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AND NATURAL HABITATS

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**REPORT
OF THE VISIT OF THE INDEPENDENT EXPERT
TO THE PIATRA CRAIULUI NATIONAL PARK
(Romania)**

September 2022

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1. Introduction

The European Diploma for Protected Areas was awarded to the Piatra Craiului National Park (PCNP) in 2006¹ and renewed in 2011². The last renewal was due on 27th September 2021, but the validity of the Diploma was extended³, on an exceptional basis (Covid-19), till 28th March 2024. To assess the opportunity to renew the Diploma an on-the-spot appraisal visit was undertaken in 2022.

The appraisal was organised through an on-line preparatory meeting and a field visit.

2nd August 2022: online preparatory meeting: Zoran Acimov (Director of the Retezat National Park) and Mircea Vergheleț (Director of the Piatra Craiului National Park), Marc Hory (Council of Europe), Peter Skoberne (expert).

28th – 30th September 2022: on-the-spot visit to the PCNP

Field excursions (see Fig. 1) and meetings:

- PCNP Headquarters near Zărnești – meeting with the PCNP staff: Mircea Verghelet (director), Radu Vulcu (Chief ranger and Tourism), Alina Szabo (biologist), Constantin Vezeanu (IT and GIS)
- Northern part of the PCNP (Zărneștilos Gorges, Cabana Curmătura, Bârsa valley: Cabana Plaiul Foli),

¹ Resolution CM/ResDip(2006)10 on the award of the European Diploma of Protected Areas to the Piatra Craiului National Park (Romania) - <http://rm.coe.int/native/09000016805d79b7>

² Resolution CM/ResDip(2011)2 on the renewal of the European Diploma of Protected Areas awarded to the Piatra Craiului National Park (Romania) - <http://rm.coe.int/native/09000016805b84b9>

³ Resolution CM/ResDip(2021)3 on the extension of the European Diploma for Protected Areas awarded to the Hautes Fagnes Nature Reserve (Belgium), Ekenäs Archipelago National Park (Tammisaari) (Finland), Seitsemien National Park (Finland), Camargue National Reserve (France), Vanoise National Park (France), Bayerischer Wald National Park (Germany), Siebengebirge Nature Reserve (Germany), Gran Paradiso National Park (Italy), Piatra Craiului National Park (Romania), Kuşçenneti National Park (Turkey) and Peak District National Park (United Kingdom) - <http://rm.coe.int/native/0900001680a3156d>

- Braşov (County Council vicepresident – Szenner Zoltan-Huba, Alina Ioana Szasz – Manager Public; Head of Braşov County Environmental Guard – Mircea Paraschiv, Carpathia Foundation – European Wilderness Reserve – Mihail Zotta, Conservation Director),
- Zărneşti (Mayors' Office – Mayor Alexandru Igrisan, Local Forest Administration - Alin Toader, Local farm and restaurant - Razvan Munteanu);
- In Zarnesti the meeting was also attended by Robert Pache, Protected Areas Unit from the National Forest Administration – Bucharest;
- Southern and Western part of the PCNP (Măgura, Peştera, Sirnea, Saua Curmatura Groapelor, Poiana Grind, Peştera Dambovicioara (tourist cave), Podu Dâmboviţei, Dâmbovita valley, Cabana Garofita, Marele Grohotiş, Cabana Dragoş Bajan.

