

“BELASITSA” NATURE PARK – AN EXAMPLE OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT¹

Rayna Pashova, PhD student

South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, Faculty of Economics, Blagoevgrad
renypashova@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The research examines the development of the mountainous region of Belasitsa in the years after 2000 and its transformation of being an inaccessible territory at the time of the Iron Curtain, to a fast-growing destination for sustainable tourism. In order to draw particular conclusions and formulate recommendations, the Belasitsa Nature Park Management Plan was used which was approved on 24.02.2016. As a result, potential threats from rapid development have been identified and concrete steps have been proposed to overcome them.

KEY WORDS: Nature Park, sustainable tourism, protected areas, sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of preserving nature and its resources in Bulgaria began to gain followers in the beginning of the 20th century. As Georgiev (2004) notes, the necessity of preserving nature in our country occurs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when the consequences of predatory use of the natural environment became more and more obvious. This growing environmental problem requires urgent measures to limit the negative processes, encourage

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sustainable use of natural resources and protect nature. For these more than 100 years, many different methods, means and approaches have been used to preserve the Bulgarian ecosystems and species inhabiting them. The creation and conservation of protected areas proved to be the most effective form of them. (Handbook of Protected Areas, 2007).

The legal status in this regard is visible from the Protected Areas Act in Bulgaria, which defines these territories as national and universal human treasure and property and as a special form of conservation of the our nature, contributing to the development of culture and science and to the wellbeing of society.

There are 3 national parks in the country - Pirin (included in the UNESCO World Heritage List), Rila, and Central Balkan; 11 nature parks; 1359 protected areas and 4 modern post-Seville biosphere parks. Two of the nature sites - Pirin National Park and Srebarna Reserve are included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. (Ministry of environment and waters)

These protected areas have enormous tourist potential. They combine extremely rich biodiversity, beautiful landscapes and cultural and historical heritage, making them a preferred destination for tourism not only for Bulgarian, but also for foreign tourists.

The present study aims to highlight the positive impact of protected areas to the sustainable development of the individual regions and to analyze the processes and problems that accompany the sustainable tourism development by identifying their tourist resources - natural and anthropogenic, the potential threats of their rapid development as tourist destinations, as well as the mechanisms for overcoming those threats.

The object of the study is Belasitsa Nature Park - the youngest and most untouched by human activity park in Bulgaria, where unique forests, vegetation and animal species have been preserved. Due to the limited access to Belasitsa in the recent past, it is a less popular destination for tourism, but with a huge and fast-growing potential.

Scope and methodology of the study, and conservation status of the research territory

Belasitsa Nature Park was established in 2007 with Order No RD-925 of the Minister of Environment and Waters. The park is located on the northern slopes of the mountain which it is named after and borders two countries - the Former

Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to the west and the Greek Republic to the south. The total area of the park is 11750.62 ha.

Belasitsa Nature Park covers the areas of the villages of Gabrene, Skrut, Klyuch, Yavornitsa, Kamena, Samuilovo, Kolarovo and Belasitsa (known as Podgorje or 'the area under the mountain') and the town of Petrich, all located on the territory of the Petrich Municipality, Blagoevgrad District. As per data from the National Statistics Institute for the population by districts, municipalities, place of residence and gender by 31.12.2017 in the municipality of Petrich there lives a total of 50 110 people, of which 24 529 men and 25 581 women. (NSI, 2017)

For the purposes of this survey, a complex approach is applied based on the methods of analysis, synthesis and review of the legislation.

Identification of the natural and anthropogenic tourism resources on the territory of Belasitsa Nature Park

Belasitsa is located between the Rupel Gorge eastwards to the Kosturin Saddle in the west, with a length of about 60 km (Nikolov and Yordanova, 1997). About 30% of its territory is in Bulgaria. Belasitsa is a climatic and floristic border between the Mediterranean and Transitional Continental Regions. Although the mountain is still not studied in detail, Belasitsa's high-mountain woodless zone is cited as an example of an area containing unique and representative groups and ecosystems of Bulgaria (National Strategy for the Conservation of Biodiversity, 1995).

Belasitsa is declared a CORINE site and is part of the European Ecological Network of Natura 2000. It is also part of the Green Belt, an initiative of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The Green Belt is the "bridge" between all those border territories in Europe, artificially separated in the past by the Iron Curtain. The remoteness and inaccessibility of this territory and the orographic features of the terrain have preserved unique forests, flora and vegetation, fauna and fauna complexes, unaffected directly by human activity. Of particular interest are the centuries-old chestnut forests, which are a rare habitat for Bulgaria (National Biodiversity Conservation Strategy, 1993) and a priority habitat for conservation under the EU Habitats Directive (92/43 / EEC).

