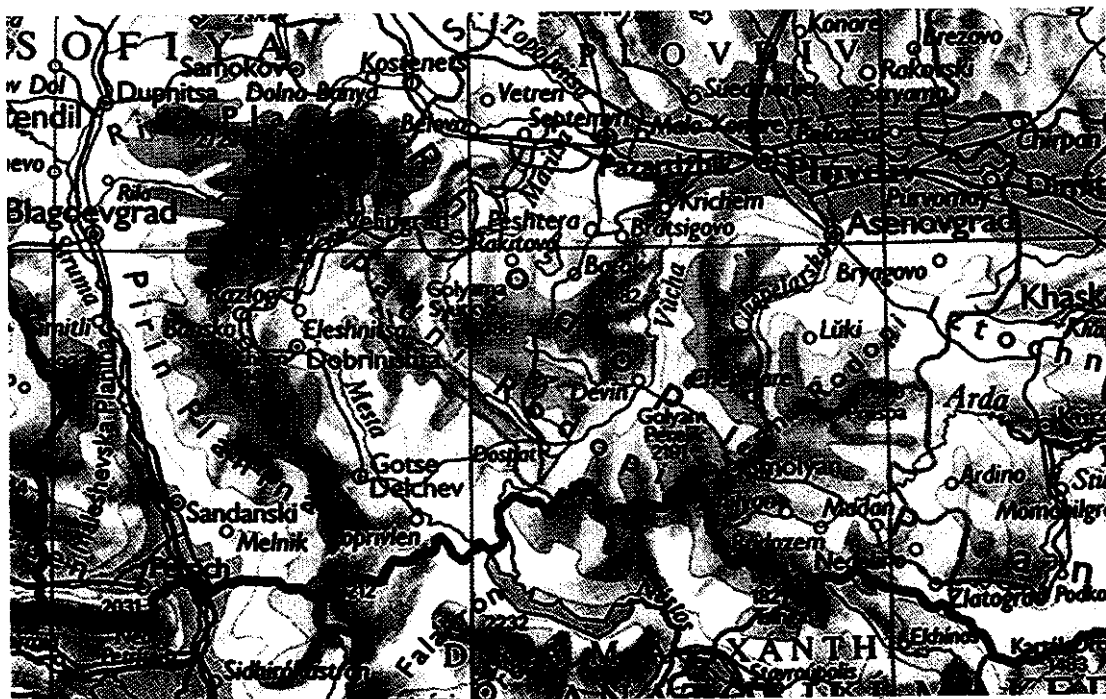


# PILOT AREA: W. RHODOPE, PIRIN, AND SLAVIANKA (ORVILOS) - BULGARIA

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## 1. Geographical definition of the pilot area

*The pilot area included in this report covers the Western Rhodope Mountains, National Park Pirin and Reserve Slavianka (Orvilous), with a special emphasis on the Western Rhodopes.*



### **The Western Rhodopes**

The Rhodope Mountains are located along the Bulgarian-Greek border and cover an area of 18,000km<sup>2</sup>. The Rhodopes are geographically divided into two sub-regions differentiated by climatic and landscape characteristics: the Western and the Eastern Rhodopes. The border between the Eastern and the Western Rhodopes is defined by the Kiyacleeka river valley, the Kitkata saddle, the Borovitzia river valley, and the east slope of the Zhulti Dyal ridge. The Yadanitza river valley, the Yundula saddle, the Avramova saddle and the Drestenetz river valley define the Western borders of the region. The area included in the report covers mostly parts of the Western Rhodopes.

The highest peak in the pilot area is Gloiam Perelik 2191m.

### **Pirin National Park**

The Park is located on the territory of the Pirin mountain, and it encompasses mainly the mountain's higher regions. The territories included in the park are mainly above 1200m with the exception of the town of Bansko. Today the territory of the park is 40 466.9 ha within the borders defined with KOPS Act 1036, 17.11.87, lying entirely within the northern part of Pirin mountain between the Predela area and the Todorka polyana.

