

## Article

# Protected Natural Areas and Ecotourism—Priority Strategies for Future Development in Selected Serbian Case Studies

Milena Cvetković<sup>1</sup>, Jovana Brankov<sup>2,3,\*</sup> , Nevena Ćurčić<sup>4</sup> , Sanja Pavlović<sup>5</sup>, Milica Dobričić<sup>6</sup>   
and Tatiana N. Tretiakova<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management, 22–26, Nemanjina, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia; milena.cvetkovic4@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Geographical Institute “Jovan Cvijić” of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Đure Jakšića 9, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia

<sup>3</sup> Institute of Sports, Tourism and Service, South Ural State University, 76 Lenin Ave., 454080 Chelyabinsk, Russia; tt1@mail.ru

<sup>4</sup> Department of Geography, Tourism and Hotel Management, Faculty of Natural Sciences, University of Novi Sad, Trg. D. Obradovića 3, 21000 Novi Sad, Serbia; nevena.curcic@dgt.uns.ac.rs

<sup>5</sup> University of Belgrade, Faculty of Geography, Studentski trg 3/III, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia; sanja.pavlovic@gef.bg.ac.rs

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, 22–26, Nemanjina, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia; milica.dobricic@mgsi.gov.rs

\* Correspondence: j.brankov@gi.sanu.ac.rs

**Abstract:** This research deals with the evaluation of tourist attractions in selected protected areas (PAs) in Serbia for the purpose of developing ecotourism. Using the integral AHP-SWOT method, two authentic mountain areas were analyzed—Stara Planina Nature Park and Suva Planina Special Nature Reserve. The results confirmed the presence of numerous natural and, to a lesser extent, anthropogenic resources that represent the basis for the future ecotourism activities. However, significant weaknesses were also registered, which are reflected in overall poverty, underdeveloped infrastructure and depopulation. The analysis also showed that the highest rated factors for the development of ecotourism are local products that should be offered on the regional market, as well as the use of the geographical position of both areas (near the state border) through the use of donor funds (IPA funds). The application of the AHP-SWOT method enabled the definition and prioritization of several development strategies, of which the ones with the greatest weight are based on the use of the variegated biodiversity of both PAs. This research advances knowledge about strategic decision-making in PAs and could be beneficial to destination managers for the creation of successful strategic plans. Results suggest that future actions should be aimed at maximizing the detected advantages, which means creating an appropriate development policy, drafting legislation, encouraging social mobilization activities and determining the institutional elements for the development and management of ecotourism.

**Keywords:** protected areas; AHP-SWOT; ecotourism; Stara Planina Mountain; Suva Planina Mountain; Serbia



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## 1. Introduction

According to a specific academic point of view, tourism is interpreted as a fundamental element that determines whether a particular society is characterized by awareness and a sufficient level of understanding related to the conservation and preservation of a space [1]. The areas with original landscapes, without anthropogenic influence, have always attracted the attention of many tourists. Over time, some were placed under protection, and tourism began to develop here. Protected nature and unchanged ecosystems have become the primary motive for the arrival of certain groups of visitors interested in various types of tourist activities. It has been established that tourism, as an activity entirely dependent on

the quality of the environment if properly organized, can be beneficial for the areas under protection in many ways due to its positive effects [2].

Over time, with the development of the concept of sustainable tourism, its specific segment—ecotourism—was defined. Opposed to mass visits, this unique form of tourism is based on the responsible behavior of tourists and a proper attitude towards values. It is evident that ecotourism is a rapidly growing sector, especially since tourists, following trends, are looking for new destinations and experiences [3], and want to get to know life in local communities. Ecotourism is interpreted as a holistic product, where the experiences of tourists and their satisfaction influence the perception of the destination [4]. Its basis is natural resources and authentic products so that the economic profit remains in the ecotourism destination [5].

Taking into account the definition of ecotourism, it is clear that the activities of tourists are realized in nature, where protected natural areas are especially valued, i.e., territories with diverse geo, biodiversity and cultural heritage, such as national parks, special nature reserves, nature parks, landscapes of exceptional features and natural monuments. The integrative role of ecotourism is reflected in the harmony between environmental protection and tourists' use of protected areas.

The subject of this research is two authentic protected areas (PAs) in Serbia, which belong to different protected categories. Stara Planina Mountain (Mt.) is a Nature Park that was proposed in 2020 as the sixth national park in the Republic of Serbia, while Suva Planina Mountain is a Special Nature Reserve. A nature park is an area of well-preserved natural values with predominantly preserved natural ecosystems intended to preserve diversity and satisfy scientific, educational, spiritual, aesthetic, cultural, tourist and other activities, following the traditional way of life and sustainable development [6]. A special nature reserve is an area with an unaltered or slightly altered nature, significant due to its uniqueness, rarity or representativeness. It includes the habitat of endangered wild species of plants, animals and fungi, where man lives in harmony with nature. The special reserve preserves natural features, a gene pool, ecological balance, scientific research and education, limited visits and a traditional way of life [7].

The natural and anthropogenic tourist attractions of the investigated mountains (Stara Planina Mt. and Suva Planina Mt.) have not been adequately studied, evaluated and presented in the existing scientific literature. Their insufficient tourist utilization, promotion and recognition on the market are evident. Therefore, it is necessary to determine the degree of their protection, opportunities and limitations of tourist supply and demand, in order to define the strategic directions of ecotourism development. Accordingly, the goal of the research is to evaluate the tourist attractiveness of selected PAs in Serbia for the purpose of developing ecotourism and to determine future directions of its development through the definition of priority strategies. The potential role and impact of ecotourism on the development of the broader area of researched PAs, which largely belong to underdeveloped areas of Serbia, will also be analyzed.