Belasitsa is a separate floristic area and a phyto-geographic area (Bondev, 1982). The flora of Belasitsa consists of 1591 fern and seed plants, which make up about 39% of the flora of Bulgaria. There are 104 species of seed plants of high

conservation significance on the territory of Belasitsa, 28 of which are protected by the Biodiversity Act (Annexes 2a and 3 of the Biodiversity Act). 17 species are included in the Red Book of Bulgaria (4 critically endangered, 10 endangered and 3 vulnerable), 53 are Balkan endemics and 5 - Bulgarian endemics. Regarding international environmental agreements, 31 species fall under the provisions of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES) and 3 are subject to the European Habitats Directive.

Belasitsa NP is a site for conservation of habitats and species of European and global conservation significance.

Belasitsa's fauna uniqueness is due to two main reasons: geographic location and altitude. About 800 species of invertebrate animals are found in the mountain range, 178 of which are of conservation significance. 35 bird species are included in Appendix 1 to the EU Birds Directive, 2 species are globally endangered / the semicollared flycatcher (*Ficedula semitorquata*) and European roller (*Coraciagarrulus*).

The Belasitsa Nature Park has numerous cultural and historical heritage sites. The most significant ones are:

Late Antiquity and Medieval Fortress of GaiurCalesi, which is registered as cultural heritage of local significance.

Chukata Fortress

The earliest traces could be associated with the Thracian era, but there is no reliable information about the nature of the facilities of that time. It was one of the strongholds that Justinian I built during his large construction activities in the middle of the 6th century AD.

Gergevtche Fortress

It is located 2.5 km southeast of the village of Klyuch. Although we associate this fortress with the battle of King Samuil in 1014, the fortifications have a long history. It begins with the late Antiquity in the 5th - 6th centuries AD and continues until the 13th - 14th centuries.

Park – Museum of Samuilova Krepост (Samuil's Fortress)

It is located 5 km north of the village of Klyuch, next to the road to Zlatarevo Border Checkpoint. The site is a part of the Historical Museum –of Petrich –and one of the 100 National Tourist Sites in Bulgaria.

The cultural and historical heritage is a basic prerequisite and resource for the development of cultural cognitive tourism, which is gaining increasing popularity. Overall, the territory of the NP is not well studied from an archaeological point of view due to its recent isolation. With the exception of the ruins in the Chukata area above the village of Kolarovo, archaeological sites are not exposed and information is not provided to the tourists.

Analyzing the extraordinary richness of the natural and cultural heritage of the Belasitsa Nature Park and the adjacent territories, we come to the conclusion that the diversity of natural forms - high mountains and centuries-old forests (chestnut forests are unique not only for Bulgaria, but also for Europe) mineral springs and the Struma River Valley, the preserved volcanic cone combined with the preserved forms of traditional livelihood, the rich cultural and historical heritage, and the geographical location (at the border with two countries) are among the main prerequisites for Belasitsa and Petrich to become one of the leading destinations in the Southwestern ecotourism region.

Analysis of the potential for sustainable tourism development

The development of sustainable tourism in this region of Southwest Bulgaria can be called emblematic, as before the political and economic changes this was a border region and even the local population is not familiar with the surrounding areas and assets. With the opening of the access regime in this territory, environmentalists saw a unique opportunity to reach nature unaffected by modern human activity, which must be preserved in the most appropriate way. This is how the idea of creating a Nature Park was born. The choice of this particular category is not accidental. The decision was made on the basis of the provisions of the Protected Areas Act, where it is stated that nature park territories must include various ecosystems with diversity of plant and animal species and their habitats with distinctive and remarkable landscapes and objects of inanimate nature. Within the boundaries of nature parks, the law allows for the existence of villages, settlements and resorts, as well as industries and activities that do not pollute the environment.

In the Rules of Procedure of the Nature Parks Directorates it is determined that their activity is to ensure the preservation and maintenance of the diversity of the ecosystems, flora and fauna species, the creation of prerequisites for the development of tourism and the ecological livelihood of the local population as well as the realization of scientific, educational and recreational activities.

The idea of turning the Belasitsa Mountain into Belasitsa Nature Park was initially proposed by a large group of supporters, including local people, specialists and scientists, who began collecting the necessary scientific information, documentation and cartographic material.