For millions of years nature has carved the alpine, deeply cut terrain. Eighty-one peaks are higher than 2 500m above sea level. The peak of Vihren, 2 915m, is the highest point of the Park, the lowest being at 950m, is near the Park entrance above the town of Bansko. There are more than 180 high- mountain lakes in the granite section. Many rivers start here, some forming beautiful waterfalls. More than 70 springs spout hot mineral water around the foothills of the mountain. Scores of precipices and caverns have formed among the cirques in the karst areas.

### **Slavyanka (ORVILOS)**

The Mountains of Slavyanka were made famous in 1955 as "Ali Botush" is situated south from the Pirin Mountains, along the Greek border. The lowest point is at 1140 m above sea level and the highest Gocev vrah peak, is at 2212 m.

## **2. Protected territories in the pilot area**

### **The Western Rhodopes**

There are no National or Natural parks in the Western Rhodopes - only 14 reserves (6 of them are maintained reserves, four of them are biosphere reserves: Mantaritsa (576.5 hectares), Koupena (1086.4 , Doupkata (1210.8 hectares) and Chervenata Stena (811.9 hectares).

Other protected areas include - 36 nature monuments and 95 historical and protected sites. Currently there is a proposal from the NGO, "Green Balkans", to declare a Natural Park in the region. The proposed conservation status is IUCN Category V for the entire territories and I to IV IUCN Categories for the internal zones.

There is also another NGO - Wilderness Fund, working on a different proposal for large protected area in

the Rhodope Mountains This proposal includes the creation of three natural parks - two of them 50 000ha and the third one - 100 000ha.

From the beginning of 2002 UNDP Bulgaria, together with the Global Environment Facility (GEF), have been in the process of developing a regional nature conservation project: Conservation of Globally Significant Biodiversity in the landscape of Bulgaria's Rhodope Mountains.

### **Pirin National Park**

It was declared as a National Park Vihren in 1962 with act 3074 and has been expanded several times. The Protected Areas Act adopted in 1998 made it a national park. During 1977, the Park was included on the UN list of National Parks and Their Equivalent Reserves and a Natural World Heritage Site. Bulgaria's oldest reserve "Bayuvi Dupki - Jinjritsa" (in the park) was included on the list of biosphere reserves in the UNESCO program "Man and Biosphere".

The most recent reserve, Yulen, with an area of 3 200 hectares, was established in 1994.

During 1983, the park was recognized by UNESCO as an object of "The Convention for the Protection of the World's Cultural and Historical Heritage".

In 1977 the reserve was listed in the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Program for biosphere reserves.

### **Slavyanka (Orvilous)**

#### **Biosphere Reserve "Ali Botush"**

Part of the mountain was declared a reserve in 1951; later the area increased to 1628 hectares. This was done to preserve the largest *Pinus leucodermis* forest on the Balkan Peninsula. Some of the trees in the reserve are more than 400 years old.