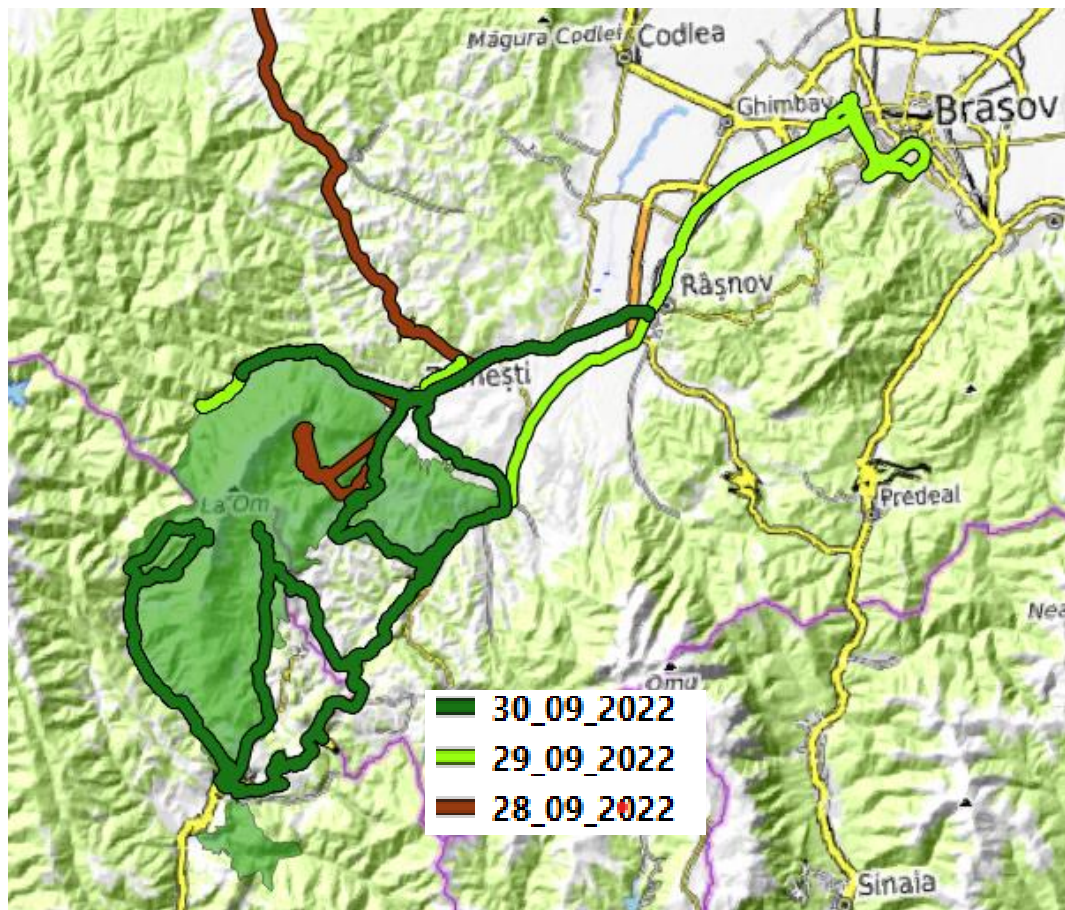


Figure 1: Visited parts of the PCNP during the mission

The 2022 annual report⁴, the last appraisal report⁵ and the National Park home page⁶ were used as basic source of information.

Acknowledgement:

I would like to thank the organisers of the visit, in particular the director, Mr Mircea Verghelet, and his team, as well as all I met for the helpful, competent, enthusiastic and very open assistance during my assessment mission.

⁴ <https://rm.coe.int/66-romania-piatra-craiului-national-park/1680a9cc48>

⁵ Lethier, H., 2011: *Piatra Craiului (Romania) Expert Report*, Council of Europe, 2011, document T-PVS/DE (2011) 6 - <http://rm.coe.int/convention-on-the-conservation-of-european-wildlife-and-natural-habita/1680746969>

⁶ <https://www.pcr.ai.ro/>

2. General description

The Piatra Craiului National Park (PCNP) is situated in the Southern part of the Carpathian Mountains. Piatra Craiului is an impressive calcareous ridge built mostly of Mesozoic limestone and conglomerates. It is oriented more or less North-South, sharply dividing valley of Bârsa and Eastern slopes (watershed). The main ridge is relatively narrow and sharp. Especially on the Western side, limestone walls are almost vertical, ending at the bottom with screes. The highest peak is Bacului Peak (2,238 m). Limestone is placed over crystalline basement. At this contact line there are many karstic springs feeding torrents that carved deep and spectacular gorges on the Eastern side. About 300 caves are identified in the limestone area, as well as other karst phenomena (dolinas, karrens). There are many typical structures of Pleistocene glaciation.

