IUCN Conservation Outlook Assessment 2017 **(archived)**
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Please note: this is an archived Conservation Outlook Assessment for Pirin National Park. To access the most up-to-date Conservation Outlook Assessment for this site, please visit https://www.worldheritageoutlook.iucn.org.

Pirin National Park

SITE INFORMATION

Country:
Bulgaria
Inscribed in: 1983
Criteria:
(vii) (viii) (ix)

Site description:

Spread over an area of over 27,000 ha, at an altitude between 1008 and 2914 m in the Pirin Mountains, southwest Bulgaria, the site comprises diverse limestone mountain landscapes with glacial lakes, waterfalls, caves and predominantly coniferous forests. It was added to the World Heritage List in 1983. The extension now covers an area of around 40,000 ha in the Pirin Mountains, and overlaps with the Pirin National Park, except for two areas developed for tourism (skiing). The dominant part of the extension is high mountain territory over 2000m in altitude, and covered mostly by alpine meadows, rocky screes and summits. © UNESCO

SUMMARY

2017 Conservation Outlook

Significant concern

Overall, the site has been in a relatively good state of conservation until recently, but disturbance and fragmentation of the site associated with the exclusion of the skiing areas incompatible with World Heritage status (now part of the buffer zone) have been of significant concern. There are new concerns in this regard in connection with the expansion of the tourism zone and the zone of buildings and park/sport facilities (the latter located entirely within the buffer zone of the property) envisaged by the new draft management plan, even though construction of new skiing facilities would only be allowed in the buffer zone. Climate change is expected to have low to moderate impact on species, ecosystem and geological formations. However, concerns are high with regards to potentially increasing pressures on resources required to maintain skiing tourism under the changing climate. The management is relatively effective regarding daily tasks, but not in a position to confront the strong external interests in tourism development. Low levels of funding are an additional constraint.

Current state and trend of VALUES

High Concern
Trend: Stable

Overall, the site appears to be in a relatively good state of conservation. However, disturbance and fragmentation of the site associated with the exclusion of the skiing areas incompatible with World Heritage status (now part of the buffer zone) is of high concern.

Overall THREATS

High Threat

Some areas of the park, now excluded from the site and included as its buffer

zone, have been severely damaged by ski infrastructure development, as was expressed in several World Heritage Committee Decisions. There are new concerns in this regard in connection with the expansion of the tourism zone and the zone of buildings and sport facilities (the latter located entirely within the buffer zone of the property) envisaged by the new draft management plan. Until a Strategic Environmental Assessment and a specific assessment of potential impacts on the OUV of the property of potentially allowed infrastructure expansion is available, concerns remain with regards to potential impacts on the OUV of the property even if infrastructure expansion would only take place in the buffer zone. Other threats like climate change, impact of summer tourism are rather diffuse with limited impact.

Overall PROTECTION and MANAGEMENT

Serious Concern

The management is relatively effective regarding daily tasks, but the power of the Park administration in the face of increasing interest in tourism development and resource use is very limited. The park administration is under severe economic constraints. Ongoing pressures for ski tourism development in the buffer zone of the property remain of concern and concerns have also been expressed by different stakeholders with regards to the draft new management plan.

FULL ASSESSMENT

Description of values

Values

World Heritage values

▶ **A good example of the continuing evolution of flora and an example of high mountain ecosystems in natural condition**
Criterion:(ix)

The site is a good example of the continuing evolution of flora, as evidenced by a number of endemic and relict species, and the property also protects an example of a functioning ecosystem that is representative of the important natural ecosystems of the Balkan uplands. Pirin’s natural coniferous forests include Macedonian Pine and Bosnian Pine, with many old growth trees. Although the forests are affected by some historical use, the natural functioning of the ecosystem ensures the protection of its regionally significant biodiversity values (WHC, 2010).

▶ **Mountain scenery of exceptional beauty**
Criterion:(vii)

The aesthetic values of some parts of the property have been negatively affected by ski infrastructure and these impacts remain (IUCN Consultation 2017), even though those areas have been consequently excluded from the boundaries of the property and included in its buffer zone.

