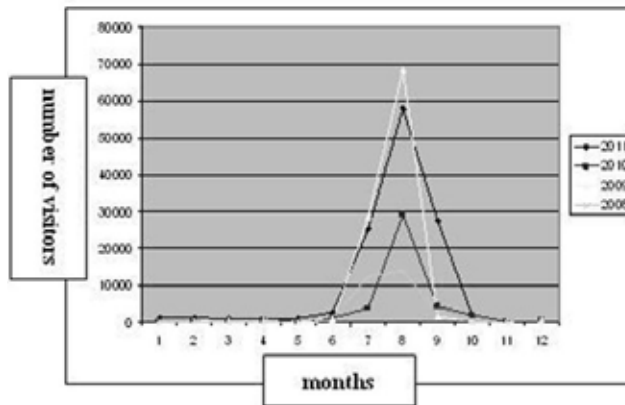
national park, despite the fact that its construction permit was issued before the approval of the plan. Consequently, the MP has not provided measures to reduce anthropogenic pressure in the region of the circus of the Seven Rila Lakes. Another major problem is the control of the unregulated movement of vehicles and the widespread use of horses for transport of tourists and their luggage in the direction of the “Rilski ezera” chalet. There is still no regulation on ATVs and in winter there is a conflict between pedestrian tourists and skiers in the use of the trail to the Musala peak, on which a ski trail is built and it can not be used by pedestrians. In the region some new trends in recreation have not been reflected. According to Section II of the MP of the Rila National Park, the region of the Seven Rila Lakes falls in the Zone of limited human impact, which aims to protect the lakes and the lakeside ecosystems, rock communities with a high level of floristic endemism, of endangered animal species. The area has a high biodiversity and landscape value, and therefore, the management of the tourist flow is imperative. The mass and camp tourism in the circus led to the destruction of the habitats of plants and animals, degradation of the landscape and the problem of wastewater treatment, while simultaneously the movement of large groups of people causes erosion and destruction of the soil. The large number of visitors and the ever increasing popularity of the region create prerequisites for the introduction of a system of eligibility in order to prevent the negative impact of humans on this sensitive area.

That area is not only the most visited by visitors in the past few years, but also with the largest number of registered violations of the total park area. In this regard, it is essential to lead an effective control and security activity, enhanced presence of the staff from the park’s directorate in the lake area and interaction with institutions and individuals in charge, including the police, tenants, users, etc. According to data of visitors monitoring, conducted by the Directorate of Rila National Park during the period January-October 2007 the visitors were **9,508**, while in 2011 their number had increased to 120,539 (Figure 1 and Figure 2).

The control and security activity in the area of the lakes is performed with ensuring additional security in the form of duties, given by the employees of “Park security and control” of other park areas. An additional presence is provided through commissioning of experts and specialists from the Rila National Park administration, who provide the necessary information, assist the visitors and facilitate the activities of park guards. The statements of violations detected in the area of the lakes indicate that offenders have promptly been punished. In weekends, holidays and public holidays, due to the large tourist flow the enhanced presence of the park’s security and control employees is ensured in the lakes area. An examination of the coverage of video-observation cameras at the Lower lift station, Upper lift station “Pionerska chalet – Rilski ezera chalet” and at “Rilski ezera” chalet indicates that the scope of the tourist trail in the park is unsatisfactory for use in detecting



**Fig. 1. Number of visitors to the region of Seven Rila Lakes 2007 - October 2011**



**Fig.2. Number of visitors by seasons in the region of Seven Rila Lakes for the period 2008 - 2011**

violations in the area and the receipt of additional information from them. Due to the presence of very large numbers of pedestrian tourists and an increased anthropogenic pressure the conduction of specialized tourism is prohibited by Order № ПД-82 of 04.07.2011 of the Director of Rila National Park – passing of tourists with horses in the lakes area, and due to the extremely large number of visitors, users and the ongoing traditional annual camp “White Brotherhood Society in Bulgaria” an additional

presence of officials of the park’s directorate has been secured by Order № ПД-103 of 11.08.2011, but these measures are not sufficient for the effective management of tourism in the Rila National Park (Andonov, 2011).

The protection of the Seven Rila Lakes is possible to be guaranteed through the application of international experience in the management of sensitive ecosystems, subjected to increased tourist interest. For this purpose it is necessary to prepare an environmental assessment of

the capacity of the sensitive ecosystems, infrastructure construction to reduce erosion, installing toilets, etc. The most urgent measure to stop the already occurred negative consequences for the Seven Rila Lakes is taking actions by the Ministry of Environment and Water for limiting the tourist flow to levels tolerable for the ecosystems, including through the imposition of financial incentives and limiting the capacity of the lift.

