

European Diploma for Protected Areas

Central Balkan National Park

Bulgaria

Appraisal Report – July 3th – 7th, 2017



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Background

- European Diploma awarded in 2009 to the Central Balkan National Park (CBNP) with conditions and recommendations.
- Appraisal mission organized in 2013 in order to assess the opportunity to renew the Diploma after 5 years for a period of 10 years
- Check the progress regarding the conditions and recommendations of the 2008 ; due essentially to the delay in the renewal of the Management Plan and several open questions, ***the European Diploma was suspended until the adoption of a new / revised Management Plan.***
- Regular annual reports were sent to the Secretariat and confirmation was received of the adoption of the new management plan in 2016.
- The Group of Specialists decided to carry out a new appraisal mission in Summer 2017. The mission took place from 5 to 7 July

- The Central Balkan National Park (CBNP) is one of the 3 well established national parks (NP) in Bulgaria.
- It covers an area of 72'021 ha and belongs to IUCN cat II. It is located in the central part of the Stara Planina mountain range
- It was designed in 1991 around 9 strict nature reserves established during the communist time and was reclassified as National Park in 1999
- The whole territory is "exclusive state property", which corresponds to the requirement for a National Park according to the Bulgarian legislation. In addition, a nature reserve and a managed reserve outside the NP boundaries are managed by the Park.
- The overall park area has not been modified since 2008 (nomination) and 2013 (appraisal) missions.



Bulgaria - National and Nature Parks



Central Balkan National Park

71'700 ha – IUCN Cat II



Nature Reserves and Biosphere reserves



Forests



Highlands meadows and pastures

Protection status

- National Park Cat II IUCN – reclassified in 1998
- Exclusive State Property
- PANParks Certificate (2003) – History!
- 9 strict nature reserve
- 4 nature reserves were designated as Biosphere Reserves; today the whole Park is part of a «modern» BR which includes surrounding areas
- Designated Natura 2000 – including surrounding area (2017)
- Since 2017 listed as component of a UNESCO World Heritage site ***Ancient and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe***

Natural values

- Central part of Stara Planina Mountains
 - Several peaks over 2'000m – Botev Peak 2'367m



- Tracian Plain on the S / Danube Plain on the N
- Limit between the Danube / Black Sea watershed and the Aegean Sea (Maritsa basin)

Vegetation

2/3 forests

- Forests:

- Broad leaf forests – few coniferous stands
- North slopes: well preserved beech forests
- South slopes: high diversity of broad leaf species



Vegetation

1/3 upland meadows

- Upland meadows:
 - gained on the forests – maintained by centuries of pasture (sheep, cows, horses)
 - many endemic species
 - large use of aromatic and medicinal plants



Fauna

- Rich fauna; suitable habitats for large carnivores: wolf, brown bear, etc.
- Forests rich in bird species; have been used, but almost no monospecific plantations
- Open areas: high invertebrate diversity; small mammals (souslik, etc.)



Socio-economic activities

- Sheep and cattle grazing: long tradition, intensive use.
- “Underuse” 1990 - 2007
- Rapid changes – EU Subsidies:
 - ➔ From 7’880 heads (2007) to 20’800 (2013)



Socio-economic activities

- Tourism: popular area for hiking / mountaineering. Good network of marked trails and mountain huts
- Eco-trails



Management – MP and strategic doc.

- Management plan prepared in the mid-90's (USAID and Bulgarian-Swiss programme)
- MP adopted in 2001 – 10 years period with potential revision every 4 years
- After a long delay, eventually renewed and adopted by the Council of Minister in 2016; completely in line with the previous one regarding the territory, the zoning and the Park management.
- Yearly action plans prepared by Park Directorate and submitted to the NNPS

Management – Staff and Budget

- Central Balkan NP Directorate: appointed by the MoEW for management and control; > 70 staff. **New director appointed.** Remarkable staff stability.
- Park divided in 7 sections with local offices; teams of 5-8 rangers
- Specialized experts attached to the Park Directorate (GIS, monitoring, etc.)
- Budgets just sufficient for current operation, remains quite stable; remain quite stable; additional money for large projects through the SEMEPA (State Enterprise for Management Environmental Activities).
- Legally the NP is not authorized to operate business. This has consequences namely on the maintenance of the buildings which do not directly serve to the Park management. Money collected by the park (fines, taxes for grazing, etc.) must go back to the SEMEPA accounting.
- Remarkable effort regarding the information and education activities. A new information center (Vezhen) is operational on the North side, and many new information tables have been installed at different locations.