▶ **Diverse limestone mountain landscapes**
Criterion:(viii)

The principal earth science values of the property relate to its glacial geomorphology, demonstrated through a range of features including cirques,

deep valleys and over 70 glacial lakes. The mountains of the property show a variety of forms and have been developed in several different rock types (WHC, 2010). Functioning natural processes allow for study of the continued evolution of the landforms of the property, and help to understand other upland areas in the region (UNEP-WCMC 2012).

Other important biodiversity values

► Biodiversity of flora and fauna

In total, there are 1,315 species of vascular plants, about one third of Bulgaria’s flora, including 86 Balkan endemics, 17 Bulgarian endemics and 18 local endemics. The fauna of Pirin National Park includes 45 mammal species, including brown bear, wolf and pine marten, and 159 bird species. Pirin is also home to eight species of amphibians, eleven species of reptiles and six fish species (WHC 2010).

Assessment information

Threats

Current Threats

High Threat

Some areas of the park, now excluded as buffer zone, have been severely damaged by the development and operation of ski zones; however, these areas are relatively small and limited in comparison with the whole site. Other threats like climate change, impact of summer tourism are rather diffuse with limited impact.

► Livestock Farming / Grazing

High Threat

Inside site, scattered(5-15%)
Outside site

Overall, grazing is relatively well managed in Pirin National Park and is only allowed on meadows and pastures located within the Zone for Sustainable Use of Open Areas and in the Tourism Zone. Yearly quotas and permissions are issued by the National Park Directorate and regular inspections are conducted to check compliance with the established regulations. However, some concerns have been expressed regarding eutrophication of lakes due to grazing in their vicinity (Consultation with the State Party, 2017).

► Poaching

Low Threat
Inside site, scattered(5-15%)
Outside site

Illegal hunting inside and outside of the property has been regularly reported in the past (IUCN Consultation, 2014). However, only a few cases of illegal hunting or carrying of hunting weapons have been detected in the recent years and those detected have been registered and led to relevant proceedings. Regular inspections are also being carried out to detect any illegal activities (Consultation with the State Party, 2017).

► Logging/ Wood Harvesting

Low Threat
Inside site, localised(<5%)
Outside site

Concerns have been expressed about the planned logging activities within the property (UNESCO, 2014) and cases of illegal logging have also been previously reported (UNESCO, 2011). So far timber extraction has been limited to forestry maintenance activities, as commercial logging is forbidden in national parks by the Protected Areas Act. However, vigilance is required in order to ensure that any timber extraction in the future is only done if justified as such maintenance activity, e.g. for safety reasons, and based on a scientific evaluation of potential impacts on the OUV of the property.

► Tourism/ Recreation Areas

High Threat
Inside site, localised(<5%)

Outside site

Development of skiing infrastructure in the Bansko ski area located in the buffer zone of the property has been subject to numerous Decisions by the World Heritage Committee and also led to certain modifications of the original boundaries of the property, specifically when the Bansko and Dobrinishte tourism zones were excluded from the boundaries of the property and included in its buffer zone (World Heritage Committee, 2010). The World Heritage Committee in a number of its Decisions expressed its concern that “the Outstanding Universal Value of the property has been repeatedly and significantly impacted by the development of ski facilities and ski runs” (World Heritage Committee, 2010). While more recent developments within the Bansko ski area mainly related to the maintenance of existing facilities, they included extensive activities such as the extension of the system for artificial snow, the reconstruction of an existing ski surface lift and the reconstruction of a ski lift station (UNESCO, 2016). Concerns have also been expressed by different stakeholders over the fact that the new draft management plan for Pirin National Park would allow extension of areas where tourism infrastructure development is allowed (UNESCO, 2016).

► Temperature extremes

High Threat
Inside site, extent of threat not known
Outside site

Climate change (particularly changes in snow regime) may affect the caves and karst system as well as endemic species with very limited distribution, but its specific impacts are still difficult to judge. However, concerns are high with regards to potentially increasing pressures on resources required to maintain skiing tourism under the changing climate.

Potential Threats

Very High Threat

The political and economic pressures are very high for mass tourism development and expansion of skiing facilities and other infrastructure, even though expansion of skiing facilities would only be permitted within the buffer zone of the property.

