

# Challenges of Nature Conservation in Postsocialist Bulgaria: A View From the Rhodope Mountains

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**Abstract**—Since the crumbling of its socialist dictatorship in 1989–90, nature conservation efforts in Bulgaria have accelerated. New parks have been established, protected area management plans are being developed, and legislation has been passed standardizing protected area categories. Yet this small and relatively biodiversity-rich country in southeastern Europe has faced many challenges in the postsocialist era as it has sought to protect its wildlands. The postsocialist restitutions of forests and agricultural land to former owners have affected land ownership in some areas identified or designated for protection. Western countries have provided financial and technical assistance to postsocialist conservation efforts, yet these efforts have been hampered by Bulgaria's difficult financial situation as well as relatively limited development of a protected area management network at the start of the period. The example of postsocialist conservation efforts in the Rhodope Mountains illustrates these challenges.

## Introduction

Since socialist regimes crumbled in the countries of the now former Soviet bloc in 1989–90, one of the environmental issues receiving attention has been nature conservation. While this reflects increasing concern in the last two decades about protecting biological diversity around the globe, some of the challenges to recent conservation efforts in Eastern Europe are associated specifically with the changes underway in the postsocialist period as these countries move away from the state-socialist system towards something that is presumed to be more socially just, politically democratic, and economically market-oriented. This paper examines recent wildland conservation efforts and challenges in the small southeast European country of Bulgaria.

While it did not escape the environmental contamination and resource damage associated with state socialism, substantial areas of relatively unspoiled mountain and wetland landscape remain in Bulgaria, and it ranks among the more biologically diverse countries in Eastern Europe (Baker and Baumgartl 1998; Meine 1994). Building upon presocialist and socialist-era efforts, conservation activities in the form of establishing new protected areas as well as developing structures and practices to manage them have accelerated

since the democratic changes of 1989–90. These activities have been supported in part by financial and technical assistance from the West, that is, from the United States and Western Europe. They have been challenged, however, by the country's difficult financial situation, limited infrastructure for nature conservation, and changing land ownership associated with postsocialist property restitutions.

After reviewing the history of Bulgaria nature conservation, this paper describes postsocialist efforts to establish and manage protected areas and then focuses in particular on the case of the Rhodope Mountains. It is written from the perspective of a non-Bulgarian observer, a cultural anthropologist who has spent a total of approximately three years in the country during the postsocialist period. In addition to the written sources cited throughout, the discussion that follows is based on interviews conducted and other information collected during my periodic research visits to Bulgaria on rural livelihoods, nature conservation, and environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) between 1995 and 2002.

## Brief History of Nature Conservation in Bulgaria

Formal nature conservation efforts in Bulgaria date back to the mid-1930s, with the creation of the first nature reserves and national park and the passage of the country's first law on nature protection. Bulgaria established its first two nature reserves in 1933—Silkosiya in the Strandja Mountain area and Parangalitsa in the Rila Mountains—and its first national park, on Vitosha Mountain just outside of the nation's capital, was created in 1934 (see fig. 1 for a map of the country showing the location of major cities and the main mountain ranges). The 1936 Law for the Protection of Bulgarian Nature specified several different types of protected territories: reserves (originally *branishta* or protected places), national parks, natural landmarks, and natural-historical places. The law called for special regimes for the protection and use of these territories, although it did not affect their ownership status. A few more reserves and small national parks were created in the 1930s and early 1940s, including Bistrichko Branishte and Torfeno Branishte on Vitosha Mountain, thereby beginning the tradition of designating strictly protected nature reserves within national park borders at an early date (Georgiev 1993; Peev and others 1995).

After a period of little action during World War II and the following decade, conservation again received attention in the 1960s and 1970s with the passage of a new law on nature protection in 1967 and the creation of additional protected

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areas (Georgiev 1993). In addition to the designation of some smaller protected sites, the second Bulgarian national park of any substantial size, Pirin National Park, was established in 1962. The 1980s similarly saw establishment of a few new parks as well as the designation of two existing protected areas as World Heritage Sites. Thus, the middle decades of the 20th century saw the creation of additional protected areas in Bulgaria. Yet, many of them were small, they often lacked management plans, and their oversight was scattered across many different government bodies, often local forestry authorities and municipalities (Mihova 1998).