Ideal Objectives of the Park

- Ideal Objective 1: To ensure the long-term conservation of the natural state, integrity and cohesion of natural elements and ecological processes
- Ideal Objective 2: To preserve forever the natural condition, integrity, unity and qualities of landscape
- Ideal Objective 3: To provide appropriate conditions and opportunities for recreation and contact with wild nature for the visitors of the park
- Ideal Objective 4: To ensure support of the local population and the general public for the purposes and objectives of the park

Park Governance

- **Advisory council:** 20 members – meet at least twice a year (municipalities, chalet managers, livestock owners, tourism sector, conservation organisations). Meets the legal requirement, but its efficiency is challenged by NGOs
- **Scientific Council:** 12 members (Academy, Natural History Museum, Universities).
→ council members have been associated to the preparation of the Management Plan
- Good relation with local communities – but pressure from local shepherds associations

Zoning of the Park

The first Management Plan of the park has determined *five functional zones*. The new management plan has just adapted the names of the zones to the actual legislation.

- Reserve Zone: highest level of protection. Preserve the natural character of environment and ecological processes (without human intervention); carrying out scientific and education activities
- Human Limited Impact Zone: territories adjacent to Reserve Zone and biological corridors
- Tourism Zone: tourist routes and facilities in the park and the small tourist infrastructure servicing them
- Buildings and Facilities Zone
- Multifunctional Zone: rich biological diversity and important habitats in the highland pastures and the centennial forests while allowing the reasonable use of natural resources (sustainable agriculture and tourism, herbs and berries collection, etc.)

Changes in the new MP

Some small changes of surfaces have been made.

- the Reserve Zone has remained the same,
- the Human Limited Impact Zone has been significantly enlarged, in order to create corridors between reserves,
- the Multifunctional Zone has been reduced. The effort to increase the ecological functionality of the reserves system has to be underlined.
- As a consequence, the summer grazing area has been reduced from 20 800 ha (not exact in the previous MP) to 16 741 ha. There is also some reduction in the number of animals; the trend is towards a reduction of the number of sheep and a slight increase in the number of cattle
- In 2017, the area for grazing (with issued permits for grazing it) is 15 561.2 ha.

Conclusion: In general, the new management plan is the direct continuation of the previous one, with a rather reinforced conservation status.

Threats

- ***Decrease of pasture pressure (1990 – 2007)***
 - ➔ ***Invasion of meadows by junipers and heath species***



- ***Since 2007: return to intensive grazing due to EU subsidies; pressure to increase the carrying capacity in the new MP. Study made to assess the 2007-2012 grazing impact. Reduction of grazing area in the new MP***

Other threats

- Fire
 - Forest fires: limited threat; consequences of climate changes?
 - Juniper burning in highland meadows: threat for adjacent forest; difficult to control
- Collection of berries and medicinal plants: concentrated on short periods and limited area; control difficult
- Climate changes – lack of water resources in the meadows (shepherds)
- Tourism in and around the park

The threat previously identified of resort construction close to the park borders has almost disappeared (economic reasons).

➔ Pressure from mass tourism development is low in CBNP, in opposition to the 2 other Bulgarian National Parks.

