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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
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Standing Committee

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REPORT

**ON THE SPOT EXPERT APPRAISAL OF THE
CENTRAL BALKAN NATIONAL PARK**

(BULGARIA)

6-7 July 2017

*Document prepared
by Mr Pierre Galland (Switzerland)*

INTRODUCTION

The European Diploma was awarded in 2009 to the Central Balkan National Park (CBNP) with conditions and recommendations. An appraisal mission was organized in 2013 in order to assess the opportunity to renew the Diploma after 5 years for a period of 10 years. It was the opportunity to check the progress regarding the conditions and recommendations of the 2008 appraisal, as well as to identify successes, recurrent issues and new problems. 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. After receiving confirmation 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. It was very well organised by the Park authorities; the expert could visit a few areas of the park to discuss in the field the most significant concerns expressed in the previous reports. The expert was given a broad overview of the new management plan and received satisfactory answers to his numerous questions.

The expert wishes to express his gratitude to the NP management and to all the partners met during the 2 days in the field. The complete agenda and the list of people met are attached as annex to this report.

NB: The annual reports always refer to the 2008 and not to the 2013 conditions and recommendation, for unknown reason. Several of them are obsolete, the problem having been solved before the 2013 mission.

THE CENTRAL BALKAN NATIONAL PARK AND ITS NEW MANAGEMENT PLAN

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, which runs from West to East from the Serbian border to the Black sea coast, parallel to the Danube. It was designed in 1991 around 9 strict nature reserves established during the communist time and was reclassified as National Park in 1999, following the adoption of the Bulgarian Protected Areas Act (PAA) which divides protected areas in categories taken from the IUCN management categories system. 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. A detailed description of the Park can be found in the 2 previous missions report. In this report, we shall comment on only the changes which occurred during the last few years, especially within the newly adopted Management Plan (MP).

The new management Plan 2016 - 2025

After several years and some delay allowing for scientific discussion and smooth public hearing, a new management plan, replacing the MP adopted in 2001 and valid for 10 years, was adopted by the Council of Ministers in March 2016. It is completely in line with the previous one regarding the territory, the zoning and the Park management.

Ideal Objectives of the Park for the period of the new MP

Ideal Objective 1: To ensure the long-term conservation of the natural state, integrity and cohesion of natural elements and ecological processes in the park.

Ideal Objective 2: To preserve forever the natural condition, integrity, unity and qualities of landscape and of the other abiotic components of the park.

Ideal Objective 3: To provide appropriate conditions and opportunities for recreation in and contact with wild nature for the visitors of the park, in a way that complies with the conservation importance of the park as well as opportunities to deliver educational and scientific objectives.

Ideal Objective 4: To ensure the informed support for the purposes and objectives of the park of the local population and the general public.

For each of these ideal objectives, a list of primary long-term objectives has been adopted.

Zoning of the Park

The first Management Plan of the park has determined five functional zones, as follows: Reserve Zone, Human Limited Impact Zone, Tourism Zone, Buildings and Facilities Zone, and Multifunctional Zone. The new management plan has just adapted the name of the zones to the actual legislation.

- Reserve Zone

Reserve Zone has the highest level of protection. Pursuant to Article 16, Paragraph 2 of the PAA, the zone is managed to: preserve the natural character of environment and ecological processes (without human intervention); carrying out scientific and education activities and/or ecological monitoring; preservation of the genetic resources; preservation of natural habitats and of the populations of the species inhabiting them (especially the protected, rare, endemic and relict species); development of a network of ecosystems and endangered habitats that are representative for Bulgaria and Europe. It includes the territories of the nine reserves existing in the boundaries of the park (Boatin, Tsarichina, Kozya Stena, Steneto, Severen Dzhendem, Peeshti Skali, Sokolna, Dzhendema and Stara Reka). (Annex No 3.1.1.); furthermore, pursuant to Article 16, Paragraph 1 of the same Act, samples of natural ecosystems, including typical and/or remarkable wild plant and animal species and their habitats are declared Reserves. The total area of Zone Reserves is 20,019.6 ha

- Human limited impact zone

HLI Zone comprises territories adjacent to Reserve Zone, which if adequately managed and because of their location and qualities could reduce the anthropogenic pressure on the reserves; these could also serve as biological corridors between individual reserve territories to form an unabridged, non-fragmented territory, preserving the natural ecological processes, habitats and species.