### **Programs planning and incorporating a wide range of interested parties on the example of the MP of the Vitosha Nature Park**

A good example of effective planning of tourism with conservation of biological and landscape diversity is the Third priority of the MP of Vitosha Nature Park. The development of tourism is limited by maintaining the recreational capacity of the various functional areas and an active management through the development of various projects and activities, which include: redirecting the tourists flow to the southern slopes of the mountain by building routes, development of environmentally-oriented tourism policy for the development of the park and adjacent areas, specifying and equipping areas and routes accessible to disabled people, update and complementation of tourist marking, cutting ecological trails in areas with unique natural sites and informational indication of cognitive pathways, development of sports and recreation infrastructure for summer use, determination of appropriate routes

and locations for practicing extreme sports, control over visitors' behavior and introduction of penalties imposed "on the spot" in case of a violation by visitors.

The development of the MP of Vitosha NP gives a clear idea of allowing a wide range of interested parties in the planning of tourism in protected areas. In 1997 the "Structure and content of the MP and spatial planning of Vitosha NP" was adopted by Decision of the Supreme Expert Environmental Council № 24/17.11.1997, funded by the Ministry of Environment and Water, the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and Sofia Municipality. The draft of the Management Plan was awarded to a team led by Arch. Stanoeva, together with expert teams of Agrolesproject company, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, the University of Forestry, and others. Specially for the MP a methodological council of specialists and experts from the interested institutions and structures was created: The Ministry of Environment and Water, the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, the municipalities on whose territory the park stretches – Sofia, Pernik and Samokov, Agrolesproject, the Bulgarian Tourist Union and others. At a meeting on 23.04.1997, the Supreme expert council of ecology, in an enlarged staff, with representatives of the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, Sofia Municipality and the National Forestry Administration a report was adopted on the first phase of the assignment "Plan for management and

arrangement of Vitosha Nature Park". The public discussions on the draft plan were held on 19.10.2001 in the city of Sofia and on 06.11.2001 in the town of Pernik and the appropriate suggestions and recommendations were reflected in the text. After all this long process of coordination with experts and the public the MP was adopted with a decision of the Council of Ministers № 305 of 22.04.2005.

The threats to the sustainable development of tourism in the Vitosha NP are related to the lack of programs to financially support the implementation of existing planning documents. There is a lack of interest from local authorities and the public in discussions and taking decisions related to the management and the activities in the park. There is an improper exploitation of tourist resources, poor coordination and agreement of the actions of various institutions involved in the management of the park, illegal construction and destruction of natural resources, etc.

### **Informational provision of protected areas**

An important role in the development of tourism in protected areas has visitor centers. Their establishment and effective functioning depends largely on the analysis of collected information and the assessments in the MP. National and natural parks in Bulgaria are characterized by multiple entry routes for both pedestrian tourists and for those, using public or private transport. This peculiarity requires the choice of a location

of visitor centers to be precisely defined based on a thorough analysis, to determine the most appropriate locations, consistent with the passage of tourist flows.

*The Vitosha Ecological Information Center*, for example, is the first of a chain of information-educational centers to protected areas in Bulgaria. It was created for the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the proclamation of the park and operates since May 1998, under a project of the Ministry of Environment and Water and the U.S. Agency for International Development. The center is managed and run by the Regional Inspectorate of Environment and Water – Sofia and has a permanent exhibition, including interactive installations, a video-hall, a watchtower, an information area and a library. The visitor center was built at the foot of the mountain, about 1 km from the capital's quarter "Dragalevtsi", near to the Dragalevtsi monastery, but is away from the main tourist trails. Excellent opportunities are provided for the development of ecological and education tourism, but because of its inappropriate location, instead for tourists to naturally visit the center, mechanisms are sought to attract them. The visitor center of Rila National Park is located in the Panichiste resort, on the tourist flow, but in contrast, far from the park's boundaries. Even more inappropriate is the planning of the visitor center of Pirin National Park, which is housed in the building of the national park administration in the town of Bansko and in practice does not fulfill its function.