► Tourism/ Recreation Areas

Very High Threat
Inside site, scattered(5-15%)
Outside site

In 2017 the Council of Ministers approved a Decision adopting amendments to the current Management Plan of Pirin National Park which provide for potential expansion of skiing facilities within the buffer zone of the property. While the World Heritage Committee in its Decision 36COM 7B.18 urged the State Party “to ensure, including through provisions in the new Management Plan, that no further areas within the property, outside the already excluded areas, are permitted for ski or other similar high-impact developments” (UNESCO, 2012), in its Decision 37COM 7B.17 it also requested the State Party “to undertake a Strategic Environmental Assessment of the development of the buffer zone, including consultations with stakeholders” and urged it “to ensure that these proposals will not negatively impact the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) and in particular the integrity of the property” (UNESCO, 2013). Until such an SEA and a specific assessment of potential impacts on the OUV of the property of potentially allowed infrastructure expansion is available, concerns remain with regards to potential impacts on the OUV of the property even if infrastructure expansion would only take place in the buffer zone. Furthermore, the new draft Management Plan also provides for expansion of the Tourism Zone within the property and even though construction of skiing facilities cannot be permitted outside the property’s buffer zone, potential other development in the expanded tourism zone is of concern.

► Logging/ Wood Harvesting

High Threat
Inside site, widespread(15-50%)
Outside site

So far timber extraction has been limited to forestry maintenance activities, as commercial logging is forbidden in national parks by the Protected Areas Act (Consultation with the State Party, 2017). However, vigilance is required in order to ensure that any timber extraction in the future is only done if justified as such maintenance activity, e.g. for safety reasons, and based on a scientific evaluation of potential impacts. It is also noted that the draft

management plan introduces a zone called “forests where intervention is allowed through forest management” in addition to the zone called “forests where intervention is allowed in case of fire, natural disasters and calamities”. It is unclear whether the introduction of the zone with forest management foresees activities other than those related to maintenance.

Protection and management

Assessing Protection and Management

► Relationships with local people

Some Concern

According to the State Party (2014), the relationship of Pirin National Park with local inhabitants and local communities is “Fair”. However, pressures for further economic development of the area and expansion of tourism infrastructure and facilities continue, as reported in a number of State of Conservation reports over the recent years, and part of civil society have been expressing strong concerns regarding the management of the property, particularly the new draft management plan.

► Legal framework

Some Concern

According to the State Party, legal framework for the maintenance of the Outstanding Universal Value of the World Heritage property provides an adequate basis for effective management and protection (State Party of Bulgaria, 2014). On paper, Pirin National Park has the highest level of protection at national (as a national park corresponding to IUCN PA management category II) and European levels (Natura 2000 site under the Birds and the Habitats Directives). However, recent developments have shown that there are some differences in the interpretation of this legal framework, as becomes clear from an ongoing Court case related to the proposed new draft Management Plan for the property which has been appealed by a group of civil society organizations. This is why this management aspect is of “Some Concern”.

► Enforcement

Some Concern

Numerous violations of Pirin National Park's regime have been reported. This indicates a lack of capacity to enforce the legal requirements for the park's protection (IUCN Consultation 2017b). However, a number of activities have recently been undertaken, including regular inspections, to detect and prevent any illegal activities, particularly illegal hunting.

► Integration into regional and national planning systems

Some Concern

The park is well integrated into the PA system; and is part of Natura 2000 network (IUCN Consultation 2017b). However, according to the State Party (2014), coordination between the range of administrative bodies / levels involved in the management of the property could be improved. It is also of concern that the development of spatial plans and tourism development planning of the Bansko and Dobrinishte ski zones under the newly drafted management plan may not be in line with the integrity of the property (IUCN Consultation, 2017). Increasing developments in the buffer zone and immediate vicinity of the property may compromise landscape connectivity.

► Management system

Serious Concern

In the past, the management system of Pirin National Park was considered relatively effective, clear, and stable if rather limited in terms of available resources. However, recently concerns have been expressed that the newly drafted management plan for the site would set out a management regime that – if indeed improved and implemented – may result in a level of tourism development that could threaten the integrity of the property (IUCN Consultation 2017). However, the draft new management plan has been appealed in Court by a group of civil society organizations.

► Management effectiveness

Some Concern

At the time of the most recent Periodic Reporting, the State Party considered

that the management regime was fully adequate to maintain the property's Outstanding Universal Value, and is being implemented fully (State Party of Bulgaria, 2014). However, there are concerns about the enforcement of the protection regime of the property (IUCN Consultation 2017).

