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PROTECTED TERRITORIES IN BULGARIA AND DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM

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Abstract: This paper is intended to present and study the main categories of protected territories of global and national importance. The main categories protected territories in Bulgaria, namely reserves, national and natural parks, protected areas, and natural monuments have been characterized. They are presented as territories of great recreational potential and a base for development of ecotourism. The main ecotourist destinations are pointed out in parallel to the analysis of crucial challenges of ecotourism development in Bulgaria.

Key words: ecotourism, tourist destination, protected territories, national parks, natural parks

In 1994, after twenty years of efforts, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) developed and presented a common, acceptable for all the countries classification of the protected territories. Classifying each protected territory into a certain category allowed their managing directors to use the experience of their colleagues from different regions all over the world and to coordinate their efforts. **As a main criterion for applying a protected territory to the proper category is defined its purpose of management. The system of categories developed by the IUNC assists and supports the legal framework in different countries, in order to promote development of internal systems of protected territories and basic parameters for their management.**

According to the IUCN the basic point in categorizing a protected territory has to be its definition. **The protected territory is an area situated within the mainland or water, intended to protect and preserve the biological diversity, natural and cultural values, which is maintained by legal or other effective ways and means.** This definition comprises the protected territories in total, and all the categories have to be coordinated with it. It is important to have in mind that although all

the protected territories have to satisfy the definition's requirements, the particular purposes for declaring a territory as a protected one are different.

The main goals for declaring and supporting a protected territory are as follows:

- Scientific researches;
- Preservation of nature;
- Protection of species and genetic diversity;
- Conservation of environmental functions;
- Protection of cultural and natural monuments;
- Recreation and tourism;
- Education;
- Sustainable use of the natural resources;
- Protection of cultural and traditional features.

According to the IUCN observing the main purposes, combinations, and priorities results in the following variety of protection forms:

- Strict regime of protection (natural reserve). This is a territory, where the nature is still in its initial, original condition, and therefore it is under the strict regime of protection;

- Preserving the ecosystems and organizing the recreation (national park);
- Conserving the natural resources (natural monuments);
- Protection with care (protected habitat);
- Conserving the landscape (protected landscape);
- Sustainable usage of the natural ecosystems (protected territory with use of the resources)

The reserves with strict regime of protection, national and natural (regional) parks, and so-called manageable reserves are considered to be of vital importance for conservation of the biological diversity. ***According to Bulgarian legislation they correspond to the national and natural parks, reserves and maintained reserves, and protected areas.***

At the same time, during the last few years the EU accession process results in adoption of the Law for Biological Diversity (2002), which allows Bulgaria to transpose most of the European legislative instruments in the scope of wild nature conservation, including the Directive 91/43/EEC (Directive of the EU for conservation of the natural habitats, wild flora and fauna, 1992). ***By means of this law Bulgaria built its own national ecological network, which comprises protected zones, protected territories, and buffer zones.***

In 1998, as a result from efforts lasting several years, a new Law for Protected Territories was adopted. It is consistent with all the international requirements in this field. ***This new law established six categories protected territories: reserves, national parks, natural parks,***

maintained reserves, protected areas, and natural monuments.

According to the law, as reserves can be declared patterns of the natural ecosystems, which include peculiar wild species (vegetable and animal), as well as their habitats. These territories are administered with the purpose of conserving their natural character; developing research and educational activity (or ecological monitoring); protecting the genetic resources; conserving the natural habitat and population of protected, rare, endemic, and relict species; developing a network of ecosystems and threatened habitats, representative of Bulgaria and Europe. All kind of activities are forbidden in the reserves, excluding their protection, scientific visits, and collection of seeds, plants and animal species with research purpose, or for their recovery within other areas in quality, means and time which prevent ecosystems from destroying.