It has the objective to prevent and limit the adverse human impact over the Reserve Zone. The Human Limited Impact Zone provides conditions for maintenance of the biological integrity and the natural biological exchange of species. A limited use of the natural resources is acceptable within the zone.

The total area of the Zone is 25,414.30 ha.

- Multifunctional Zone

The Multifunctional Zone comprises territories of rich biological diversity (a large number of species, communities, and habitats), regions important for the life-cycle of species of conservation concern (nest and dens, feeding grounds, watering points, mating display sites, wintering grounds, etc.) located in the highland pastures and the centennial forests with their inherent biodiversity.

The main purpose of this zone is to preserve the natural conditions of and processes in the communities, ecosystems and natural habitats, while allowing the reasonable use of natural resources by:

- ensuring implementation of the necessary maintenance, supporting, regulating of recreational activities concerning species, habitats and abiotic natural objects;
- ensuring conditions for a traditional yet environmentally friendly use of natural resources in predefined areas, providing opportunities for environmentally friendly agricultural practices and generating long-term benefits from sustainable use of natural resources through regulated grazing and haymaking, collection of herbs, wild berries and mushrooms for personal and commercial use, collecting firewood and harvesting timber, and transit of livestock for grazing via treks.

The total area of the Zone is 28,019.29 ha

- Sustainable Tourism Zone

Sustainable Tourism Zone has been defined by the combination of the tourist routes and facilities in the park and the small tourist infrastructure servicing them. The total length of the tourist trails

around and within the park comes to 940 km out of which 580 km are located within the national park. The Central Balkan National Park Directorate (CBNPD) is responsible for maintaining the marking and the optimal condition of the routes in the park. The Sustainable Tourism Zone comprises:

- A. The paths (including two-meter strip on both sides), along which the hiking summer and winter trails are traced, excluding these crossing the reserves that remain in Reserve Zones
- B. The bivouacs – sites designated for camping in the wild using one's own equipment
- C. The cultural and historic heritage sites and the zone of up to 100 m around them, (in case of roads that are cultural and historic heritage sites, the coverage is five meters along each side)
- D. Fireplaces with short-term resting facilities (fireplaces, alcoves, benches, water fountains etc.)
- E. Specialised sites for and routes of interpretation and education activities (eco-trails and interpretative routes, including information and interpretative boards, maps, info-graphics, etc.)
- F. The sites and routes for alternative tourism and sports
- G. The sites for cultural and other traditional events (equipped and marked for this purpose)
- H. The main and side entrances to the park

Its total area is 180 ha.

- Infrastructure Zone

The zone includes the existing capital construction facilities and their adjacent side and technical infrastructure, the land on which they are built, and specific territory separated around them, tailored to the individual nature of the site and statutory easements (Collection Infrastructure) as follows:

- A. Facilities and CBNPD's infrastructure built or envisaged for construction for the purposes of: managing the park, servicing the tourists, preventing and fighting fires and other disasters
- B. Individual buildings and complexes of buildings servicing the tourist flow, the use of the resources in the park; buildings and complexes of other agencies or private persons
- C. The roads of categories 1, 2, 3 and 4 and the designated parking lots
- D. Transmission facilities, canals, forest clearings, tunnels, lifts and cargo cableways; E. Water catchments, water supply networks, water reservoirs etc., including the facilities of Belts I of the respective sanitary protection zones, sewage or water treatment facilities;
- F. Buildings and infrastructure servicing HPS or small HPS;
- G. Buildings and facilities servicing broadcasting and telecommunications;
- H. Engineering infrastructure along the tourist routes.

The total zone area of Zone Infrastructure is approximately 32.08 ha

Changes in the new MP

The description of the zones had mainly remained the same. Some small changes of surfaces have been made. While the Reserve Zone has remained the same, the Human Limited Impact Zone has been significantly enlarged, in order to create corridors between reserves, while 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 ha¹. 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, while the number of animals and the grazing prescriptions have remained the same.