Specific issues regarding the Park Management

Mountain summer grazing

- introduction in 2007 of the EU subsidies for pastoralism in the National Parks of Bulgaria has dramatically changed the situation (increased interest for sheep and cattle grazing).
- Summer grazing permits are issued by the park. However, the control of the grazing (duration, number of animals, intensity) is difficult. The ideal carrying capacity should be the object of further studies and monitoring.
- Bulgaria has limited the distribution of compensatory payments to the territories of the national parks (State property status - easier to regulate).
➔ concentration of the summer grazing in the parks, with linked problems.

Buildings ownership and maintenance in the Park

- The management of the mountain chalets is an issue; some belong to the local branches of the Bulgarian Tourist Union (BTU), while other depend from the local governors.
- Maintenance issue; the park administration “controls” them, but cannot impose maintenance measures. On the other hand, the park does not take any benefits from their utilisation.

Buildings for pastoral activities

- Problem of buildings and other infrastructures for pastoral activities largely unsolved. Ownership status clarified, but maintenance remains a serious issue.
- Owners of buildings that have proven ownership can maintain/ repair the buildings. The main problem is with people - usually shepherds - who use old buildings and do not have a property document → they cannot maintain or improve them.
- Only constructions allowed by law are those directly linked to the Park management; the Park is not authorized to operate commercial activities, like renting infrastructures to shepherds.
- The owners or user of small dairies, cattle, sheep or shepherd's shelters are not authorized to proceed with reconstruction, enlargement or construction of new facilities. → use of plastic or metallic elements with negative visual impact and precarious conditions for milk processing.





Review of the 2013 Conditions and Recommendations

Conditions

- Finalize and approve a new management plan as soon as possible, with no alteration of the conservation regime in the different zones of the Park and with similar conservation conditions. In particular it should not allow an increase of the overall capacity for summer grazing and continue to forbid goat grazing in the Park as well as commercial timber.
 - ➔ ***The condition is fulfilled with the adoption of the new MP in 2016, with a conservation regime largely maintained and even reinforced in some cases***
- Change the regulations regarding the EU subsidies for the next period, starting 2014, in order to make them compatible with the new Management Plan.
 - ➔ ***The regulations for compensatory measures for grazing have been somewhat adapted and the process for permits is now well established. Overall the number of animals has not increased and horse grazing has been reduced.***
- Finalise the designation of Natura 2000 areas around the Park following the Bird and Habitat Directives, and adopt a Management Plan for the areas located in Stara Planina which must be coordinated with the Management Plan of the National Park
 - ➔ ***The designation has been done and the process has been partially completed with the designation of the Biosphere Reserve. However, the Natura 2000 zones still lack management plans, though this is an EU requirement.***

Recommendations

- Reestablish a Park directorate with a Director as soon as possible and secure a regular budget for the coming years
 - ➔ ***A park Director has been appointed after a competition held by the MoEW and a regular operational budget is secured. However, the duties will likely increase due to the 2 new international designations and appropriate human and financial resources should be allocated.***
- Take the necessary measures to harmonize the international designations before applying for a new category; in particular modify the design of the Biosphere Reserves to make them fully operational and compatible with the Sevilla strategy, or take the necessary steps to remove them from the UNESCO MaB list.
 - ➔ ***A Sevilla strategy compatible with the Biosphere Reserve has been accepted by the MaB committee and several components of Beech forests have been listed by the World Heritage Committee. However, there are still some governance issues that need to be addressed.***
- Modify the conditions for summer grazing in the park; make the necessary changes in order to allow long-term pasture concession and set up a programme for renovation of the corresponding infrastructures (shelters, dairies, etc.).
 - ➔ ***There are still no possibilities for long-term concessions, but the practice for renewal more or less guarantees the stability. The problem of summer grazing facilities remains unsatisfactory.***