In 2003, the Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation (BBF), in cooperation with the Bulgarian-Swiss Forest Program (BSFP), funded the project "Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Management of Belasitsa Mountain Natural Resources". Many experts in the field of biodiversity conservation and sustainable forest management from the state and non-governmental sector have been involved in the implementation of the project. As a result of the studies on the project, it has been found that the natural heritage of Belasitsa meets the criteria for establishing a nature park. (Documentation for the Establishment of Belasitsa Nature Park, 2006)

In the course of the studies and analyses, the BBF developed a proposal for the creation of the Belasitsa Nature Park and prepared the complete documentation, including the GIS model of the proposal. The Foundation conducted a broad information campaign among the local population. For greater transparency and a broader public response, a public discussion was held in the town of Petrich to take into account the attitude of the local population, which highlighted the benefits of nature conservation and sustainable development opportunities. There have been dozens of meetings with all stakeholders, information materials published and distributed (leaflets, posters, calendars, etc.), events organized such as exhibitions on biodiversity and exchange travel of interested parties to Kerkini National Park in Greece).

Even then the initiators of the idea to establish the Nature Park of Belasitsa were sure that the creation of such a protected area would not only assist the effective conservation of the nature but would also contribute to the overall regional development in a sustainable way. Later on this would also create prerequisites for the realization of the potential for sustainable economic development of the region - the development of tourism in various forms (trekking, bike and horse riding, thematic / educational tourism, alternative tourism tied to settlements in

the adjacent areas), restoration of traditional farming and animal breeding activities, crafts, etc.

Besides the positive effects of preserving the unique nature and livelihood of the region, the nature park will contribute to the sustainable economic development of the municipality, improving the well-being of the population and tourist resources development - human, accommodation and infrastructure.

However, in order to achieve the sustainability effect, the positive attitude and support of the local population and local government institutions are of utmost importance.

In 2007, BBF launched a new project called " Conservation of Globally Significant Biodiversity of the Belasitsa Mountains through Involvement of Local Communities in Ecotourism Development" which was implemented with the financial support of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Global Environment Fund. The main goal of the project was to turn resources into services so that the local population can have a chance to benefit from them. This included the development of cycling and hiking trails, the creation of thematic routes, the inclusion of cultural and historical monuments in tourist visits, demonstrations of local crafts, folklore, traditional dishes, etc.

Thanks to this project an inventory of tourist resources was made; A Marketing Plan has been made that includes programs for sustainable tourism in Belasitsa: maps of the routes have been printed, plus flyers for thematic routes, a guidebook to Belasitsa, image-cards, and a handbook entitled "The Interesting Plants of Belasitsa". (Activity Report Form, 2008)

At the end of 2007, on 20.11.the MOEW convened an official commission, which accepted the proposal for the announcement of the Belasitsa NP. On 28th of December 2007, the Minister of Environment and Waters, DzhevdetChakarov, signed Order No. PD-925 for the designation of the Belasitsa NP, promulgated in State Gazette No. 8 / 25.01.2008.Belasitsa became the 11th nature park in Bulgaria with an area of 11732,43 ha.

For the past 10 years since the establishment of the Belasitsa Nature Park, the Directorate has been the main initiator and center for a number of activities for the development of sustainable tourism and the formation of a more responsible attitude of the local population towards the conservation and rational use of natural resources. In addition, the Park is working all the time to build a sense of belonging and pride of the people that live near such a unique place - Mount Belasitsa.

In comparison with the other 11 nature parks in Bulgaria, Belasitsa is the seventh most recognised park for the Bulgarian citizens. This means that despite the short period of its existence, it has managed to attract people's attention.

Table 1. Which nature parks in Bulgaria have you heard about? Belasitsa NP

Answers	Percentage all	Percentage of national sample	Percentage of examined sample
I have heard	47,2	45,8	49,8
I have not heard	52,8	54,2	50,2
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0

ESTAT research at national level on Public-Private Partnerships in the Protected Areas and the Nature Parks in Bulgaria, held in August 2009.

Although there is no reliable statistics, it can be said that there is a slow increase in the number of overnights and accommodation establishments.

As per Belasitsa NP Management Plan by 2015, the number of tourist accommodation places was 14, divided into hotels with a category of 1 to 4 stars, motels, guest houses and chalets, and the dining places were 23.

The age structure and nationality of the tourists who visit the park are: working people, families, mostly Bulgarians.

The duration of the stay is 1-2 nights, the rating given by the tourists for the stay is good.

Individual visits by Bulgarians (usually by private transport), less frequently organized groups (predominantly Bulgarians) are registered.

Purpose of the visits and organized activities, grouped according to tourists' organization and length of stay - hiking, trekking and cognitive tourism and mountain biking.

Since the beginning of 2013 in the building of the Nature Park Directorate in the village of Kolarovothere is also an information and conservation center with interactive exposition for the biodiversity of Belasitsa Nature Park.