There are four vegetation levels in relation to climatic and edaphic conditions:

- Middle mountain level (650-1,200 m): beech and spruce forests (mainly planted in the past), semi-natural grasslands;
- Upper mountain level (1,200-1,700 m): natural spruce forests, pastures, saxicolous and scree vegetation;
- Subalpine level (1,700-2,000 m): shrub vegetation (*Rhododendron myrtifolium*, *Pinus mugo*) and alpine heaths;
- Alpine level (2,000-2283 m): alpine grasslands, rocky vegetation.

The difference between vegetation belts at the Easter and Western side is about 200 m due to climatic conditions.

The whole massif is in relatively natural condition. The visit of the core area is limited to marked trails and several shelters. Economic activities are only forestry and grazing, both regulated through the management plan.

The main asset is that the ecosystems are in good condition and consequently flora and fauna are the richness and in good condition. From a human perspective there are some outstanding features. I would just like to mention the presence of large carnivores (brown bear, wolf, lynx) and the rich bat fauna. The most attractive plant is local endemic Pink (*Dianthus callizonus*), the symbol of the PCNP. More details on habitats, fauna and flora are well presented in the last appraisal report⁷ and in the Park field guide⁸.

The total area of the park is 14 766 ha, with 53% ha in Braşov County and 47% in Arges County.

The main national park entrance points are Zărneşti in the Northern part (through Bârsa Valley and Zărneşti Gorges) and Podul Dâmbovitei in the South (for Dâmbovita and Dâmbovicioara valleys).

Logo of the PCNP:



⁷ <http://rm.coe.int/convention-on-the-conservation-of-european-wildlife-and-natural-habita/1680746969>

⁸ Pop, O. G. (ed.), 2015: Piatra Craiului National Park – Guide of European and National Protected Species and Habitats. The Administration of the Piatra Craiului National Park, Ars Docendi, Bucureşti.

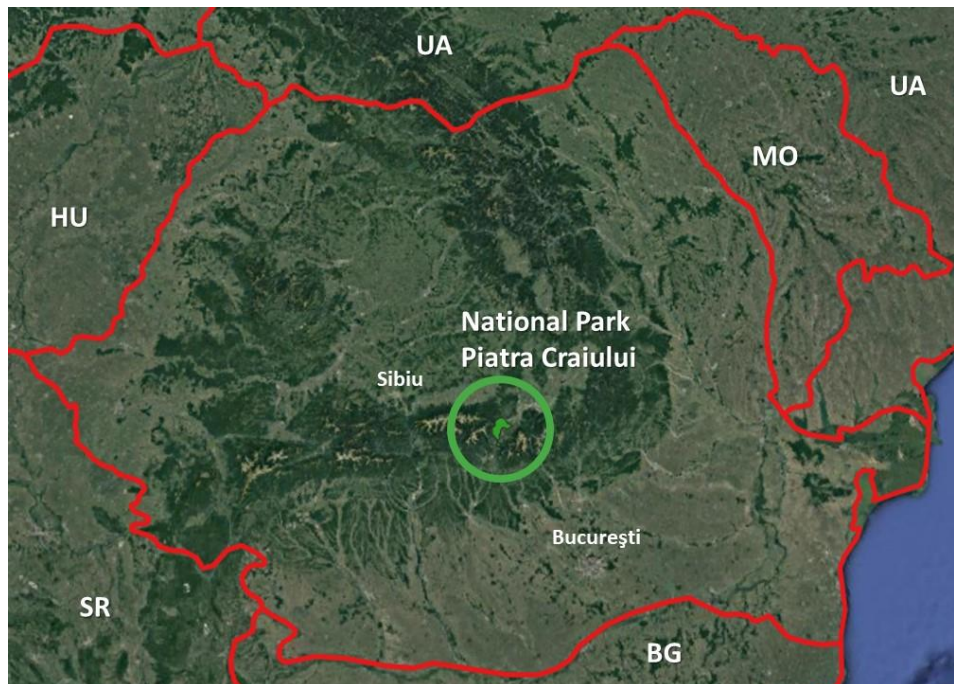


Figure 2: General situation of the National Park Piatra Craiului.

3. European interest

The PCNP is significant for the conservation of European mountain forest, subalpine and alpine diversity in the central South Carpathians due to valuable natural assets and efficient management.