At the moment 55 reserves are declared in Bulgaria within the area of 76978,3 hectares (ha) (*Table 1*). Some of the most important are the Central Rila Reserve (12393,7 ha) at the Rila Mountain and Djendema (4220,2 ha) at the Central Balkan Mountains. The smallest Bulgarian reserves are Kitka (25,4 ha) and Milka Island (30,0 ha) at the Danube. It is noticeable that most of the Bulgarian reserves cover small areas. Some of them are situated along the Danube (Kitka and Milka), Skakavitza (70,8 ha) is within the territory of the Rila National Park; however, some of the others are located out of the borders of bigger protected territories (national and natural parks), and require serious efforts for their protection.

Table 1
Bulgarian Reserves Distribution

Reserves (ha)	Number	Relative share (%)	Total area (ha)	Relative share (%)
≤ 100	6	10.91	333.5	0.43
100-200	6	10.91	943.7	1.23
200-300	1	1.82	211.0	0.27
300-500	2	3.64	777.5	1.01
500-1000	12	21.82	8667.0	11.25
1000-1500	12	21.82	14841.3	19.28
1500-2000	6	10.91	10080.0	13.09
2000-2500	1	1.82	2248.6	2.92
2500-3000	2	3.64	5402.6	7.02
3000-4000	5	9.09	16859.2	21.90
≥ 4000	2	3.64	16613.9	21.58

Another interesting fact is that within the national and natural parks are located 26 reserves with total area of 55327 ha, which is up to 71,87% of their aggregate territory. This means that the most important Bulgarian reserves are provided with proper regime of protection and conservation of the most valuable genetic patterns of Bulgarian flora and fauna.

As a positive fact it should be also underlined that most of the reserves outside the national parks are surrounded by so-called buffer zones, which restricts the anthropogenic influence within narrow limits.

National parks are territories free of towns and villages. They comprise natural ecosystems with great diversity of vegetable and animal species and habitats, peculiar landscapes, and objects of the inanimate nature. The national parks are managed with the

purpose of maintaining the ecosystems diversity and protecting the wild nature; preserving the biodiversity at the ecosystems; promoting scientific, educational and recreational activities; developing tourism and ecological means of living.

Serious attention is paid to the functional zoning of the territory. The following zones have been formed: reserves and maintained reserves; tourist zones; zones of the mountain hostels, administrative centers for management and maintenance of the parks and sports facilities; other zones according to the specific conditions in the parks.

Regulation of great importance for nature conservation is the prohibition against building within the national parks, except for mountain hostels, facilities for drinking water, administrative buildings and facilities intended to cater for the tourists,

underground communications, current repairs, roads and other facilities. Any production activities are also prohibited except for maintenance and restoration works in the forests, lands and waters. Activities such as clear felling, usage of fertilizers and other chemical substances, import of plants and animal species not typical of the region, pasture are also forbidden. The same holds true in respect of collecting herbs, wild plants and animals, fossils and minerals; damaging the natural condition of waters, water streams,

watersides, and contiguous territories; damaging rocky formations; hunting and breeding animals; sport fishing and fish-breeding; polluting lands and waters with industrial and food scraps; intervening in the biodiversity; collecting rare, endemic, relict, and protected species, etc.

Three national parks are declared in our country within the area of 193047,9 ha including 42269,5 ha reserve territories, which is up to 21,9% of the total national parks area, and up to 54,9% of the total area of the reserves. (Table 2)

Table 2
National Parks in Bulgaria

National Park	Promulgation Order and Date	Area (ha)	District	Reserves	Area (ha)
Rila	397/15.10.1999	81 046.0	Pazardjik Sofia Kyustendil Blagoevgrad	Parangalitza Ibur Central Rila Reserve Skakavitza	1509.0 2248.6 12393.7 70.8
Pirin	395/15.10.1999	40 332.4	Blagoevgrad	Djindjiritza Ulen	2873.0 3156.2
Central Balkan Mountains	396/15.10.1999	71 669.5	Lovech Gabrovo Sofia Plovdiv Stara Zagora	Boatin Tzarichina Koziata Stena Steneto Sokolna Peeshite Skali Severen Djendem Djendema Stara Reka	1597.2 3418.7 904.3 3578.3 1250.0 1465.0 1610.0 4220.2 1974.7