► Implementation of Committee decisions and recommendations

Some Concern

The most recent Decision 40 COM 7B.93 (WHC 2016) included a number of requests with regards to the draft management plan for the property, including a request that ".. the draft Management Plan is revised to comply with the requirements set out by the Ministry of Environment and Water..". In March 2017 the Ministry of Environment issued a decision that the plan does not need a Strategic Environmental Assessment and Appropriate Assessment (IUCN Consultation, 2017). After protests of concerned stakeholders, the issue is now disputed in court. (Stakeholder consultation October 2017).

► Boundaries

Some Concern

At the time of the most recent Periodic Reporting in 2014, the State Party considered that the boundaries of Pirin National Park were adequate but poorly known, while its buffer zone did not limit the ability to maintain the property's Outstanding Universal Value but could be improved (State Party of Bulgaria, 2014). When Pirin NP was inscribed, the boundaries of the WHS did not follow an ecological rationale and hence created a rather fragmented property. In 2009, the Committee approved the extension of the property and the establishment of a buffer zone. The same decision, excluded the Bansko and Dobrenishte tourism zones (1,078.23 ha) and included these in a new buffer zone (World Heritage Committee, 2011). A GPS-based demarcation of the boundaries of the property was conducted as part of the project "Sustainable Management of Pirin National Park" (Ministry of Environment and Water 2015).

► Sustainable finance

Data Deficient

At the time of the most recent Periodic Reporting, the State Party noted that the funding was adequate but could be further improved; the funding was

sourced from the State Budget and project funds to equal parts (State Party of Bulgaria, 2014). However, up-to-date funding figures or a financial needs assessment are not available for Pirin National Park, which is why this management aspect is assessed as data deficient.

► Staff training and development

Some Concern

According to the State Party, human resources at Pirin National Park are below optimum to manage the World Heritage Property; availability of qualified staff was considered “fair”, and that of staff training opportunities as medium, in most categories (State Party of Bulgaria, 2014).

► Sustainable use

Serious Concern

While the State Party considers that there is some flow of economic benefits to local communities (State Party of Bulgaria, 2014), it appears that most current uses of the area, particularly for tourism and particularly for skiing, are not sustainable; at the same time, little appears to be done to foster other, truly sustainable uses.

► Education and interpretation programs

Some Concern

According to the State Party, there is a planned education and awareness programme but it only partly meets the needs and could be improved (State Party of Bulgaria, 2014). Limited education and interpretation programmes exist near Bansko, where a small visitor centre is operating. One area of concern is the awareness and understanding of the National Park and World Heritage site among local businesses, which has been characterized as poor by the State Party (2014).

► Tourism and visitation management

Some Concern

According to the State Party, there is an excellent visitor centre, an adequate site museum, as well as excellent guided tours, visitor trails and information materials available for visitors. There is management of the slowly increasing

number of visitors but it could be improved (State Party, 2014). Therefore, management of nature-based sustainable tourism within the property can be considered effective. However, if the current scale and the likely increase in winter use by visitors and the associated infrastructure needs in the property's buffer zone are considered, then there are serious concerns about this management aspect.

► Monitoring

Mostly Effective

The monitoring system of Pirin National Park is comprehensive, integrated and relevant to management needs and / or improving understanding of its Outstanding Universal Value (State Party of Bulgaria, 2014).

► Research

Mostly Effective

According to the State Party, knowledge about the values of the World Heritage property is sufficient for most key areas but there are gaps. It was stated that there was a comprehensive, integrated programme of research, but no further details about research papers and other outputs produced as a result of it were provided (State Party of Bulgaria, 2014).

Overall assessment of protection and management

Serious Concern

The management is relatively effective regarding daily tasks, but the power of the Park administration in the face of increasing interest in tourism development and resource use is very limited. The park administration is under severe economic constraints. Ongoing pressures for ski tourism development in the buffer zone of the property remain of concern and concerns have also been expressed by different stakeholders with regards to the draft new management plan.

► Assessment of the effectiveness of protection and management in

addressing threats outside the site

Some Concern

Intensive urban development in the major towns (Bansko, Razlog, GoceDeltchev) and only limited power of the National Park to manage these threats are of concern.