Fascinating local customs and traditional cuisine are also preserved. The Chestnut Festival held in the autumn has a growing importance. It is organized

by the Nature Park Directorate, and although it has only been in place since 2012, it has the potential to become a traditional celebration. The idea of the Chestnut Festival is to promote the culture and lifestyle of people in the Podgorje area as well as the natural wealth of Belasitsa Park. The interesting thing about it is that it gets together the people from all the villages of Podgorie with many Bulgarians and foreign guests as well in recent years.

All these activities and projects are carried out in the context of targeted and planned management, which is regulated by the Nature Park Management Plan. Worldwide, the Management Plan (MP) is a document that is being developed to regulate the conservation and the sustainable use of its resources for a period of time (10 years) and forms a long-term vision for the development of the protected area. In Bulgaria, the Management Plans of Protected Areas are assigned by the Ministry of Environment and Waters, developed according to the requirements of the Protected Areas Act and the Ordinance for the Development of Management Plans for Protected Areas then approved by the Council of Ministers. On the basis of the aforementioned regulations with Decision No.120 of the 24th of February 2016 of the Council of Ministers the Management Plan of Belasitsa NP was adopted. It defines the key features and values of the protected area, clearly defines the management objectives and specifies the activities that need to be accomplished to achieve these objectives. The rapid expansion of nature-based tourism in the protected areas poses a risk of adverse effects on the natural environment. This proves to be particularly challenging for the park administrations. They strive to find a balance between protecting the resources and providing a variety of recreational opportunities, but the destruction of resources and natural and cultural values remains a serious problem due to inappropriate behavior on the part of tourists.

A look into the global picture of tourism practice reveals many examples of potential conflict between tourism development projects and the desire to protect and preserve from violation locations, possessing picturesque landscape, as tangible and intangible heritage or habitats and areas of distribution of rare plant and animal species. The implementation of traditional tourist activities leads to a complete change in the landscape, endangers wildlife, harms the flora, and cultural monuments. Effects from tourism have been established as highly utilized by industry areas and in locations with a less developed tourism sphere. This results mainly due to the fact that tourism brings customers in locations designated as tourist destinations and simultaneously submits accompanying

elements that potential tourists are accustomed to in everyday life. Negative changes stem from the established need for facilitated recreational time, even when it is organized in nature. (Stankova, Kirilov, Kaleichev, Vasenska, 2015)

The negative impact of tourism on elements of the natural complex is significant. Tourism, on one hand, is guilty of the damage caused, and on the other, it is directly affected by it. Above all, the activities that take place in the park, lead to major negative environmental consequences. Tourism causes waste disposal at unregulated sites, waste water problems, uses local natural resources and changes the overall landscape of the tourist area by building infrastructure and interfering with the natural environment of the site.

Harmful impacts are greatest when not considering the capacity of tourist services, as well as the capacity of the tourist site that offers these services. This capacity must be respected both in the development of the various administrative plans for the growth of tourism in the region and in the assessment of the environmental impact of private investment projects.

Harmful impacts can be reduced by adequate maintenance measures. The impact of tourism on the environment is direct and indirect, and it varies according to the location of the sites.

The Management Plan of Belasitsa NP clearly defines activities for limiting the negative tourist impact, among them: Periodic monitoring of the visitor flow; Reporting the number of visitors in the region and their impact on the natural complex; Monitoring the violations and conflicts in the use of the park; Establishing the type of violations and the trends in their number; Registering and evaluating attendance, counting the number, type of recreation, age structure, visitors' interests and how to use the different areas of the park, and updating a database.

The regimes and norms proposed in the Management Plan also aim at overcoming or limiting the impact of identified threats, as well as providing conditions for control and decision making. This in turn will lead to proper forecasting and planning of processes and ensuring the sustainability of tourism in the protected area.

Conclusion

The review of the documents and the traceable historical development, as well as the Management Plan study allow the drawing of some concrete conclusions and

recommendations regarding the sustainable development in the studied territory. Among the most important conclusions and recommendations that can be made from the presented report are: firstly, the protected areas have enormous tourist potential. They combine extremely rich biodiversity, beautiful landscapes, cultural and historical heritage, making them a preferred destination for tourism. Secondly, the main activities to be developed in the coming years are preservation of the biodiversity in the park, the construction of small architecture elements and infrastructure, such as fountains, benches, shelters, information boards to raise the comfort and the awareness of the tourists. Next, it is necessary to develop the Belasitsa NP as a preferred tourist destination in order to increase the number of Bulgarian and foreign tourists. Last but not least, it is necessary to develop tourist products that include unique attractions and new services to satisfy the growing demands of tourists and to contribute to the creation of an attractive tourist image for the sustainable Belasitsa NP destination.

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