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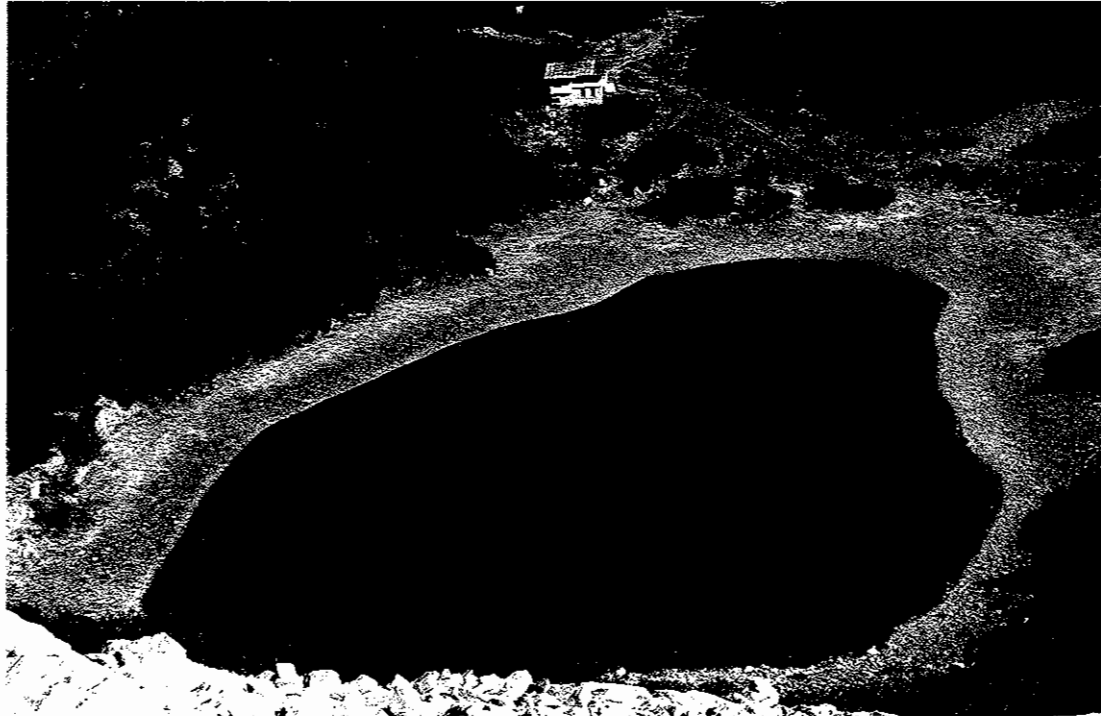
### 3. Brief information on biodiversity of the region:

#### Western Rhodope

The generalized maps in the National Strategy for Protection of Biodiversity illustrate the great importance of the Western Rhodopes for the protection of the biodiversity in Bulgaria. So far, no full “inventory” of the plant and animal biodiversity in the West-Rhodope massif is available.

According to the National Strategy for Protection of Biodiversity and the Action Plan for Biodiversity Protection, the Rhodopes rank first in the number of plant species. In South-East Europe the Rhodope massif is one of the most important centers of plant speciation. The mountain shelters many rare, relic, and endemic plants, species included on the European red-lists, in the Red Data Book of Bulgaria, on the List of protected plants, etc. In the “Tschervenata stena” reserve only 27 new orchid species have been found recently. The level of endemism is seen as one of the indicators of the uniqueness of the region. Many of the plant names found in the Rhodopes are derivatives of the name of the mountain: *Viola rhodopaea*, *Tulipa rhodopaea*, *Haberlea rhodopensis*, and others. The number of the main vegetation communities in the area, according to Bondev (1991), is 57.

About 70% of the woods in the Rhodopes are natural (71% are coniferous and 29% are deciduous forests). At present, a process of forest restitution takes place. About 50% of the forests have been given back to their owners. In general, the percentage of the private forests in the Western Rhodopes reaches 70%.



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In the Western Rhodopes live about 200 bird species, among which are the particularly rare wall-creeper, black stork, and the rock eagle.

About 50 of the vertebrates breeding in the mountains deserve special conservation attention. Some of them are already included in the Bulgarian or World Red Data Books. The mountains are still the home of rare animals such as the brown bear, wolf, Balkan chamois, cock of the wood, eagle, etc.

The region is an ancient cultural landscape and it is also home to locally domesticated animals such as the endemic Rhodope Shorthorn cow, the Karakachan sheep and Karakachan dog, now in danger of becoming extinct.

### **Pirin National Park**

Pirin is one of the major endemic-generation centers in Bulgaria. The limestone areas of the mountain are rich in young endemic species, such as *Brassica jordanoffii*, *Abies borisi-regis* and *Papaver degenii*. Most of the endemic species are local or regional. The general number of species in Pirin approaches 1,100, of which 70 are endemic. These mountains are one of the main speciation centers for Bulgaria's flora. Its very old origin is evidenced by relict species; such as the Rumelian pine and the Macedonian pine.