According to the Law for the Protected Territories (1998), the Ministry of Environment and Waters of the Republic of Bulgaria delegated the development of so-called plans for management of the national parks. After the public discussions intended to allow local population to take an active part in the management of the protected territories, and after several councils of experts the plans for management of all the three Bulgarian national parks was adopted. These plans provide description of all

allowed and advisable activities within the national parks. At the same time, the Law for the Protected Territories and the Instruction for Development of Plans for Management regulate the development methodology and the implementation responsibilities. The plans for management are adopted by the Council of Ministers on the base of an official conclusion from the High Expert Council at the Ministry of Environment and Waters, which comprises representatives of the interested state

services, municipalities, scientific and non-governmental organizations. The plans have been developed on the base of the following important factors: available information about the protected territories, conditions of different biological species and habitats, entire conditions of the environmental components in the park, available infrastructure, and ways and means of parks usage by the local population, municipalities, and visitors.

In accordance with the Law for the Protected Territories (1998), the Ministry of Environment and Waters administers Bulgarian national parks. Park administrations are regional offices of the Ministry, which execute the functions of management and protection of the parks, development plans implementation, coordination and control, environmental components monitoring, keeping the database, and prosecution of the trespassers. The managing directorate of the Rila National Park is located in Blagoevgrad. There are also nine park offices. The managing directorate of the Central Balkan Mountains is situated in Gabrovo. It has a head office in the town of Troyan, and six other offices in villages contiguous to the park. The managing directorate of the Pirin National Park is located in the town of Bansko, and three park's offices can be found in Sandanski, Dobrinishte, and Kresna.

Natural parks in Bulgaria are territories, which include various ecosystems with diversity of vegetable and animal species and habitats, peculiar landscapes, and objects of the inanimate nature. The natural parks are administered by the purpose of conserving ecosystems and protecting biodiversity; developing scientific, educational, and recreational activities; allowing sustainable usage of renewable natural resources, developing tourism and keeping traditional means of living.

An important point, distinguishing these territories from the national parks is that within the natural parks can be established towns, villages, resorts; production activities can be organized and maintained, but only if they are not pollutant. At the same time some activities are prohibited within the natural parks. For example clear felling, importing vegetable and animal species which are not inherent to the region, depasturing, collecting fossils and minerals, damaging rocky formations, collecting rare, endemic, relict and protected species, extracting mineral resources, etc.

At the moment there are 10 natural parks in Bulgaria within the total territory of 236392,5 ha, including 13112,9 ha reserves and a maintained reserve with area of 385,2 ha. (Table 3)

Table 3

Natural Parks in Bulgaria

<i>Natural Park</i>	<i>Promulgation Order and Date</i>	<i>Area (ha)</i>	<i>Reserves</i>	<i>Area (ha)</i>
Vitosha	III-a 15422/ 27.10.1934	26 606.6	Bistrishko Branishte Torfeno Branishte	784.1 1061.6
Rusenski lom	586/26.02.1971	3 408.0	-	-
Sinite Kamani	893/28.10.1980	11 380.8	Kutelka	645.1
Shumensko Plato	79/05.11.1980	3 939.9	Bukaka	62.6
Zlatni Piasatzi	2134/03.02.1943	1320.0	-	-
Vrachanski Balkan	1449/21.12.1989	28 844.8	Vrachanski Karst	1438.9

Strandja	RD-30/24.01.1995	116 136.2	Silkosia Uzunbojak Vitanovo Sredoka Tisovitza	389.6 2529.6 1112.4 607.8 749.3
Rilski Manastir	03.2000	27 370.7	Rilomanastirska gora	3676.5
Persina	RD-684/19.12.2000	21 762.3	Kitka Milka Persinski Blata (Maintained Reserve)	25.4 30.0 385.2
Bulgarka	RD-775/09.08.2002	21 772.2	-	-
TOTAL		262 541.5		13 129.9