The European Diploma was given to the PCNP for its: “outstanding geological formations, spectacular landscapes, very high biodiversity, unique local architectural traditions and other valuable cultural aspects and moreover, will improve significantly the representativity of the European Diploma areas, in terms of biological and landscape diversity in Europe.”⁹

The main attributes are presented in the section 2. As they were no major activities changing assets of the PCNP the exceptional significance is not questioned.

The European interest is in addition proven by the designation of Natura 2000 sites: ROSCI0194 Piatra Craiului (2007) and ROSPA0165 Piatra Craiului (2016).

Conclusion:

The Piatra Craiului National Park is of exceptional European significance and importance for the conservation of biological diversity in the South Carpathians.

4. Legal protection status and history

The Piatra Craiului Massif became a natural reserve on 28 March 1938 (Journal of the Council of Ministers No. 645), with an initial surface of only 440 ha. The Council of Ministers made this decision "due to the unique nature of the massif where there are rare species, such as *Dianthus callizonus*, *Hesperis nivea*, *Minuartia transilvanica*, *Leontopodium alpinum*, and also for the beauty of the landscape."

⁹ <http://rm.coe.int/native/09000016805d79b7>

In 1971, the protected area expanded to 3,570 ha by declaring several natural reserves in the counties of Braşov and Argeş, and then a project was set up to establish a national park.

In 1990 Piatra Craiului was declared a national park by the Order no. 7 of the Ministry of Environment at that time, along with 12 other parks in Romania. The total area of the Piatra Craiului National Park is 14,766 ha, of which 7,807.5 ha in the county of Braşov and 6,958.5 ha in the Argeş County¹⁰.

In 1999 the PCNP administration was established with the help of the GEF Biodiversity Conservation Management Project.

According to the Management Plan there are 4 management zones¹¹:

- Zone A: **Strictly protection zone** (ZPS – IUCN: Ia) - strict reserve character, no human intervention (6,292 ha), it includes four karst areas (Zărneşti, Dâmbovicioarei, Brustureţului and Dâmboviţei Gorges). Within this zone there are some areas where grazing is forbidden (515.5 ha);
- Zone B: **Integral protection zone** (ZPI) (104 ha) – some pastures are included in this zone;
- Zone C: **Sustainable conservation zone** (ZCD) - only activities complying with the National Park legislation can be done. Most of the forest and pasture areas are included (7,034 ha) are included in this zone;
- Zone D: **Sustainable development zone** (ZDD) – rural populated areas of Măgura, Peştera and valleys. Traditional activities of local communities, including constructions, are allowed in accordance with the Management Plan.

¹⁰ <https://www.pcr.ai.ro/location>

¹¹ Pop, O. G. (ed.), 2015: Piatra Craiului National Park – Guide of European and National Protected Species and Habitats. The Administration of the Piatra Craiului National Park, Ars Docendi, Bucureşti.