Forests occupy only 38% of the park territory, 3% being only deciduous. So the bare Alpine peaks and the old pine and white fir forests, changing into dwarf pine with the altitude, determine the typical view of Pirin. The sub-Alpine belt is to be found between 2,000 and 2,500 m, featuring dwarf pine, Siberian juniper, black currant, and some species of conservation significance. The Alpine belt (2,500-2,914 m) comprising the majestic Pirin peaks, exhibits the Pirin poppy (*Papaver degenii*), the edelweiss and other.

Medicinal plants are an important part of Pirin's flora. 130 species are to be found within the park territory, most typical of which are thyme, blackberry, gentian and mullein. Law protects thirteen medicinal species, while 15 are under a special regime of management.

Macromycetes are represented by 210 species in Pirin.

The special location of Pirin and its varied landscape have determined fauna diversity. Just within the park territory, there are 2,861 invertebrates and 218 vertebrate species. Many of the invertebrates are important to conservation: 122 species are endemic, 162 - relict, and 298 - rare. 17 species are included in World and European Red Data Books. The preservation of their endangered populations requires the conservation of their intact habitats rather than the protection of single species. Among existing vertebrates, there are 6 fish species, 18 amphibians and reptiles, 152 bird, 15 small mammal, 14 bat and 14 large mammal species.

Species included in the World Red Book are Greek turtle, wolf. Among the endangered mammals and birds are brown bear, wolf, wildcat, marten, wild goat, imperial eagle, wood-grouse and owl.

### **Slavianka/Orvilous**

The Biosphere reserve "Ali Botush" comprises Austrian pine (*Pinus nigra*) forests including the endemic

form *Pinus nigra petrodan*, Rumelian pine (*Pinus heldreichii*) forests and compound forests of Macedonian and Rumelian pine.

The largest natural forest of Rumelian pine - Balkan sub-endemic species, is located in the reserve. This forest is 60- 100 years old, with some trees over 200 years old.

There are a lot of endemic, relict and rare plant species like the Rhodope anemone (*Anemone rhodopea*), Rhodope tulip (*Tulipa rhodopea*), sassafra (*Saxifraga stribrniji*) and violet (*Viola dephinantha*), and also many rare and endangered animals. Flora and fauna in the region include a number of Mediterranean species.

#### **4. Demographic characteristic of the pilot area**

##### **Western Rhodopes**

The region includes The Municipalities of Assenovgrad, Luky, Chepelare, Smolyan, Devin, Dospat, Borino, Velingrad, Batak as well as parts of a few other municipalities.

The main cities of the region are Assenovgrad, Smolyan, Devin and Velingrad

That part of the pilot area includes municipalities from three big administrative structures (oblast) - Smolian, Pazardjik and Plovdiv with total population 224 327.

Major demographic problems in the Western Rhodopes are the high rates of unemployment, the ongoing processes of depopulation of whole villages and the tangible aging of the population. Due to lack of means of livelihood, young people move to the big cities or out of the country. The existence of the Muslim population is one of the key features of the Rhodopes. According to the survey made by the Alpha Research Agency, the different ethnic and/or religious groups in these mountains keep good and peaceful mutual relations.

According to the UNDP Human Development Report 2000, the Districts of Smolyan is among the ones with the highest human development index (HDI). The Municipalities of Devin, Borino and Dospat have the highest index of life expectancy (71-75.8 years). The Municipalities of Velingrad and Rakitovo are among the ones with the highest registered unemployment index.

##### **Pirin National Park**

The territory of the park transcends the borders of the following municipalities: the town of Razlog, the town of Bansko, the town of Gotse Delchev, the town of Sandanski, the village of Stumyani, the town of Kresna and the town of Simitli. The Park also encompasses significant agrarian areas, mainly in the higher regions of the mountain.