Good examples can also be given. The visitor information centre of Bulgarka NP is correctly built on a good

spot at the foot of the park, close to the architectural and ethnographic complex “Etara”, from where educational routes start, and currently a learning center for children is under construction. The information services it offers are related with the provision of information about the territory of Bulgarka NP – eco-trails, tourism routes, biodiversity, natural monuments, protected areas, etc. There are themed educational programs for different age groups, film shows and presentations with nature conservation themes, conduction of trainings, seminars, environmental events, etc. Advertising and PR activities are also carried out as well as conservation measures and monitoring of species. The center is run and managed by the Directorate of Bulgarka NP, although the park hasn't got an approved MP.

### **Branding of protected areas**

The most recognizable brand in protected areas in Bulgaria is the certification by PAN Parks foundation – the European organization for wildlife that works to protect, greater understanding and appreciation of wild nature areas in Europe. PAN Parks works as a partner and patron in cooperation with European protected areas. With the help of PAN Parks Certification it is ensured that these wild nature areas will be protected, improved and evaluated. Collaborative partnerships are encouraged between individuals and organizations that collectively can protect wild nature by sharing knowledge and development of sustainable, responsible tourism. In

Bulgaria, two parks – members of the network – have been certified - Rila National Park and Central Balkan National Park. The membership brings certain obligations to comply with the standards and criteria enacted as well as benefits for the Park and its partners. The park can provide the right to local tourism providers, craftsmen, etc. to use the trademark of PAN Parks and be advertised through the information network of the Foundation if they meet certain quality requirements. The Organization funds activities to inform the European public about the particular park, which increases its international recognition, but also assists its members when they apply for funding to other sources.

Another type of branding is the creation and establishment of a regional brand. The aim is to create trust, product recognition and quality assurance. Regional brands in Bulgaria were created by the Central Balkan National Park and the nature parks “Strandja” and “Ruse Lom”. Most successfully developed is the regional brand of Strandja NP.

The development and implementation of the Strandja quality trademark is based on the need to establish and enforce a more effective marketing instrument through which the products of the region in the Strandja Nature Park to be more competitive on the market. The process is a kind of a system for voluntary certification of quality and sustainable use of resources in tourist sites and other businesses related to the park area. The objects must first be officially categorized or to be in a process of categorization under national legislation and to maintain a constant level of quality

according to the category awarded to them (Alexova, 2011).

The brand is awarded by a local certification group that includes independent evaluators, representatives of Strandja NP directorate and local communities for a period of 3 years, after which the objects pass the certification process again. The aim is to demonstrate that they continue to meet the high standards of service quality and environmental friendliness. The standards include: emphasis on the natural environment, cultural and historical sites in the region; focusing on the best interpretation of the natural values of the Park, knowledge of the natural and cultural sights of the region, as well as the problems related to reducing the negative impact of human activity on the environment; a proven practice of environmental sustainability and minimal negative environmental impact, including advices to the guests, related to the protection of the environment; contribution to environmental protection and support for activities related to sustainable tourism, the Park and the protection of wild nature; support of NGOs working for the conservation of the environment, prevention of the guests from purchases of goods associated with rare and endangered species, etc.; contribution to the local community and hiring local staff; offering products and souvenirs of local make, furnishing with mainly Bulgarian goods, including Traditional dishes and drinks in the menu; respect for local culture and integration of appropriate cultural elements from the region or prepared with the participation of the local community; customer care (Alexova, 2011).

The assessment and certification standards with the Strandja brand were developed on the model of the Pan Rarks foundation certification system and that of the Regional Association "Stara Planina". The main aim of the Standards is to support the imposition of a sustainable model of tourism and local economic development in the area of Strandja NP and to choose the feature in which the protected area is unique. The certification covers three categories of tourist services and activities: "accommodation and catering", "attractions" and "tours". The "*Accommodation and catering*" category includes the provision of travel services in the facilities of sheltering, accommodation places and the catering and entertainment places, according to the Ordinance on the classification of accommodation facilities, places of accommodation, catering and entertainment to the Tourism Act, approved by Decree of the Council of Ministers № 357 of 27.12.2004. To obtain a Certificate, tourist sites are expected to facilitate the communication of guests with nature, traditional culture and popular customs of the region. The "*Attractions*" category includes offering additional tourist and other tourism-related services, combining local natural and cultural environment or focused on a natural sight with fixed infrastructure. The requirement is to assist visitors in observing and getting to know nature. Typical examples of attractions are the eco-trails, museums, reserves, shelters and towers for wildlife observation, small studios/workshops, places for the exercise of information activities (tourist information and visitor centers),

monuments of cultural and historic heritage, animation and/or interpretative programs, schools and clubs in riding and other services that contribute to the development and diversification of tourist products. The “*Tour*” category is an activity in which guests are offered a passage – with or without a guide – to observe and communicate with nature and the cultural and historical heritage of the region.