According to the Law for the Protected Territories, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, as well as some physical and juridical persons, and municipalities, which are owners of forests, lands, and waters, located within the protected territories are responsible for their management and protection. The National Directorate of the Forests at the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests establishes specialized directorates of the natural parks intended to implement their plans for management and development. Directorates' functions, goals, and activities are determined by the internal regulations, approved by the managing director of the National Directorate of the Forests. All the natural parks in Bulgaria are assigned such directorates. Most of them have developed plans for management.

As maintained reserves are declared ecosystems, which include rare or threatened with extinction vegetable and animal species, and their habitats. Such reserves are administered for the purpose of maintaining its natural character; developing scientific and educational activities (or ecological monitoring); regenerating some vegetable and animal populations (or their habitats); conserving genetic resources. Within the maintained reserves all the activities are prohibited, except for the protection; research or educational visits; collection of seeds, wild plants and animals; maintaining, regulating or regenerating activities.

Establishing such a category is due to the fact that the strict reserve regime (prescribed by the already abolished Law for the Nature Protection) is not applicable to the moist zones, because of its peculiarity as a specific habitat, which could not be treated separately from its surroundings. Therefore, by establishment of this category, a solid base has been created for protection of the most important moist zones in Bulgaria. Introducing such a protected territory allows the best coordination of its national value and the admissible maintaining activities, provided by the legislation.

It is noticeable that this category comprises most of the little forest reserves, which have often been negatively affected by the forestry enterprises in the neighborhood. Therefore, for the purpose of preserving these perennial plants, which are of serious scientific interest, certain intervention is allowed as prescribed by the categorization ordinance. At the moment 35 maintained reserves are declared in Bulgaria within the total area of 4451,7 ha. The most important of them are Atanasovsko ezero (1050 ha), near the town of Burgas and Srebarna (902,1 ha) located to the west of the town of Silistra. The smallest ones are Amzovo (0,3 ha) located in the region of the Smolian Lakes, and Sand Lily (0,6 ha) near the town of Sozopol. However, maintained reserves in our country are relatively small protected territories and 20 of them include area of less than 50,0 ha. (Table 4)

Table 4
Maintained Reserves Distribution

Maintained Reserves (ha)	Number	Relative share (%)	Total area (ha)	Relative share (%)
≤ 10	3	8.57	6.3	0.14
10-20	4	11.43	45.7	1.03
20-30	2	5.71	52.3	1.17
30-40	9	25.71	317.8	7.14
40-50	2	5.71	90.8	2.04
50-100	6	17.11	460.6	10.35
100-350	5	14.29	678.1	15.23
350-500	2	5.71	848.0	19.05
500-1000	1	2.86	902.1	20.26
≥ 1000	1	2.86	1050.0	23.59

Another category of protected territories is so-called protected area. ***According to the definition, as protected areas are declared territories with peculiar landscapes, including results from the harmonic coexistence of the human beings and nature, as well as the habitats of rare or vulnerable vegetable and animal species. These areas are administered for the purpose of conserving landscape components; protecting, maintaining, and regenerating the habitats in conditions that respond to the ecological requirements of the species under protection; developing scientific researches, educational activities, ecological monitoring, and tourism.***

At the moment 411 protected zones are declared in Bulgaria within total area of 52801,0 ha. Obviously, some additional corrections are inescapable in the future, mainly because of continuous re-categorization of the historical and natural monuments, and forthcoming amendments in the Law for the Biological Diversity, intended to give the buffer zones surrounding reserves a statute of protected areas. It is interesting to note that declaring the national parks, reserves, and maintained reserves as territories exclusively state property is going to become more and more difficult in the future. Therefore the protected areas in Bulgaria are undergoing a gradual transformation into the main protected territories, conserving unique biodiversity.