The Pirin National Park is located within the Blagoevgrad District and covers several municipalities: Razlog, Bansko, Gotse Delchev, Sandanski, Kresna and Simitli. The total population is 141. 699.

According to statistical data, the demographic profile of the adjacent Park zones is more favorable than in other parts of the country, although the general trends of losing young and active population can also be seen here. The municipalities with a high birth rate are mostly concentrated in the Mesta River Valley. This is due to the concentration of Bulgarian Muslims in these areas who still practice the tradition of having many children in the family. Speaking of the correlation between birth rate and natural assets, the municipalities in the northern parts of the region are in a much more favorable position.

According to the UNDP Human Development Report, the Blagoevgrad District is among the areas with a highest Municipal Human Development Index (MHDI).

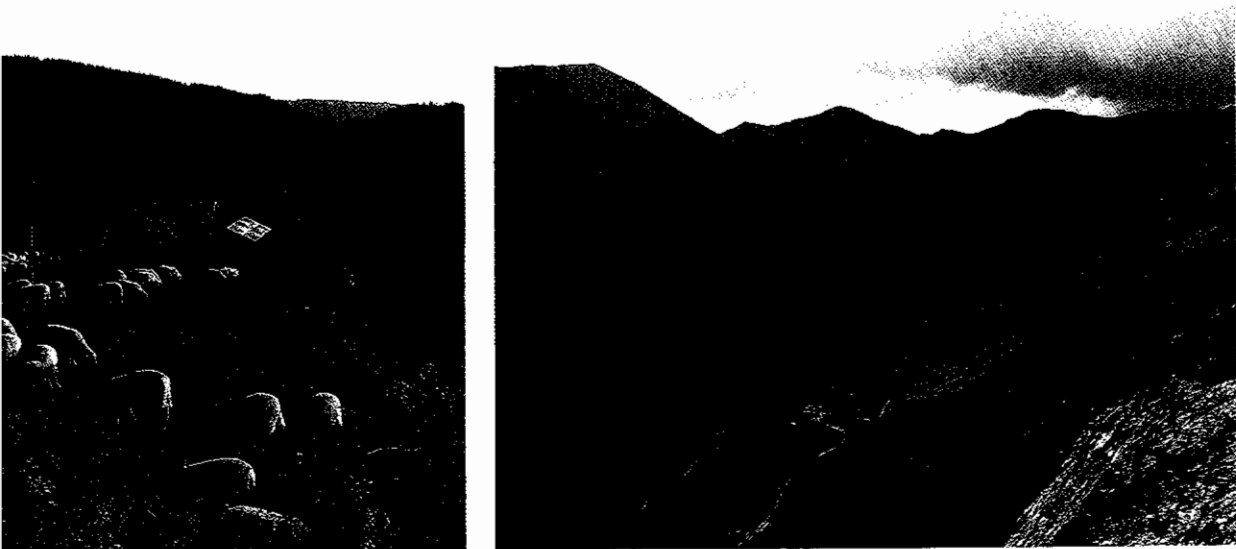
According to UNDP Report, Yakorouda is among the municipalities with the highest percentage of Turkish population in Bulgaria, followed by the Garmen and Belitsa municipalities. The limited resources of arable land in the Kresna Gorge have gradually shifted occupation to tourist activities, services and trade.

### **Slavyanka**

This border region is remote from settlements and located in the border area. These factors act as limits to human impacts. Slavyanka Mountain is included in the territory of the Blagoevgrad district - municipalities of Sandanski and Hadji Dimovo. There are five villages on the Mountain with a low population.

## **4. Economy. Tourism Overview**

When we discuss the possibility of a trans-boarder park including Pirin National Park and Western Rhodope Mountains with Greece, it is necessary to discuss and to take into consideration the increase in



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tourism in the future Trans-boarder Park. An essential characteristic of sustainable tourism development is the creation of long-term approach including planning of nature protection, social-economical, marketing, and infrastructure planning.