## Bulgarian Conservation After the Fall of Socialism

The focus of government conservation efforts in Bulgaria shifted in the 1980s and especially in the 1990s from

relatively small nature reserves to national parks and nature parks that cover larger geographic areas. This parallels a worldwide trend since the 1970s of significant increases in the area of land under such formal protection (for example, IUCN 1994). Recently established parks include Central Balkan in 1991, Rila in 1992, Strandja in 1995, Persina and Rila Monastery in 2000, and Bulgarka in 2002 (see table 1), and this has led to a substantial increase in the area accorded some form of protected status in Bulgaria. As of 2005, Bulgaria has three national parks, 10 nature parks, 90 nature reserves, and hundreds of other protected natural phenomena and sites (see table 2). The parks are generally located in either wetlands or mountains, and the three national parks are all mountain ones. The national and nature parks alone cover 455,477 ha (1,125,508 acres), or about 4.1 percent of Bulgaria's territory. Two of the three national parks and four of the 10 nature parks have been established since the political changes of 1989–90. This

**Table 1**—Characteristics of National Parks and Nature Parks in Bulgaria.

|                           | Year established | Park area        | High point    | Reserves within park |                      |
|---------------------------|------------------|------------------|---------------|----------------------|----------------------|
|                           |                  |                  |               | Number               | Percent of park area |
|                           |                  | <i>hectares</i>  | <i>meters</i> |                      |                      |
| <b>Nature Parks:</b>      |                  |                  |               |                      |                      |
| Blue Stones               | 1980             | 11,380.8         | 1,182         | 1                    | 6                    |
| Bulgarka                  | 2002             | 21,772.2         | 1,511         | 0                    | —                    |
| Golden Sands              | 1943             | 1,320.7          | 269           | 0                    | —                    |
| Persina <sup>a</sup>      | 2000             | 21,762.2         | 260           | 3                    | 2                    |
| Rila Monastery            | 2000             | 27,370.7         | 2,671         | 1                    | 13                   |
| Rusenski Lom <sup>b</sup> | 1970             | 3,408.0          | 255           | 0                    | —                    |
| Shumen Plateau            | 1980             | 3,895.8          | 502           | 1                    | 2                    |
| Strandja                  | 1995             | 116,068.0        | 710           | 5                    | 5                    |
| Vitosha                   | 1934             | 26,606.0         | 2,290         | 2                    | 6                    |
| Vrachanski Balkan         | 1989             | 28,844.8         | 1,482         | 1                    | 5                    |
| <b>Total area</b>         |                  | <b>262,281.2</b> |               |                      |                      |
| <b>National Parks:</b>    |                  |                  |               |                      |                      |
| Central Balkan            | 1991             | 71,669.5         | 2,376         | 9                    | 28                   |
| Pirin                     | 1962             | 40,332.4         | 2,915         | 2                    | 15                   |
| Rila                      | 1992             | 81,046.0         | 2,925         | 4                    | 20                   |
| <b>Total area</b>         |                  | <b>193,047.9</b> |               |                      |                      |

Source: Except as noted below: National Database of the Protected Areas in Republic of Bulgaria; Ministry of Environment and Waters, National Nature Protection Service; Internet database located at <http://chm.moew.government.bg/pa/>; and Parks in Bulgaria, pages for individual park units; Internet documents located at <http://www.bg-parks.net/> [both accessed 6/8/2005].

<sup>a</sup> For Persina: email of 8/19/05 from Valeri Valchinkov, Chief Expert, Protected Areas Division, National Nature Protection Service, Ministry of Environment and Waters.

<sup>b</sup> For Rusenski Lom: email of 8/7/2005 from Milko Berberov, director of Nature Park Rusenski Lom.