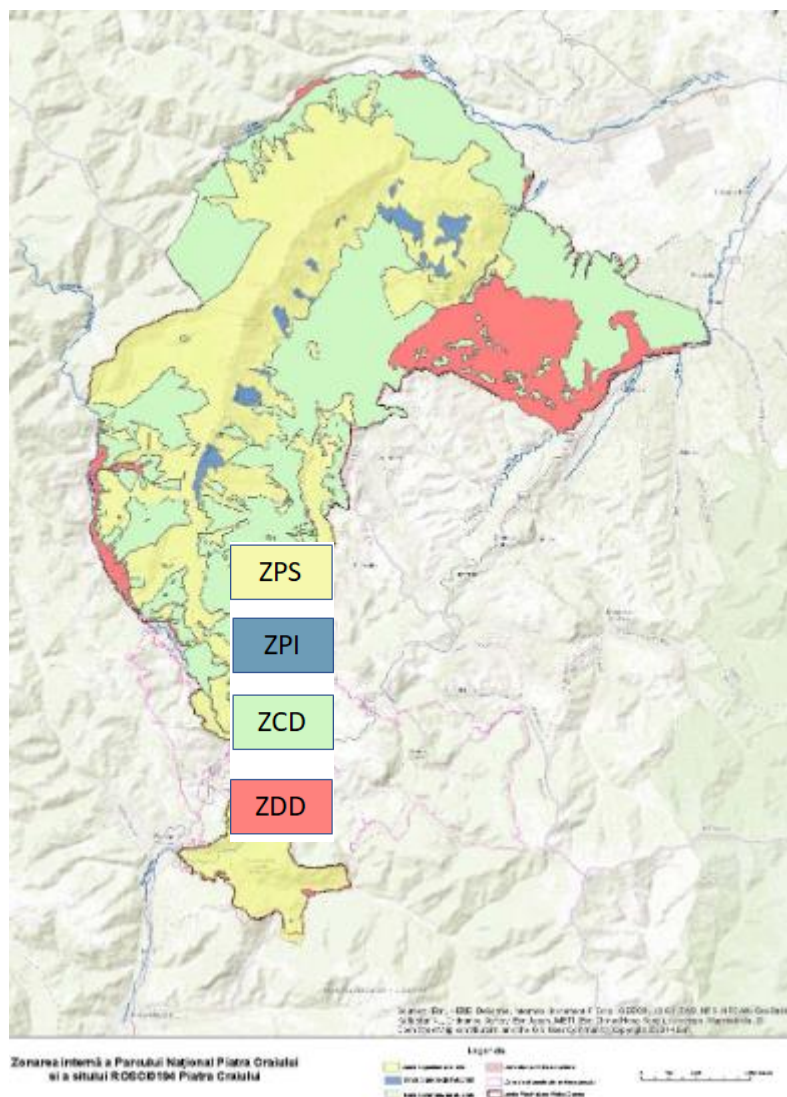


Figure 3: Internal zonation of the PCNP (Source: Management Plan - <https://www.pcrain.ro/files/pdf/Plan%20Management.pdf>)

There is additional legislation that supports conservation of forest at national level, including in protected areas. This is the Romanian National Catalogue of Virgin and Quasi-virgin Forests, a tool to identify, register and protect valuable forests in Romania. The intention of this legislation and catalogue is to ensure strict protection of residuals of virgin and quasi-virgin forests.

The legal frame and methodology were prepared between 2012-2016. However, there are a lot of difficulties in the implementation which lead to some disappointment within conservation circles. The listing process is relatively long, based on technical criteria, but for the final decision, economic and social reasons are considered. In the first-place the ownership is crucial. For state property forests it is easier to get the agreement, whereas for private or commune forests, discussions usually focus on compensation. In PCNP 1700 ha of forest are officially included in the Catalogue.

Conclusion:

Existing legal regulations are considered as a solid basis for the future conservation of the Diploma holding area.

5. Management

Institutional arrangements

The PCNP Administration was established in 1999 as a result of a capacity building Global Environment Facility (GEF) – World Bank project. It is a subunit with legal personality of the Romsilva National Forest Administration. At central level, the activity of the administration is coordinated by the Service of Protected Areas and Forestry Education within the Romsilva, a service that coordinates other 21 national and natural parks in Romania.

The PCNP staff consists of 13 persons: the director, an accountant, a biologist, a manager for communities, procurement and investment, an IT and GIS specialist, a chief ranger and tourist responsible and 7 rangers¹².

The work of the administration is supervised by the Scientific Council, whose members are the researchers and representatives of the Romanian Academy - the Commission for the Protection of Nature Monuments, the Ministry of the Environment through the Environmental Protection Agencies, the National Forests Administration and of the different universities in the country. The Scientific Council meets twice a year in ordinary or extraordinary sessions, whenever necessary.

Stakeholders whose activity is carried out within the park boundaries or whose activity is directly influenced by the activity of the park administration, are represented in the Consultative Council of the Piatra Craiului National Park. The Consultative Council meets every six months and aims to represent and harmonise the interests of the stakeholders. Both Councils membership is approved by the Ministry of Environment through a ministerial order.

The mission of the PCNP is the protection of the natural and traditional values from Piatra Craiului National Park for the enjoyment and benefit of the future generation¹³.

The Management Plan

The first Management Plan was adopted in 2005, the second in 2013, whereas the revised management plan¹⁴ was approved in February 2020 through the Ministry Order No. 296/21.02.2020.