The services quality evaluation is an important marketing instrument that aims to helping local small businesses improve their market positions and increase their sales. The objects and services, making up the Strandja product brand provide personalized service and direct contact with the local community, the possibility of empathy of local customs, culture and traditions, including food and drinks. An important outcome of the process of voluntary certification under Strandja standards is that tourist sites and enterprises – brand bearers, offer the customers in the region authentic services and experiences (Alexova, 2011).

The disadvantages of regional brands are mostly related to the limited offering of goods and services, which creates difficulties for successful branding. The brand does not always perform marketing functions, advertising is complex and even interested tourists often remain uninformed. Despite these shortcomings, the examples given show that branding affects quality improvement in protected areas and it is necessary to work in this direction for a successful product positioning of the parks as recognized tourist destinations.

## **Key deductions and conclusions**

Management plans are adequate instruments for the planning and development of tourism in protected areas. The MPs of the national and natural parks approved so far in varying degrees, pay attention to the functions of tourism offering planning and regulation of anthropogenic pressure on vulnerable ecosystems. The key importance is focused on the collection and analysis of information essential for the planning and development of tourism. The examples given show that when on the phase of description and evaluation there is no sufficiently full and qualitative information, the next parts of the MP, namely zoning, regimes and norms are not effective in regard of tourism planning and development. It should be also noted that despite the qualities of the MP, its role in the management of tourism depends heavily on the availability of administrative and financial capacity for its implementation. In times of financial crisis, budget funds of park authorities are reduced annually. This necessitates a constant attraction of funds from the EU Structural Funds and other funding organizations. Often the problem appears to be in the recruitment of suitable staff with expertise and managerial functions.

The weaknesses related to the implementation of the Management Plan are largely due to the lack of effective mechanisms of control that undermines the regimes and norms in protected areas. Some of the problems can be overcome by the instruments for planning programs, projects and operational tasks and allowing the inclusion

of a wide range of interested parties in tourism management. Every protected area should be established as a complete tourist destination, offering a generic product. Tourism management should be planned sequentially and in stages, and the planning stages need to start from the general to the specific, i.e. from the destination to various areas and objects.

The conservation activity is essential for protected areas, but along with the conservation of genetic, species,

ecosystem and landscape diversity opportunities should be provided for new attractions that do not harm the environment, but uncover it. Practice shows that this is possible by applying the instruments of the MP. The adaptation of international experience to local conditions and branding also contribute to the sustainable development of tourism and the improvement of the quality of the tourist product, with an emphasis on authentic, responsibility to the environment and local communities.

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### Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> Strict nature reserves are areas that include examples of natural ecosystems, the protection of which excludes any or allows minimum human intervention (art. 16, para. 1 of PAA).
- <sup>2</sup> Managed nature reserves are ecosystems, hosting rare and/or endangered wild plant and animal species and the habitats thereof. (Article 26, paragraph 1 of PAA).
- <sup>3</sup> National parks are managed with the purpose of protection and maintenance of the diversity of the ecosystems and protection of wildlife, provision of opportunities for the development of scientific research, education and recreational activities as well as creation of prerequisites for development of tourism, environmentally sound livelihood to the local community.
- <sup>4</sup> Nature parks are managed for maintenance of the diversity of ecosystems and conservation of biological diversity therein, provision of opportunities for pursuit of scientific research, education, and recreation, sustainable use of renewable natural resources while preserving the traditional forms of livelihood, and ensuring conditions for the development of tourism.
- <sup>5</sup> Protected sites have typical or remarkable landscapes, including resulting from the harmonious interaction between people and nature, or habitats of endangered, rare or vulnerable plant and animal species and communities (art. 33, para.1 of PAA).
- <sup>6</sup> Natural monuments are designated typical or remarkable non-living natural features, such as rock forms, rock exposures of scientific value, caves, waterfalls, fossil beds, mineral occurrences, sand dunes and others of outstanding value because of the inherent rarity, representative or aesthetic qualities thereof or of scientific or cultural significance (art. 23, para.1 of PAA).
- <sup>7</sup> Regulation on the development of Management Plans for protected areas, 2000.
- <sup>8</sup> Pirin National Park Management Plan, 2004.

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