**Table 2**—Protected areas in Bulgaria.

| Category           | Number |
|--------------------|--------|
| Reserve            | 55     |
| National park      | 3      |
| Natural landmark   | 340+   |
| Maintained reserve | 35     |
| Nature park        | 10     |
| Protected place    | 400+   |

Source: Protected Areas; Internet document located at <http://chm.moew.government.bg/nnp/IndexDetails.cfm?viD=23> [accessed 6/8/2005]; Ministry for Environment and Waters; National Nature Protection Service.

represents nearly a three-fold increase in the area protected during the postsocialist period (Ministry of Environment and Waters 2000). Bulgarian conservationists also take pride in what they describe as “the greatest network of strict reserves in Europe” and the fact that 60 percent of the territory of strict nature reserves is located within park boundaries, so that the parks serve as buffer zones to the more strictly protected and ecologically important reserves (Peev and others 1995; see table 1). Recall here that this practice is not new; it started in the 1930s with Bulgaria’s first national park.

The first postsocialist decade has also seen a more systematic approach to nature conservation. In the early 1990s, Bulgaria developed a National Biological Diversity Conservation Strategy with help from the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Biodiversity Support Program—a consortium of three U.S. based environmental organizations (Meine 1994)—and a National Biodiversity Conservation Plan was approved in 1999 (Ministry of Environment and Waters 2000). The Ministry of the Environment (now the Ministry of Environment and Waters) was established in 1990 as a ministerial-level body with responsibility for environmental issues (Baker and Baumgartl 1998), and the National Nature Protection Service (NNPS) was created within the ministry in 1994 as the government unit with primary responsibility for protected areas and biodiversity conservation. Creation of the NNPS was part of an ongoing institutional strengthening effort, sponsored in part by external donors, to help Bulgaria create its own protected area management system.

An important development for Bulgarian nature conservation at the national level was passage of a postsocialist law on protected areas by the National Assembly in November 1998. The law sets out categories of protected areas in the country (see table 2), their purposes, and the conditions for their declaration, protection, use, and management (*Durzhaven Vestnik*, No. 133, 11 November 1998). The six categories of protected areas are largely designed to reflect the internationally recognized standards of the World Conservation Union (IUCN) (Government of the Republic of Bulgaria, Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, and United Nations Development Programme 2003). Of concern for some environmentalists in the development of the law was a distinction made in the legislation between ‘national’ parks, which are protected areas owned exclusively by the Bulgarian state, and ‘nature’ parks, which include lands that are in private, municipal, or other non-state ownership as well as state-owned lands. The two types of parks also differ in the kinds of activities and developments that are allowed within their boundaries, with national parks being more strictly protected. Previously only the term national park had been used, with the documents establishing each individual park setting out the conditions for that specific park. At the time that the law was passed, the country had 12 national parks (Ministry of Environment and Waters 2000). Under the new legislation, only three of the country’s parks—Rila, Pirin and Central Balkan—retained the status of national parks, in part due to their land ownership status. Most of the others were re-classified as nature parks. For both nature and national parks, the law required the development of park management plans as well as a review of the existing park boundaries.

Beyond these structural developments at the government level, numerous projects with a conservation focus have been undertaken by the Bulgarian government, international donors, and a re-emerging community of Bulgarian environmental NGOs. Many of these projects have received financial support, technical assistance, or both from various Western governments and donor organizations. Details of these efforts are described elsewhere (Cellarius 2004). The discussion that follows highlights some of the key challenges to nature conservation in postsocialist Bulgaria, before turning to the specific case of efforts to establish a large-scale protected area in the Rhodope Mountains.

## Challenges to Nature Conservation in Bulgaria

One challenge facing nature conservation efforts in Bulgaria is that while some protected areas exist on paper, in many cases, the existing parks and reserves in the early 1990s had little in the way of on-the-ground management and oversight. A summary of the NGO contributions to Bulgaria’s biodiversity strategy, presented in March 1993, for example, included the statement that “the members of the NGOs report that, in the course of the many visits they have made to protected areas throughout the country, they have never been inspected by anybody. This leads to the conclusion that most of the protected areas exist only on paper” (Mihova 1998: p. 709). While this is changing through some of the projects and programs mentioned earlier, it still means that Bulgaria’s parks and reserves are in a developmental or capacity-building stage. This reflects a more general observation made by Baker and Baumgartl (1998), who write that the Bulgarian government lacks the administrative and institutional capacity to tackle environmental problems in many instances.