Chart 1

**Distribution of the Protected Areas in Bulgaria
(Districts and Number)**

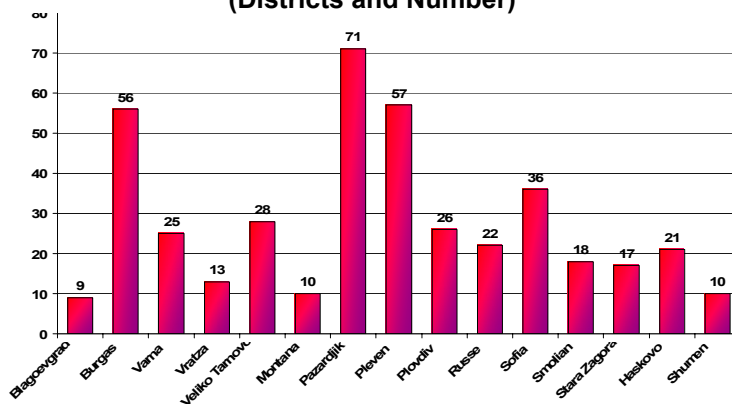


Chart 2

**Distribution of Protected Areas in Bulgaria
(Districts and Total Area)**

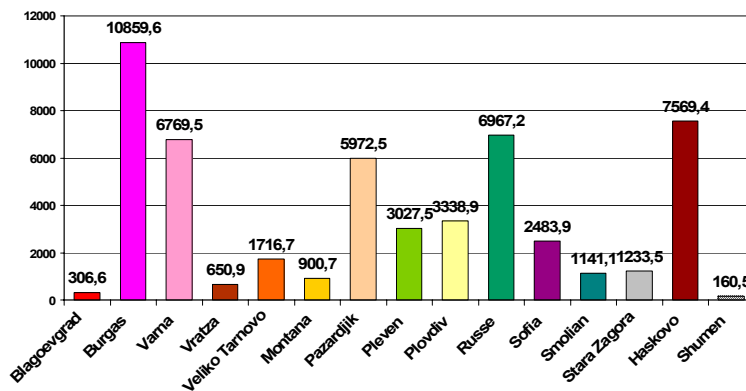


Chart 3

**Distribution of Protected Areas in Bulgaria
(Biogeographical Regions and Number)**

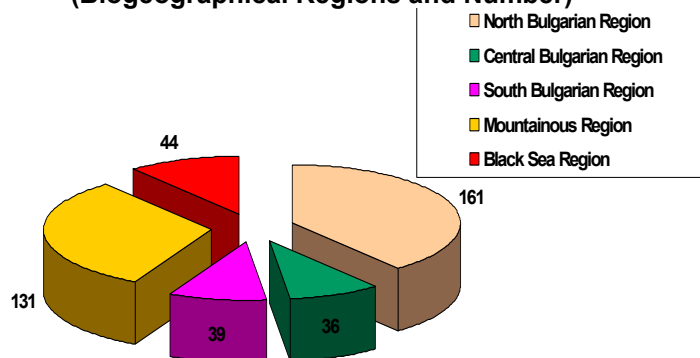
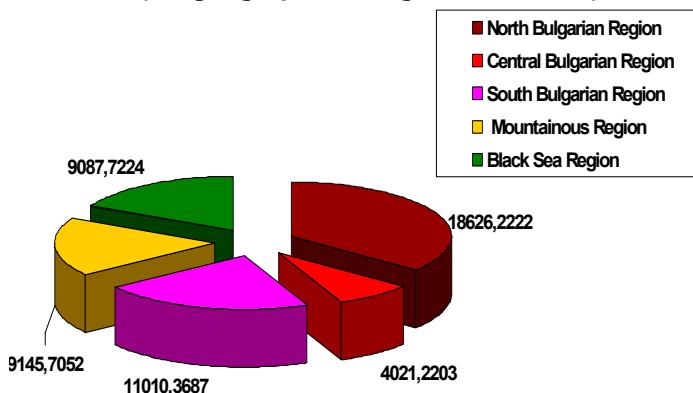