¹ 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. Some of the previously identified issues remain still not completely solved, but some of them can be addressed through the annual operation plans. They also not always depend on the NP authority of the National Nature Protection Services, like the grazing which depends on the Ministry of Agriculture.

INTERNATIONAL DESIGNATIONS

Four of the 9 strict reserves are on the world list of the UNESCO MaB Biosphere Reserves since the early 80's. Despite several warnings from the MaB committee, nothing had been done for more than one decade in order to implement the Sevilla strategy. Eventually under the pressure of the MaB, namely the adoption of the exit strategy, the Bulgarian authorities have sent in 2016 an application for "Sevilla compatible" modern ("real") Biosphere reserves. The CBNP is one of them; it included the former Biosphere Reserves (4) which now constitute, together with the other strict reserves, the core area. The NP constitutes the buffer zone, while a relatively large surrounded area has been designated as transition zone. The nomination presented by the Bulgarian State Party has been officially accepted in 2017.

Several well-preserved beech forests have been nominated as component of the newly extended Beech Forest World Heritage property. The new extended Beech Forest property has been inscribed on the World Heritage List in July 2017 by the World Heritage Committee.

The Park and its surrounding area is part of the Natura 2000 network; however, the respective sites do not have yet a management plan. The drafting of MPs for these areas adjacent to the NP should be a priority in order to ensure a buffer function around the park.

The park is holding since 2003 the PANParks certificate, which was renewed in 2010. This label has disappeared because of the bankrupt of the PANParks organization.

Consequences on the park management

The newly acquired international designations should certainly give an added value to the park. Some management issues could be addressed in particular through the management of the Biosphere Reserve. However, there are no specific management bodies established for these 2 newly acquired designations, and of course no corresponding budgets. It is expected that the CBNP administration will be asked to manage these 2 designations, but without additional human and financial resources.

PARK MANAGEMENT

The Park is managed by a team of more than 70 people with a Directorate located in Gabrovo, on the Northern side of the mountain, outside of the Park territory. A director has been appointed a few years ago; there is a remarkable stability among park employees, especially in the higher positions. The regular budgets remain quite stable, though an increase, namely in relation with the new tasks, should be allocated – see above. In addition, the park regularly receives money for large projects through the SEMEPA (State Enterprise for Management Environmental Activities). According to the law, 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 – see below. All the money collected by the park (fines, taxes for grazing, etc.) has to go back to the SEMEPA accounting. A remarkable effort has been done regarding the information and education activities. A new information center is operational in the Vezhen Chalet, on the North side of the park, and many new information tables have been installed at different locations.

There is a Public Advisory Council comprising 20 members (municipalities, chalet managers, livestock owners, tourism sector, conservation organisations) which meets twice a year. While this is fulfilling the legal requirements, there are some questions about its efficiency, namely from the NGO sector. In addition, there is a Scientific Advisory Council of 12 members, whose chair is a member of the Public Advisory Council.

SPECIFIC ISSUES REGARDING THE PARK MANAGEMENT

Mountain summer grazing

Since 2007, the introduction of the EU subsidies for pastoralism in the National Parks of Bulgaria has dramatically changed the situation. A renewed interest for sheep and cattle grazing was observed. Summer grazing permits are issued by the park. However, the control of the grazing (duration, number of animals, intensity) is difficult. Therefore, the ideal carrying capacity is hard to determine and should be the object of further studies and comprehensive monitoring.

Bulgaria has limited the distribution of compensatory payments to the territories of the national parks, mainly because they are State property and therefore easier to regulate. This has the consequence of a concentration of the summer grazing in the parks, with all the linked problems this brings.

Studies made in recent years do not show dramatic signs of overgrazing or erosion, except in some areas close to water sources. While the overall regulatory framework was not significantly modified during the last few years, some adjustments have been made in order to reduce the pressure. The ban on goat grazing has been confirmed; the horse grazing is significantly reduced and a certain stability among the livestock breeder is observed, in relation to the practice of renewal of the permits to the same owners providing that there are no infringements of the regulations.

Buildings ownership and maintenance in the Park

The problem of the buildings and other infrastructures for pastoral activities remains largely unsolved. While the status or ownership of most of the building is now clarified, their 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, thus cannot maintain or improve them. The only constructions allowed by law are those directly linked to the Park management; moreover, 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. This leads to use of plastic or metallic elements which have a negative visual impact and, in some cases, forces the sheep breeders to process the milk in precarious conditions. Some solutions to these problems, including some legal adjustments, should be elaborated at national level and do not depend currently on the park administration.