This stems, in part, from the country’s dire economic situation in the postsocialist period and consequent lack of government financial resources. In a 1995 interview, the then director of the National Nature Protection Service expressed a desire to mobilize his employees quite literally by providing them with the vehicles needed to do their jobs. And this was before the near collapse of Bulgaria’s economy in the winter of 1996-97. The financial support of foreign governments and donor organizations, such as two large projects supported in part by the Global Environmental Facility and several smaller projects supported by the Swiss government, have helped further Bulgarian conservation efforts in the context of limited internal funding for environmental projects. Yet it remains to be seen what will happen when foreign donors pull out; some of the internationally sponsored conservation projects have been extended beyond their planned time frames in part due to concerns about whether the efforts will be sustainable without the Western donors (Cellarius 2004).

Beyond the questions of funding for park management and administration and the growing pains associated with developing a functioning protected area management system, Bulgaria faces the challenge of balancing conservation and development as well as issues related to changing property ownership. The first issue is likely a familiar one to many

who work in conservation. Some examples from the Rhodope Mountains are discussed in a later section (see also Staddon and Cellarius 2002 for examples from elsewhere in the country).

An issue perhaps more unique to the former socialist-bloc countries concerns property restitution, especially the restitutions of agricultural land and forests. During the socialist era, most agricultural land in Bulgaria was incorporated into cooperative farms or other state-run agricultural enterprises, and many forests previously owned by individuals, religious institutions, municipalities, and other non-state owners were nationalized. Subsequently, one of the tasks undertaken by postsocialist parliaments was to pass legislation to undo these actions. The Law on the Ownership and Use of Agricultural Lands (*Durzhaven Vestnik*, No. 17, 1 March 1991) was one of the early acts passed by the Grand National Assembly in February 1991, while Bulgaria's forest restitution was not authorized until November 1997 (*Durzhaven Vestnik*, No. 110, 25 November 1997). In both cases, the restitutions were based on a principle that a 2000 report from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) called "historical justice" in that they sought to "restore ownership and property rights to former (pre-communist era) owners and their heirs" (OECD 2000: p. 16). The restitutions have affected conservation efforts, as a couple of examples below illustrate. (For additional discussion of the agricultural land and forest restitutions and their implications for natural resource use, see Cellarius 2003.)

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the impact of postsocialist property restitutions on conservation efforts in Bulgaria comes from Rila National Park, in the country's southeast. It is here that one finds the highest point in Bulgaria, and indeed on the Balkan Peninsula, Peak Musala (2,925 m or 9,596 ft). Currently the largest of Bulgaria's national parks at approximately 81,000 ha (200,155 acres), Rila National Park was created in 1992. The park was initially much larger, and this is the story to be related here. Under amendments to the Protected Areas Law passed in 2000 (*Durzhaven Vestnik*, No. 28, 30 March 2000), more than 23,000 ha (56,834 acres) of Rila National Park—some 20 percent of the park's former territory—was removed from the national park and reclassified as the Rila Monastery Nature Park. This reclassification was done as part of returning these lands to private ownership under the provisions of Bulgaria's forest restitution.

Religious organizations and institutions were among the entities owning forests in the decades before socialist rule in Bulgaria. Following passage of Bulgaria's forest restitution legislation in 1997, the Bulgarian Orthodox church applied for restitution of a large area of forests around Rila Monastery. The largest monastery in Bulgaria, Rila Monastery was designated as a World Heritage Site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1983 in recognition of its role in protecting Bulgarian culture during several centuries of Ottoman rule (UNESCO World Heritage Committee 1983). Located in a valley high in the Rila Mountains, the monastery holds a special place in the hearts of many Bulgarians. Its forests fell largely within the borders of Rila National Park, but under Bulgaria's new protected area law the designation 'national park' is limited to areas that are exclusively state property. The compromise worked out was to designate the

forests and associated lands returned to the church as a nature park, a designation that places fewer restrictions on allowed activities. It is too early to know the long-term consequences of this action, however, some conservationists were concerned about what one person described as a bite that was taken out of one of the country's premier protected areas, and what it means for the park's integrity.