The plan is based on intensive field studies financed by the project “The revision of Piatra Craiului National Park’s Management Plan”, co-financed by EU cohesion funds. The draft was intensively discussed by stakeholders. The Plan, includes management of both the SCI Natura 2000 site, as well. Currently PCNP is implementing another project for the revision of the management plan, which will include also studies and provisions for the recently created SPA overlapping with the park area.

Financial matters

There is an administration contract with National Forest Administration (Romsilva) that secures 90% of the national park budget. The remaining 10% comes from the national park administration efforts (visitor fee, selling products at the Visitor Center, guiding fees, taxes for the approval of documentation etc.). The total budget is 1,7 mil. lei and the staff salaries 1,4 mil. lei.

The core financing is stable and secures regular work of the staff as well regular maintenance but no additional investments. For all additional activities, additional financial sources will be needed, as for the regular monitoring, maintenance and running of the headquarters building and the Visitor Center.

Nature conservation and natural resources management

The PCNP Administration is doing excellent work.

¹² <https://www.pcr.ai.ro/pcrai-team>

¹³ <https://www.pcr.ai.ro/mission>

¹⁴ <https://www.pcr.ai.ro/files/pdf/Plan%20Management.pdf>

The PCNP Administration is responsible for the management of both Natura 2000 areas. This task added some new orientation to the staff work. In the Management Plan conservation status and measures for species and habitats are well defined.

There are no people living in the core area and the main management goal is non-intervention. This area can be visited on marked trails, only. Small refuges and good physical condition are limiting the number of visitors. Road entrances closed to public are closed with barriers, supervised by cameras and violations prosecuted.

There are several visitors' hotspots (like Zărnești Gorge) where existing infrastructures are not adapted to the number of visitors in peak days/hours (parking places, toilets, litter...). The PCNP Administration should consider with local communities and tourist organisations ways for improving the management of these places.

In the conservation zones, forestry and grazing are regulated in accordance with the Management Plan. There is a continuous process of cooperation of the PCNP Administration and local communities to find a compromise between pasture and nature conservation goals.

Forestry activities are carried out in accordance with forestry plans. The goal of PCNP Administration is to enlarge areas of non-intervention forests, but this is closely related to the ownership. Private and commune forests in the conservation zone can be utilised sustainably. In these cases, non-intervention can be implemented through a compensation system.

There are no more large-scale clear cuts in the PCNP. The studies of clear cuts of spruce forests in 2004 and 2005 show that natural regeneration is very successful. These experiences will be used in gradual replacement of spruce stands with natural broad-leaved trees, as this is a general orientation of the PCNP policy.

A good synergy exists with the Carpathian Foundation which purchased 16,000 ha of forest land for conservation in the national park surroundings. 2,500 ha of this surface are situated inside the national park. The foundation purchased also 2 game management areas in the national park surroundings and the main goal is the conservation of game species.

The PCNP assets are very attractive for tourism, at least at the county level. The tourist facilities are developing in the Park surroundings, whereas within the Park, even in the development zone, the rules are very restrictive. The PCNP Administration has very good relations and co-operation with the Brașov County Council and tourist organisations. They support each other and work together in different projects (e. g. activities within the Carpathian Convention). They are encouraging small scale quality tourism based on local capacities and gastronomy supporting local agriculture and market.

In general, the PCNP Administration is very present at local and county level, being a respected partner in shaping development of the region.

Conclusion:

Management is in place and is operational.

6. Review of the condition and recommendations of the Resolution CM/ResDip(2011)2 on the renewal of the European Diploma of Protected Areas awarded to the Piatra Craiului National Park (Romania):

Condition: Complete the process of preparing and approving the new management plan by the end of 2011.

As Management Plan were adopted in 2013 and 2020, the condition is fulfilled.

Recommendations:

Secure the budget of the national park so that the national park administration is able to manage the park appropriately and has all financial resources needed in order to pay the staff on a regular basis.

The core financing is stable and sufficient for the regular work of the park administration. However, any further development needs additional financial sources. The smart use of cohesion funds (ERDF) in the past made big improvements, and will at the same time trigger in the future more financial means for functioning and maintaining the visitor center. This should be kept in mind in the future financial planning of maintenance.