The NATURA 2000 Program sets tourism as a key element of ecosystem protection. It can play a vital role for determining the future of mountain areas, such as the proposed pilot area. "Tourism can affect nature, but it can also help protect biodiversity." Environmentally friendly tourism can support local people financially, thus bringing economic value to biodiversity.

In the next paragraph a short tourism overview of the pilot area is given.

### **Short Tourism Overview**

#### **The Western Rhodopes**

The Rhodopes are a real challenge for the development of cultural tourism. The favorable nature and climatic conditions are the reasons the mountains have been inhabited since prehistoric times: 20-115 thousand years BC. There are remains and archeological evidence from the Neolithic period, the Thracian Civilization, and the 1st and 2nd Bulgarian Kingdoms. Even now, different ethnic and religious groups live peacefully together here preserving their centuries-old traditions and culture. The Rhodopes are well known for their folklore and crafts. Many towns and villages have kept samples of the National Revival Period (18-19th century) architecture. The Rhodopes are very popular for so-called "religious" tourism; the most famous place related to this type of tourism is Bachkovo Monastery, founded in 1082.

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There is an abundance of natural phenomena, interesting and varied landscapes, and beautiful old forests with preserved biodiversity, rivers, waterfalls, and other natural wonders in the region. Nature's gifts and the numerous tracks and footpaths cutting through the mountains make the region especially attractive for hiking. With their gentle round hills and numerous tracks and paths, the Western Rhodopes are especially attractive for the lovers of mountain biking.

With its unique and diverse habitats, as well as the many endemic and rare species some of them included on the UNESCO List as well as in the IUCN Red Data Book, the Rhodopes are offering a great opportunity for ecotourism. Cave tourism is very well developed in the region, for example in the area of Trigradsko Zhdrelo (Trigrad gorge), there are more than 150 caves.

The region is rich in curative mineral waters of various compositions. Many of these have been captured and bottled or utilized in spa tourism.

The Western Rhodopes offer wonderful opportunities for fishing tourism, with the well-established system of dams and the numerous rivers full of Balkan trout. There are several hunting estates for game, the largest being the "Kormisosh" Hunting Reserve in the Laki Municipality.

Ski tourism is one of the most developed forms of tourism in the region. The main winter resorts are Pamporovo (1600m.) and the town of Chepelare. The resort of Pamporovo is one of the most developed ski resorts in Bulgaria and offers six ski-tracks with different levels of difficulty. The Complex "Mechi chal" near Chepelare offers two ski-tracks with a total length of 8400m, which are among the best alpine tracks in Europe.

### **Pirin National Park**

Magnificent views, unique nature, settlements with special atmosphere and centuries-old culture make Pirin one of the most attractive places to visit.

Many types of tourism are developed in the Pirin NP, thanks to the complex geological past of the mountain and the long glacial and erosion processes which have formed a fascinatingly varied landscape. Location, climate and easy access to the park are yet another tourism prerequisite. Today the park is visited by appr. 16,000 people each year. However the area only offers 8 huts, 4 hotels and 16 departmental holiday homes for tourists to stay at.

*Hiking* tourism is very well developed in the mountains. The attractive nature, well-organized trail system and marking system, as well as maintained chalets on the tourists trails contribute significantly to its popularity.

*Mountaineering* is a traditional sport in Pirin. It is worth mentioning that 90% of all visits are in the summer months, whereas winter trails are possible for only the most experienced mountaineers. *Trekking* is the most developed type of tourism.

Only professionals with rich experience are practicing *alpinism* and their numbers within the park are close to zero. Much more popular are summer and winter Alpine treks.

*Cave tourism* is not allowed. The peaks of Vihren, Atmegdan, Samodivski, Razlozhki Souhodol, and others, are more popular for *climbing*.