## Creating a Nature Park in the Rhodope Mountains

The Rhodope Mountains are an extensive, moderate-elevation mountain range located along Bulgaria's southern border with Greece (see fig. 1 and fig. 2). The largest in area of Bulgaria's mountains, the Rhodope range covers an area of 14,735 km<sup>2</sup> (5,689 square miles) in the country. About 80 percent of the range—which covers a total area of roughly 18,000 km<sup>2</sup> (6,950 square miles)—is in Bulgaria; the remainder is in Greece. These mountains average 785 m (2,575 ft) in elevation above sea level overall, with higher territory in the central and western part of the range and lower hills to the east. The high point at Peak Golyam Perelik in the south central part of the range reaches an elevation of 2,191 m (7,188 ft) (Danchev 1998; Perry 1995). Although no large-scale protected area has been established in the Rhodope Mountains, numerous smaller nature reserves and other protected sites have been designated in the region (see fig. 3), including four small reserves listed under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Program. Most of these designations occurred prior to the political changes of 1989-90, although the region has seen various projects and proposals in the postsocialist period.

Conservation efforts in the lower elevation eastern Rhodope typically focus on the raptors found there, while attention to the western and central parts of the range has a wider biodiversity focus on the plants and animals found in the thick forests, deep rock gorges and high mountain pastures. Large mammals found in the region include brown bears, wolves, red deer, wild boars, and wild goats or chamois (see Peev and others 1995). The Rhodope rank second, after the Balkan Mountains, in the number of plant species found only in Bulgaria with more than 80 endemic species and subspecies. About 16 of these are found only in the Rhodope (Peev and others 1995).

Although not as dramatic as the Rila case, property restitution has also affected postsocialist conservation efforts in the Rhodope Mountains. Specifically, one explanation for the delay in establishing one or more protected areas in the region during the 1990s was the need to first resolve issues of land restitution and property ownership. Unlike other mountains in Bulgaria, where settlements typically ring more compact mountain terrain, villages and small towns are scattered throughout the range (see fig. 4). This is significant for conservation efforts in that property ownership and local livelihoods consequently play perhaps a greater role here than in other Bulgarian mountains. While the forests in most of Bulgaria's other mountain ranges were largely in state or municipal ownership prior to nationalization, private forest ownership in some parts of the Rhodope was extensive, and the forest restitution did not take place until the early 2000s. And now that the restitutions have largely