Complete the construction of the headquarters and other infrastructure, especially the exhibition room and other tourist facilities, within three years and make particular efforts to raise the appropriate funds to achieve this;

The Visitor Centre has been opened in April 2016 and has received until 2021 over 31,425 visitors. The didactic and technical approaches are inventive and effective. The whole building, that serves as housing for the headquarters is also used as information centre, for exhibitions and events (meeting, small conferences). The construction is unique from the architectural point of view and operates in an environmental friendly way (heating, materials, isolation...).

The budget for the construction works came from an ERDF funded project implemented between 2012-2015. During this project an information point at Curmatura and 4 information kiosks were also built.

The tourist facilities were improved with a cycling network (11 routes with over 120 kms) and several new hiking marked trails¹⁵.

The system consists now of 44 hiking trails¹⁶ with over 200 km. Additionally, hiking maps and very good guide book were published with the support of the project. The recommendation is fulfilled.

Elaborate and implement a specific high-profile programme devoted to the promotion, preservation and restoration of the local architecture and landscape; this exemplary programme should be implemented with the help of relevant specialists and contribute to making this region a model for the preservation of natural and cultural heritage;

¹⁵ <https://www.pcr.ai.ro/bike-trails>

¹⁶ <https://www.pcr.ai.ro/tourist-trails>

The management plan of Piatra Craiului National Park establishes several principles for the sustainable development of human settlements to preserve the local architecture and traditions:

1. Keep the existing parcels in the historical format;
2. Encourage the preservation and reconversion of the existing constructed parcels;
3. Encourage the use of historical architecture, adapted to the modern needs;
4. Fit the new buildings into the local landscape and climate;
5. Keep the existing vegetation;
6. Use of local materials and traditional crafts.

In 2013 a Building Guide in the Sustainable Development Area of Piatra Craiului was printed. It was prepared by the architect Raluca Munteanu, one of the members of the Scientific Council of Piatra Craiului National Park. The principles of this guide are inspired from the Architectural Policy in Romania for 2010-2015 – the culture of the constructed environment and the quality of life, promoted by the Architects Order in Romania. The guide is included in the new management plan approved in 2020 as obligatory guidelines. The Scientific Council is giving consent to each construction within the PCNP.

Pursue the scientific work and monitoring of biodiversity in every sector of the park; those activities should assess the status and trends of species and habitats, considering the national park as part of a functional ecosystem and consequently use appropriate methods and indicators to keep the national park administration aware of important changes to this ecosystem;

There are several monitoring protocols, approved by the Forest and Environment Ministry in 2010, targeting especially the species and habitats of European importance. 11 monitoring protocols, including *Ligularia sibirica*, bat species from caves and bat species of European interest, capercaillie, chamois, large carnivores, birds of prey of European interest, forest habitats, bushes with *Pinus mugo* and *Rhododendron myrtifolium*, alluvial forest with *Alnus glutinosa* and *Fraxinus excelsior*, were established during one of the last projects implemented whose goal was the improvement of the conservation status for the biodiversity in Piatra Craiului National Park.

The scientific work was also important during another project, aiming to the revision of the management plan of the National Park and ROSCI0194 site. On this occasion new species in the southern part of the protected area were identified.

In 2016, another Natura 2000 site (ROSPA0165 Piatra Craiului) was established that covers the National Park territory whose main objective is the protection of bird species.

For the large carnivores species, there is also a collaboration protocol with the Conservation Carpathian Foundation to collect samples for genetical analyses that will help to assess the population and the status of these species inside the Piatra Craiului National Park.

From 2018 to 2021, the Park Administration has been one of the partners in the Connect Green project, whose main objective was to maintain, respectively improve the ecological connectivity between natural habitats, especially between Natura 2000 sites and other protected areas of transnational relevance in the Carpathian ecoregion.

From April 2019, the Park Administration has been one of the partners in the Building Management Capacities of Carpathian Protected Areas for the Integration and Harmonization of Biodiversity Protection and Local Social Economic Development (Central Parks) project, financed by Interreg – Central Europe Programme, whose main goal is to improve management capacity of protected areas.

From 2020 the Park Administration has been one of the partners in “Increasing the economical competitiveness of forest sector and the life quality by knowledge, technology and competence transfer” project, aiming to

evaluate the functions and services of forestry ecosystems and to identify the main threats to forest biodiversity¹⁷.