- Provide new water sources or rehabilitate and increase the capacity of existing ones in order to avoid erosion caused by daily large concentrations of cattle around them. Study the possibility of controlling the growth of the Junipers without burning them.
 - ➔ ***Some water sources have been improved, but the problem remains. Burning Junipers is forbidden in the Park, but alternative techniques are very much time consuming. There is no easy solution, grazing pressure is not likely to control the growth of Junipers and other scrubs in the meadows.***
- Continue to support the ongoing study of the grazing impact in the Park and implement its conclusions and recommendations
 - ➔ ***In general, more management-orientated scientific research should take place in the park, but specific effort should be put on the impact of grazing and compensatory measures to stock breeders.***
- Undertake negotiations with the Bulgarian Tourist Union regarding the maintenance and improvement of the mountain huts; look at their ecological impact, especially regarding the energy and water supply, as well as the waste and waste water management.
 - ➔ ***The current legal framework does not offer real solutions for ensuring the maintenance of the large tourism infrastructure, nor regarding their visual and environmental impact. A solution should be envisaged at national level. This issue should be in the agenda of the Biosphere Reserve***

Conclusions, conditions and recommendations

The general ecological condition of the Park is good; in some areas the situation has improved; with the new management plan, the objectives have been clearly set and their implementation is ongoing.

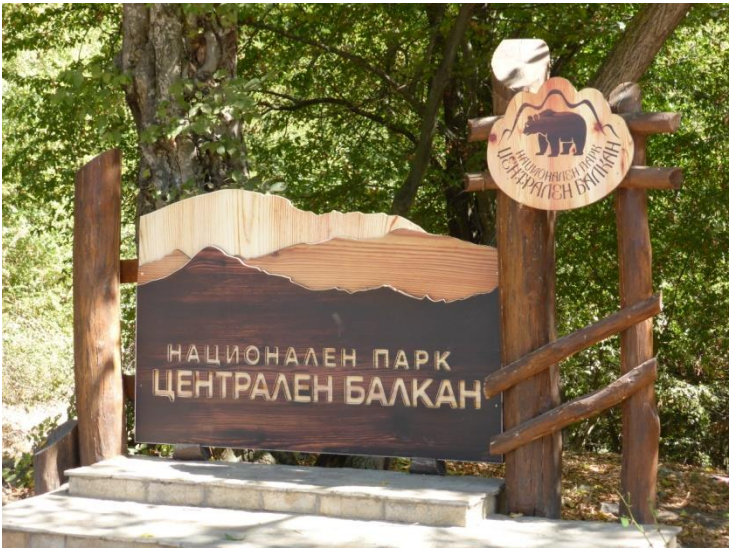
➔ We can therefore be much more confident regarding the park's development for the next decade and we estimate that the conditions for the renewal are largely fulfilled.

However, some of the issues still need a special attention and we suggest to attach the following recommendations to the renewal:

Recommendations attached to the Renewal

1. Implement the new Management Plan and in particular control the protective measures for the different zones. After 5 years, make a comprehensive mid-term assessment and revise the relevant parts of the plan as appropriate.
2. Take measures to better control poaching in the park and implement as soon as possible the Strategic guidelines for the development of the security and control in Central Balkan National Park which includes a section for poaching prevention. In particular, strictly limit the road development and systematically control their usage.
3. Maintain a strict control of the grazing permits and forbid any increase of grazing animals. Maintain the pressure to reduce grazing by horses, which are much more difficult to control, and improve the number of water sources and their access.
4. Produce a comprehensive impact monitoring of the grazing; in general, allocate the necessary funding for more management-orientated scientific research and studies.

5. Propose solutions at national level for improving the infrastructure related to mountain pastures, like animal and shepherds' shelters and dairy facilities. Improve their visual and ecological impact, as well as their sanitary conditions for dairy production.
6. Explore solutions for increasing the role of the National Park in the management of the tourist infrastructure (chalets) inside the park, including their maintenance, the control of their ecological impact and their use as information points.
7. Use the newly established Biosphere Reserve to reinforce the role of the Public Advisory Council as link between the National Park, the municipalities and civil society organisations around the park. Allocate adequate financial and human resources to fulfil the tasks and commitments taken at international level with the designation of the park as part of Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage property and establish, as soon as possible, corresponding management structures.
8. As soon as possible, prepare and adopt management plans for the Natura 2000 areas adjacent to the Park.



Thank you