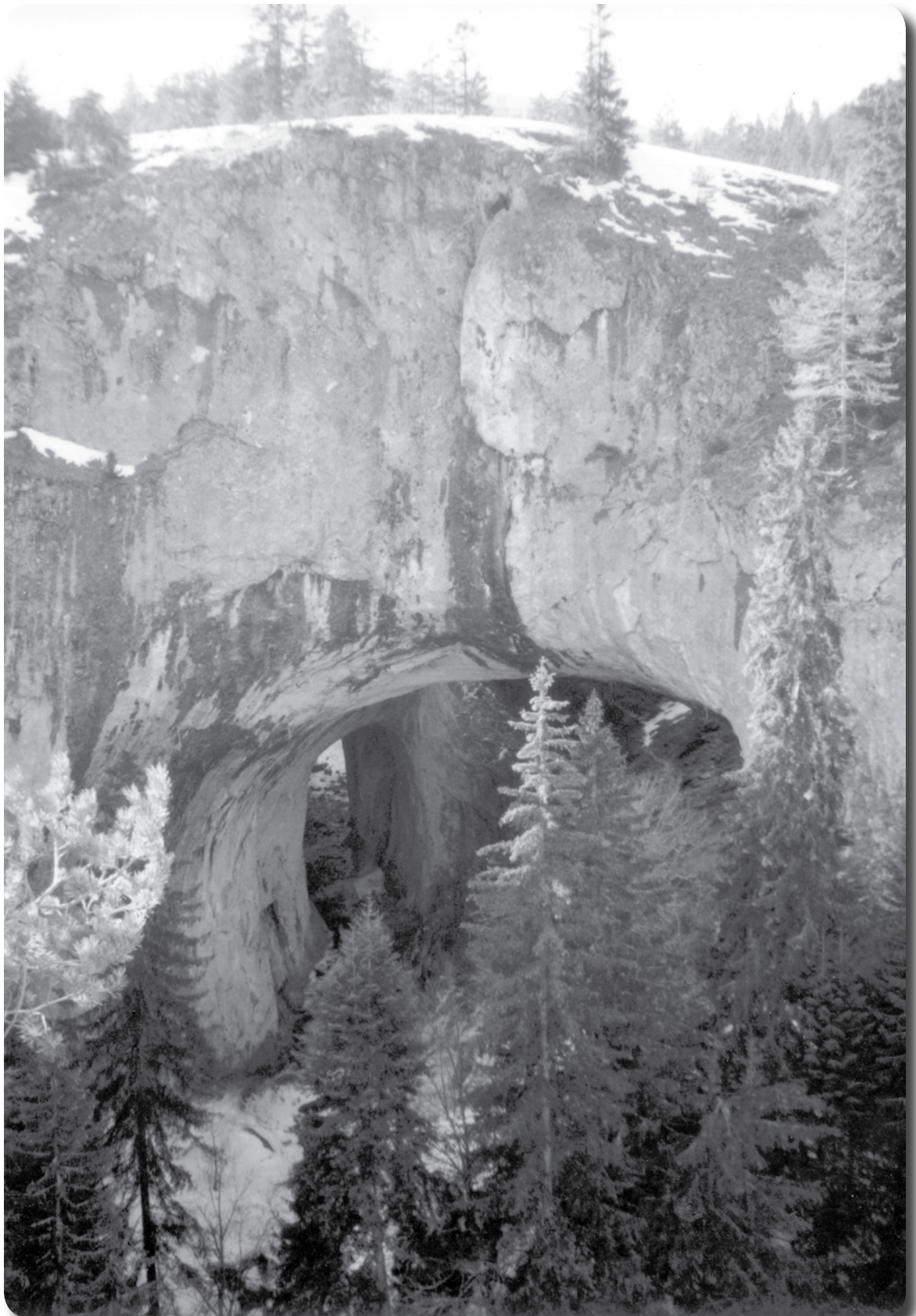


Map prepared by University of Kentucky Cartography Lab

**Figure 1**—Map of Bulgaria showing location of major cities, rivers, and mountain ranges (map prepared by University of Kentucky Cartography Lab).



**Figure 2**—From ridge tops, the Rhodope Mountain landscape appears to consist of meadows, thick evergreen forests, and mountains (photo by the author).



**Figure 3**—The Wonderful Bridges (Chudnite Mostove) is a natural landmark located a short distance from the author's village field site. It is one of several small, protected sites in the Rhodope (photo by the author).



**Figure 4**—A closer view of the Rhodope landscape reveals scattered stone buildings along with hay meadows and potato fields of village farmers. The borders of the hay fields are discernible as lines of brush or low stone walls (photo by the author).

been completed, the high percentage of non-state ownership of many agricultural lands and forests in the Rhodope region has affected local support for the establishment of a protected area, as will be discussed below.

While not an uninhabited, roadless wilderness, the Rhodope include substantial wildlands that are home to a wide variety of flora and fauna. This wildland status is recognized in existing protected area designations as well as in ongoing conservation planning efforts. The Rhodope are identified in Bulgaria's biodiversity conservation strategy as a top priority for conservation and for the creation of new protected areas (Meine 1994), and Bulgarian environmental NGOs and external donors have been engaged in conservation-related efforts in this region since the early 1990s. During the early 1990s, for example, the Worldwide Fund for Nature provided support to two Bulgarian NGOs for conservation-related projects in the Rhodope (Cellarius 2004). In August 2000, two NGOs collected more than 2,400 signatures in support of a park designation at a folklore festival in the Rhodope (see fig. 5), and a large conservation planning project is now underway with funding from the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) as well as the Bulgarian government.