To conclude: while preparing the revision of the Management Plan finances for the expert field work and studies were covered by the ERDF project. A lot of data and knowledge was collected through other mentioned projects. This excellent data on occurrence of species and habitats constitutes valuable baseline data for further regular monitoring. It is essential that finances for monitoring are secured in the future to get information on population trends. It is the only way to have good evidence for defining conservation measures, monitoring their implementation and efficiency and follow effects of the climate change.

Regarding both central and local forest authorities, more attention should be paid to the enforcement of the forest law on the national park's fringe and in the surroundings of the park; the measures taken and the results obtained should be reported to the Council of Europe on an annual basis;

In 2021 the Park Administration organised 143 control actions to enforce the forest law, 42 of them with the assistance of authorities. The result were 71 fines with a total of 22,450 lei.

The "Forest Radar" regulation was established in 2014. As a result, the illegal logging and transport has decreased since then at national level.

Regular control actions should remain and cooperation between owners, forestry authority and the PCNP Administration enhanced.

Pursue the efforts made by the national park administration to address the litter and garbage issues and to engage a new phase of activities facilitated by this administration; a detailed report on the results of those activities should be sent to the Council of Europe every two years.

In 2021 the Park Administration organised 4 garbage collection campaigns, with the help of volunteers, along the touristic trails, with a total length of 31 kms.

The local authorities in Dambovicioara are regularly collecting the garbage, and they also set up some resting areas along the road, containing garbage bins for the tourists.

Special focus on this issue should be paid at visitors' hotspots within the PCNP.

Issues not covered by previous recommendations

Climate change

Recommendation No. 206 (2019) of the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention, adopted on 6 December 2019, on nature-based solutions and management of protected areas in the face of climate change, is addressing the European Diploma for Protected Areas as well:

- Ensure adaptive management in the context of climate change is included, as appropriate, in Resolutions for the award or renewal of the European Diploma for Protected Areas (EDPA);
- Support the involvement of Emerald Network and EDPA sites in testing ways of scaling up and transferring nature-based solutions, as a response to climate change and for the prevention of natural disasters.

Through the project for the elaboration of the Management Plan a lot of baseline data were gathered about wildlife and ecosystems. This will enable monitoring of changes in species composition and in particular possible vertical shift of ecosystems. The Piatra Craiului massif is very convenient for monitoring vegetations

¹⁷ <https://rm.coe.int/66-romania-piatra-craiului-national-park/1680a9cc48>

changes caused by climate change, mostly because of the continuity of vertical vegetation belts and their naturalness.

Planted spruce forests are more vulnerable to the climate change. Backed up by the Management Plan, spruce is gradually replaced with broadleaves either by planting or by natural succession.

European Diploma visibility

I regularly pay attention to the visibility of the European Diploma on the spot. The European Diploma logo is used everywhere. The PCNP is a perfect example how to use the EDPA logo! The only additional idea would be to make the explanations of the logo and the network more visible in the Visitors Centres.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

I therefore recommend to the Group of Specialists on the European Diploma for Protected Areas and to the Standing Committee to the Bern Convention to renew the European Diploma of the Piatra Craiului National Park for the next 10 years.

In addition, the following **recommendations** should be attached to the renewal:

Recommendations:

1. Secure the necessary budget for the national park administration to run and maintain the infrastructure for visitors and for regular monitoring activities;
2. Monitor the effect of climate change on species and habitats and ensure findings are considered in the management of the area;
3. Maintain and strengthen the good relations with the local and the county authorities, as well as with tourist organisations to work together on future sustainable tourist development in the area surrounding the Piatra Craiului National Park with special attention to visitors hotspots;
4. Continue and strengthen the implementation of the Building Guide in the Sustainable Development Area of the Piatra Craiului National Park;
5. Maintain regular control actions for forestry activities and enhance cooperation between owners, forestry authority and the Piatra Craiului National Park Administration;
6. Continue the gradual replacement of spruce forest with broad-leaves forest in the middle mountain level, and ensure, sustainable forest practices are used to greater extent within the National Park;
7. Continue giving appropriate visibility to the European Diploma logo in all information material and brochures, and explaining the relevance of the Diploma wherever appropriate, in particular in the visitors' centres and on the website.