State and trend of values

Assessing the current state and trend of values

World Heritage values

▶ **A good example of the continuing evolution of flora and an example of high mountain ecosystems in natural condition**

High Concern
Trend:Deteriorating

Overall, the current state of values is good (IUCN 2011), with limited impact from visitors. However, disturbance and fragmentation of the site associated with the exclusion of the skiing areas (now part of the buffer zone) is of high concern. Data from the draft management plan show that important elements of the ecosystems of the Balkan uplands, such as large carnivores and characteristic bird species, are disturbed by the high human pressure in the ski zones; part of the plan states that “after extension of the ski zone above the town of Bansko, the area marks a significant reduction of the numbers of bird species with high conservation status such as three-toed and white-backed woodpecker, capercaillie, Tengmalm's Owl”. ... „Data on the numbers of the capercaillies from 20 years ago indicate about 220 individuals. The last 10 years its numbers dropped from 190 to about a 100 individuals”. (IUCN Consultation 2017).

▶ **Mountain scenery of exceptional beauty**

High Concern
Trend:Stable

The aesthetic values of some parts of the property have been negatively affected by ski infrastructure and these impacts remain (IUCN Consultation

2017), even though those areas have been consequently excluded from the boundaries of the property and included in its buffer zone.

► **Diverse limestone mountain landscapes**

Low Concern
Trend:Stable

Soil erosion in skiing areas and modification of the water regime, have been previously reported; however, overall the geological values of the property remain stable.

Summary of the Values

► **Assessment of the current state and trend of World Heritage values**

High Concern

Trend: Stable

Overall, the site appears to be in a relatively good state of conservation. However, disturbance and fragmentation of the site associated with the exclusion of the skiing areas incompatible with World Heritage status (now part of the buffer zone) is of high concern.

► **Assessment of the current state and trend of other important biodiversity values**

High Concern

Trend: Deteriorating

The biodiversity of flora and fauna is in the same current state as that of the ecosystems to which it contributes, and shows the same trend.

Additional information

Benefits

Understanding Benefits

► **Commercial wells**

The Park area provides drinking water for large populations in lowland areas

► **Outdoor recreation and tourism**

Large mountain areas with relatively little disturbance

► **Cultural identity and sense of belonging**

Pirin National Park provides ample cultural services.

► **Importance for research, Contribution to education**

The park also is a pilot area for research and education (State Party of Bulgaria, 2014).

Summary of benefits

The landscapes and ecosystems of Pirin National Park provide a wide range of supporting, provisioning, regulating and cultural ecosystem services, which offer ample benefits to local and national inhabitants as well as international visitors, in terms of water, tourism and recreation, the production and dissemination of art and knowledge, as well as the maintenance of a healthy living environment.

Projects

Compilation of active conservation projects

№	Organization/ individuals	Project duration	Brief description of Active Projects
1	Balkani Wildlife Society		Monitoring of birds and animals
2	WWF Danube Carpathian Programme		Advocacy, communication and public awareness raising
3	The Natural History Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Science		Science and monitoring

Compilation of potential site needs

№	Site need title	Brief description of potential site needs	Support needed for following years
1	Demonstration of successful models for economic development alternative to mass skiing development; enhance the knowledge and use of the UNESCO logo	Demonstration of successful models for economic development alternative to mass skiing development; enhance the knowledge and use of the UNESCO logo	From: 2018 To: 2022
2	PA Management effectiveness assessment	A standard management effectiveness assessment using either appraisal methods such as METT (WWF 2007) or “Enhancing our Heritage” (Hockings et al. 2008) or – better – a systematic analysis using the Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation (CMP 2013) would be a useful basis for further improvement of the management of the site.	
3	Monitoring of values, threats and management	Implementation of monitoring particularly for World Heritage values and supporting ecosystem values, direct threats and their drivers, and the effectiveness of site management to address them.	From: 2018 To: 2022
4	Communication, education and awareness raising activities aimed at local inhabitants, businesses and government	The lack of political support to an appropriate protection regime for Pirin National Park reflects a lack of understanding of national but particularly local stakeholders of the Outstanding Universal Value of Pirin National Park. An extensive and well resourced communication effort is necessary (but certainly not sufficient) to help achieve this.	From: 2018 To: 2022

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