*Ski tourism* is well developed in Pirin, the most important ski areas being Shiligarnika and Chalin Valog above Bansko. *Caving* is concentrated in the Karst parts of Pirin; that is why it is important that access and visits to them conform to environment protection limits.

*Ecotourism* activities are rare and limited to, the observation of birds and animals, or tours on flora, forests, hydrobiology, geology, etc.

On the territory of the park lies the *ancient wine trail* providing tourists with the exiting experience of vine (degustationWhat word is this?) and cultural exchange.

Around the area of the Park there is a well of potential for developing other forms of tourism like *spa tourism, religious and cultural* tourism.

## 5. Main Threats to Biodiversity in the pilot area

### A. Main threats to the biodiversity in the pilot area:

- Mass and inappropriate tourism
- Big infrastructure projects
- Illegal logging

### More specific threats for different parts of the plot area:

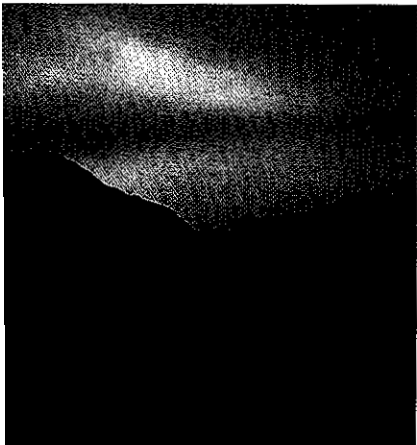
#### A.1. The Western Rhodopes

1. Habitat fragmentation and it loss
2. Small isolated protected areas
3. Unsustainable use of natural resources:
  - New ski infrastructure (Highland sports and tourist complex "Suitka" and "Perelik")
  - Illegal logging, seasonal use of fire
  - Over harvesting of medicinal plants
  - Illegal hunting
4. Insufficient public awareness on nature protection

#### A.2. Pirin National Park

1. The conflict between nature protection and developing new ski infrastructure at the territory of the Park, near the town of Bansko.
2. The lack of a Park Management Plan, which would include sustainable tourism development and shape up the type of activities needed.  
(This will change soon, as the Swiss Government is starting a project for the preparation of the Plan.)
3. The insufficient tourism infrastructure: lack of information provision, lack of signage, lack of short walks, and lack of suitable accommodations and services.

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## **B Threats Concerning development of future eco-tourism:**

1. Using the term “eco-tourism” to conceal the reality of developing “mass tourism.”
2. Potential conflicts between interested parties.
3. Lack of proper organizational structures on the regional and local levels in the areas of planning, marketing, control of the development of eco-tourism and so on.

## **6. Recommendations and conclusions**

YEO-Rhodope and other NGOs that participated during the meeting in Pamporovo, agree on need for the creation of a Bulgarian - Greek transborder protected territory, that can better protect the unique nature of the Rhodope Mountains from both sides of the border and give the region a better chance for sustainable development.

The new park in Western Rhodope Mountains will be among the most valuable protected areas the Bulgaria and is going to include in the network EMERALD (the analog of network NATURA 2000 for the CEE counties).

### **1. Objectives and targets of a potential trans-border cooperation between Greece and Bulgaria**

- Creating a large trans-boarder protected area;
- Development of a joint management plan;
- Creating a system of policies and procedures for information exchange and daily operations between local authorities managing the park and central management institutions;
- Signing a contract for future cooperation of the development of a park between the Bulgarian Ministry of Environment and Water and the Greek Ministry of Environment.

### **2. Future mutual understanding between populations living in the area for ecotourism development and conservation of common cultural and natural heritage in the trans-border mountainous area**

- Development of a public information campaign to explain to the citizens of both countries the importance of the trans-boarder park;
- Environmental education and building attitudes towards the environment (an environmental ethic), which is one of the main foundations of sustainable resource use especially concerning children.

### **3. Common actions for the conservation of rare, threatened and endangered species in the area**

- Coordination of trans-boundary scientific monitoring
- Creation of common protected trans-border territories