Chart 4

**Distribution of Protected Areas in Bulgaria
(Biogeographical Regions and Area)**



According to the legislation in force, natural monuments comprise peculiar objects of inanimate nature as rocky formations, earth pyramids, caves, pot-holes, waterfalls, fossils and minerals, sand dunes, and other objects of exceptional value due to their inherent rarity, representative character, aesthetics, or great importance for the science and culture. Natural monuments are administered for the purpose of conserving their natural features and are declared with their contiguous territory, which is necessary for their protection.

Within the borders of the natural monuments some activities are prohibited, namely these that can destroy monument's natural condition or jeopardize its aesthetic value. Specific measures for protection, maintenance, and regeneration of these territories are allowed only in accordance with the permission of the Ministry of Environment and Waters, coordinated with the owners of the natural monuments and other interested institutions.

Obviously there are territories in Bulgaria with great recreational potential, which is a solid base for development of ecotourism.

Ecotourism is a specific form of tourism, based on the nature. During the last few years it has held the attention of the experts in this field as an instrument for sustainable development. As a result the term

"ecotourism" is often used on the one hand as a concept of sustainable development, and on the other hand as a market segment of the tourist branch.

According to the IUNC, ecotourism is defined as travel or visit, responsible for the environment, to the relatively unspoiled countryside for the purpose of pleasuring and perceiving the nature (including all the concomitant present and historical cultural monuments). This is a form of tourism, which supports the environment protection. Visitors have relatively low negative effects on the environment and ensure active and profitable development of the local population.

However, ecotourism is intended to achieve the sustainable development results. All the tourist activities – recreation, business, congressional and ecological tourism include the sustainability. In other words, the process of planning and developing tourist infrastructure, its functioning and marketing has to be focused on the ecological, social, cultural, and economic criteria for sustainability.

Ecotourism take a special place in the sphere of the tourism because of its clear and precise orientation towards principles and leading directions, based on the standards of sustainability. Nowadays, a clear trend towards dynamic growth of the potential tourist market can be observed in

Bulgaria. There is a real opportunity for our country to become a regional and European leader on this developing market (National Strategy for Ecotourism, 2001).

Bulgaria is situated in the Southeast Balkans. Biogeographically our country falls within the range of deciduous and mixed forests at the temperate zone in the northern hemisphere. Its floral diversity includes 7200 species of green seaweed, moss, ferny, gymnospermous and other plants. The higher plants are approximately 3550-3750 species, 846 under species, and 2000 varieties, classified in 130 families and 872 genres. The forests are dominant. They cover 30,16% of the country's territory. Approximately 29000 animal species have been discovered, but the real number is considered to be over 56000. Vertebrates form 2,5% of Bulgarian fauna and comprise 736 species. One of the main features of our flora and fauna is its endemic and relict character.

In conclusion, Bulgaria is a country with great and unique biodiversity, which is important natural resource for ecotourism development. System of protected territories has been established within 5% of the total country territory in order to protect and conserve the natural habitat.

Another important resource for ecotourism development is the cultural and historical heritage of our country. The most valuable part of it has the statute of protection as a cultural monument. Approximately 40000 objects have been recognized as cultural monuments of national and international importance. In addition to thousand events, traditions, and ceremonies, they represent Bulgaria's cultural diversity. Undoubtedly, this cultural, biological, and landscape diversity forms an attractive combination (The National Strategy for Ecotourism, 2004).

Obviously, the ecotourism in Bulgaria is closely connected with nature protection. It is mostly developing in the neighborhood of the protected territories, natural attractions, cultural and historical monuments.