Yet, 15 years after the fall of socialism in the country, the conditions for conservation in the Rhodope are not that different from those in other parts of the country a decade or so earlier. The project document, entitled "Conservation of Globally Significant Biodiversity in the Landscape of Bulgaria's Rhodope Mountains" (Government of the Republic of Bulgaria, Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, and United Nations Development Programme 2003), describes some of the following conditions:

- Only 12 of 55 protected areas in the Rhodope are larger than 500 ha (1,236 acres) and very few are large enough to maintain viable habitats or populations of species. Many protected areas are habitat "islands" surrounded by pasture or production-oriented state forestlands.
- Only four of the 12 Rhodope protected areas greater than 500 ha (1,236 acres) in size are regularly patrolled by a guard or ranger.
- None of the protected areas in Rhodope are managed on-site. They are all managed remotely by the regional forestry board or the Regional Inspectorate for Environment and Waters.
- Few protected areas in the Rhodope Mountains have management plans or data from ongoing field research.

In an effort to alter these conditions, the project document describes the creation of two nature parks, one of approximately 250,000 ha (617,763 acres) in the Eastern Rhodope and one of approximately 400,000 ha (988,422 acres) in the Western Rhodope. Compare these sizes to the current parks listed in table 1; they would be significantly larger than Bulgaria's existing parks and would more than double the area of the country protected as a nature park or national park. Given the mosaic of land ownership in the Rhodope, any large-scale protected area created would include substantial areas of private and municipal land as well as land under state ownership. A project fact sheet notes that there are 28 priority municipalities in the two sub-regions of interest (UNDP 2005), and the project document recognizes the need for intensive consultation with local stakeholders in establishing the park as a result of this mixed land ownership.



**Figure 5**—The sign on this booth at the 2000 folklore fair at a high Rhodope Mountain meadow called Rozhen says, “Support the establishment of Nature Park Western Rhodope.” Staff and volunteers from two environmental organizations staffed the booth and collected signatures in support of creating the nature park (photo by the author).

Meanwhile, concerns about balancing conservation and development are clearly on the minds of local officials as they consider whether to support the establishment of a park. In August 2001, an activist from Green Balkans, an active and well-established Bulgarian environmental organization working in the Rhodope, had just returned from a road trip during which he visited with municipal leaders in the region of the proposed nature park. He reported that some communities had been supportive of the nature park concept from the start, but that others—particularly those with substantial forest resources and heavily involved in timber production—were more reserved in their support due to concerns that the nature park designation would negatively impact their development opportunities. The president of the Bulgarian Society for the Conservation of the Rhodope Mountains, another NGO working in the region, likewise related that local officials she spoke with had similar concerns about the kind of restrictions designation as a nature park might place on their ability to develop local natural resources. In addition to logging, development opportunities that are being discussed for the Rhodope and could potentially conflict with conservation efforts, are ski area development and mining.

## Conclusions

This paper has described some of the key challenges that have faced and in some cases continue to face wildland conservation efforts in Bulgaria during the postsocialist period. Examples from the Rhodope Mountains mirror in many cases the situation elsewhere in the country. Some of these challenges are familiar to conservationists in many

parts of the world, such as how to balance conservation with various kinds of development or resource exploitation. Limited funding and limited conservation infrastructure are similarly challenges facing many areas, particularly in countries with limited economic resources, which have seen rapid increases in their protected area networks in recent years, or both. Issues of property restitution, including ownership, as well as how the restored land will be managed, are perhaps more unique to postsocialist countries. For the Rhodope, the recent restitution of formerly private forests has been particularly significant for land ownership in some parts of the range.

Yet, with the help of various partners and projects and the involvement of Bulgarian NGOs, Bulgaria appears to be making progress in addressing the challenges of wildland conservation in the postsocialist period. It has taken more than a decade, but efforts seem to be accelerating to create possibly two large nature parks in the Rhodope Mountains, an area with particularly interesting challenges to conservation due to their populated nature and the dependence of local residents on the area's natural resources, but also one with considerable wildlands. The landscape approach being taken, with its emphasis on sustainable livelihoods and involving local stakeholders, seems to be a reasonable one given the populated nature of the Rhodope and the reliance of local residents on the resources found there.

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