The management of the mountain chalets is also an issue; some of them belong to the local branches of the Bulgarian Tourist Union (BTU), while other, for historical reasons, and depend on the local governors. Their maintenance is in some cases an 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.

Poaching and road infrastructures

The Park is responsible for the road maintenance within the Park. While some roads are necessary, like transit roads and access to Botev peak communication station, they are difficult to control and offer access to remote zones for the poachers which are still a problem for the park. The development of the road network should be severely limited in the Park territory and the use of the roads strictly controlled.

Tourism in and around the park

The threat previously identified with the construction of resort areas close to the park borders seems to have disappeared, mainly due to the economic difficulties. Pressure from mass tourism development is therefore extremely low in CBNP, in opposition to the 2 other Bulgarian NPs.

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 since the last visit. 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 special attention and we suggest to attach the following recommendations to the renewal:

Recommendations

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- Produce a comprehensive impact monitoring of the grazing; in general, allocate the necessary funding for more management-orientated scientific research and studies.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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 fulfill 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.
- As soon as possible, prepare and adopt management plans for the Natura 2000 areas adjacent to the Park

Reference:

Ministry of Environment and Water

CENTRAL BALKAN NATIONAL PARK MANAGEMENT PLAN 2016 – 2025

Approved with Decree № 195/24.03.2016 of the Council of Ministers

Annex

PROGRAMME OF THE MISSION WITH PARTICIPANTS

CENTRAL BALKAN NATIONAL PARK - APPRAISAL VISIT FOR THE RENEWAL OF THE EUROPEAN DIPLOMA

05.07.2017

20:30 – departure from Sofia airport to the village of Ribaritsa, Municipality of Teteven;

06.07.2017

08:00 – breakfast;

09:00 – departure to Boluvanya grazing region, park section Teteven (*head of park section – inspector Stoyan Hristov*);

10:30 – a short walk through the Boluvanya grazing region – the main grazing area for park section Teteven; meeting with stakeholders and discussion on the use of pasture resources in the park; // *We visited Bratanitsa pasture and Letishteto locality – view point for Ravna reka and Boluvanya pastures. On Bratanitsa pasture we met Krastyo Krastev – livestock owner and herdsman, and his wife. On Letishteto locality we met another herdsman – Krastyo’s helper.*

11:30 – departure to Vezhen visitor center and Vezhen chalet;

12:30 – lunch;

13:30 – visiting Vezhen center; a brief presentation on the progress in complying with the conditions and recommendations which were attached to the Award and to the Appraisal report from 2014; discussion with park’s employees about the fulfilment of the conditions and recommendations of the EDPA;

15:30 – departure to the village of Drashkova polyana, Municipality of Apriltsi;

18:30 – accommodation at family hotel in the village of Drashkova polyana;

19:30 – traditional dinner with local dishes in the family hotel with *Anton Stanchev* – the Director of the Biodiversity and Control Department (during this period the Director of the CBNPD will attend the UNESCO 41st session of the Committee) and experts of the Park Directorate. // *Here we met Velichka Gankovska – a member of Public Advisory Council representative of local tourism businesses, and her husband – Encho Gankovski.*

07.07.2017

07:30 – breakfast;

08:00 – departure to the town of Apriltsi where is located the office of park section Stokite (*head of park section – inspector Pavel Kolev*);

09:20 – arrival at town of Apriltsi – the office of park section Stokite;

09:30 – departure – field trip;

09:50 – short visit to Complex for interpretation *The Forest*, located on the park’s border; start of short trip from Mazaneto locality to Bazov dyal locality and Pleven chalet;

11:00 – visit in the Pleven chalet’s area and pasture *Bazov dyal* – place popular for tourism and livestock grazing; meeting with *Mladen Yermiev* – member of Public Advisory council, representative of organization of local livestock breeders and owner of flock, grazing in the park.

12:15 – lunch;

13:00 – departure to Sofia airport;

16:45 – arrival at Sofia airport.