Moreover, one of the most typical features of the regions, which are main ecotourist destinations, is community with living standards intended to support the conservation of nature, protect cultural monuments and traditions, and develop sustainable means of living. Furthermore, this combination of natural and anthropological elements is supported by a strong sense of local identity. It is based on a great diversity of local customs, traditions, cuisine, agricultural practices, architecture, and history. Ecotourist destinations are basic supporting points for ecotourism development and main components of a future national program for development of ecotourism in Bulgaria. The ability to act local and think global should be applied to these ecotourist destinations. Thereby each of them can be transformed into a local center for sustainable ecotourism, intended to contribute to the national framework of tourist products and services, based on biodiversity protection, cultural heritage, sustainable means of living, and local economic growth. Actually, this approach and its products are some of the most important competitive advantages of Bulgaria.

Within our country are located the following important ecotourist destinations:

➤ ***Southwestern ecotourist destination*** comprises parts of the Rila and Pirin National Parks, the Natural Park Rila Monastery, and great numbers of protected areas, natural, cultural and historical monuments.

➤ ***Ecotourist destination the Western Rhodope Mountains*** is one of the most attractive regions for development of ecotourism in Bulgaria. In this context, the protected areas in the region of the towns of Batak, Velingrad, Shiroka Laka, Asenovgrad, as well as the protected territories around the Monastery of Bachkovo head the list.

➤ Development of the ***ecotourist destination the Eastern Rhodope Mountains*** is mainly connected with the protected areas **Fist Rock, Ribino,**

Patronka, Oreshari, Maiden Rock, etc. This destination also includes some of the most significant cultural and historical monuments in Bulgaria, namely the ancient settlements of Perperikon and Tatul.

➤ **Ecotourist destination Strandja Mountains, Eastern Thrace, and Southern Black Sea Coast** is the most developed tourist region in Bulgaria. Its development is concentrated on the protected areas around the region of moist zones near the town of Burgas, as well as the protected areas Silistar, Veleka, and the Natural Park Strandja Mountains.

➤ **Tourist destination the Eastern Balkan Mountains** also offers appropriate conditions for ecotourism development around the protected areas in this part of the country, and mainly in the Kamchia Mountains.

➤ Special pilot project for supporting ecotourism has been developed for the **ecotourist destination National Park Central Balkan Mountains – South**. Some of the main participants in this project are the municipalities of Kalofer and Karlovo.

➤ **Ecotourist destination National Park Central Balkan Mountains – North** is one of the most developed tourist regions in Bulgaria.

➤ Parts of the Rila and Vitosha National Parks fall into the **ecotourist destination Vitosha Mountains – Northern Rila Mountains**. Another pilot project comprises two park areas, namely Govedartzi and Beli Iskar.

➤ Formation process of the **ecotourist destination Western Border Areas** is still in its initial stage. At the

moment it is necessary to develop a number of new projects, based on correct expert assessment.

➤ Further development of the **ecotourist destination Western Balkan Mountains** is mainly connected with the natural monument Belogradchik Rocks, and some protected areas.

➤ **Ecotourist destination the Northern Black Sea Coast and the Dobroudja** is one of the well-developed destinations in Bulgaria. It comprises several protected areas, including the zones around Duran-kulak and Shabla, the reserve Kaliakra, and the protected area Balchik Botanical Garden, etc.

➤ **Ecotourist destination Danube Moist Zones** comprises Persina and Russenski Lom Natural Parks, as well as numbers of protected areas and historical monuments.

In spite of the undoubted achievement in the scope of ecotourism development in Bulgaria, there are some challenges, which are still persistent. First of all, the main weaknesses at the macrolevel are mostly due to lack of sustainable practices in the field of agriculture and forestry, emigration, loss of traditions, destroyed and ugly urban infrastructure, lack of managerial skills, planning process, database and interpretative programs, etc. Unfortunately, the attempts at decentralizing management and planning process are insufficient and inadequate to ensure the competent local governments' participation.

Solving the most important challenges in their entirety and interaction will contribute to the transformation of ecotourism into one of the most perspective tourist branches in Bulgaria.

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