The rest of the manuscript is organized as follows: the next section refers to the literature review and the theoretical framework on the general approach to ecotourism worldwide and in Serbia, as well as on the methods of evaluating ecotourism destinations. A detailed analysis of the literature was the basis for defining the hypotheses, which are also presented in this section. In Section 3, the specificity of the investigated territories is described, while in Section 4, the integral AHP-SWOT method is presented. Section 5 contains an analysis of the obtained results, followed by a discussion of these results in the next section. The manuscript ends with a Conclusions section.

## 2. Literature Review

In this section, the literature review on the general research approach to ecotourism, the research approach to ecotourism in Serbia, as well as the methods, techniques and models of evaluation of ecotourism destinations will be given.

### 2.1. A General Research Approach to Ecotourism

In the scientific literature, during the last few decades, there has been a debate about what ecotourism is and is not [8]. This is especially true for studies linking natural resource management and tourism [9]. In 1987, the Mexican architect Caballo Lascaurin, in the first definition of ecotourism, emphasized that it is a trip to unpolluted nature in order to learn and enjoy the nature and cultural heritage of a particular area [10]. Chiu et al. [11] believe that ecotourism does not consume resources, has an educational and adventurous character and it is possible to organize it in undeveloped, little-visited, natural, cultural and historical areas. Synonyms for ecotourism are “tourism in nature”, “green travel”, “socially responsible tourism” [12].

The World Council on Ecotourism (2002, Quebec), the World Council on Sustainable Development (2002, Johannesburg) and the Global Conference on Ecotourism (2007, Oslo) show the importance of ecotourism at the global level [13]. Also, its impact on poverty alleviation by creating new jobs and increasing biological diversity is especially highlighted. Choi et al. [14] believe that ecotourism is important for the international market and is a key factor in sustainable tourism, necessary to preserve the ecological balance. Achieving economic, social and ecological sustainability of the local community certainly favours tourism [15], especially in rural areas [16].

Ecotourism is a particular segment of sustainable tourism (the general relationship between the geographic environment and tourism) based on protected areas [17]. Sustainable tourism applies to all tourist movements, while ecotourism involves only certain activities [18]. Ecotourism is particularly important for strengthening awareness of the connection between the environment and tourism, i.e., nature and man. Educating and raising awareness among residents about the importance of ecosystems can help protect the area. A positive social impact is achievable if the costs and benefits of conservation will be shared equally [19]. Pointing out the importance of ecotourism in developing countries, Ćurčić [20] analyzes the positive and negative impacts of tourism on PAs, as well as the effects of socio-economic gains from tourism.

It is emphasized that ecotourists respect not only the natural environment, but also local communities and their cultural heritage [21]. From this point of view, ecotourism is a protective approach to preserve culture and nature in PAs, with little impact on nature [22]. At the same time, it contributes to strategies that define rights, duties and responsibilities towards ecology and the environment. Carrying capacity, local communities, climate change, nature conservation, human-wildlife conflicts and geo-tourism are research topics that have appeared more frequently in recent studies [23–28].

Sánchez-Prieto and associates [29] proposed the projection of ecotourism (short-term, medium-term and long-term) based on ecotourism activities following environmental policy. All those who use its services should be aware of the preservation of the ecosystem. Gradinac and Jegdić [30] state that in PAs, complex urban planning requirements should be applied when building infra and supra-structure buildings, and such ecological standards also mean increased costs. The construction of the Visitor Center activates the possibilities of ecotourism in the PA and represents a model of sustainable income generation [31].

ECOS (Ecotourism Opportunity Spectrum) is significant for ecotourism since the ecological database determines the tendencies in planning the sustainable development of ecotourism [32]. Ecotourism contributes to the long-term planning of the development of protected natural resources and their biological diversity [33]. However, some residents believe ecotourism is a careless attitude towards the environment [34]. In Cameroon, passive participation in ecotourism, limited benefit to the local community, inadequate management of PAs and little interest of residents to contribute to tourism development are evident [35–38].

Sahahiri and associates [39], analyzing studies on ecotourism, concluded that they mainly refer to the impacts of ecotourism on the environment, the benefits that stakeholders have in developing ecotourism, and the responsible behavior of local communities. They found five dimensions to “measure” ecotourism: nature, education/environmental

protection, sustainability, socio-cultural amenities and tourist satisfaction. An analysis of ecotourism practices in Potatso National Park, Yunnan Province, China shows the involvement of five dimensions: natural environment, environmental education, community participation, experience in ecotourism development and socioeconomic support. The five most significant elements related to the ecosystem, the sensory and behavioral experience of ecotourism, ecological objects and interpretation systems were also singled out [40].

## 2.2. Research Approach to Ecotourism in Serbia

Ecotourism in Serbia has a good resource base that is poorly utilized and insufficiently researched, which is why scientific research should be emphasized, with a continuous qualitative and quantitative contribution.

Ecotourism in protected natural areas of Vojvodina was studied by Tomić et al. [41], who analyzed tourist geographic location, natural and anthropogenic attractions, tourist infrastructure and superstructure. Analyzing the development tendencies of Serbian ecotourism, Milenković and Bošković [42] present the possibilities of cluster development, stating that Southwestern Serbia has the most significant potential. Gajić and Cvetanović [43] provide the theoretical foundations of ecotourism and examples of potential ecotourism destinations in Serbia.

The research carried out by Stojanović et al. [44] dealt with the assessment of the environmental impact of ecotourism in a developing destination. The research results on the Upper Danube have shown that protected plant and animal species are not threatened by ecotourism, while a negative impact is possible in the future. In order to prevent it, it is necessary to adopt ecotourism activities to protect natural values. Stojanović et al. [45] analyzed the participation of the local population in heritage conservation programs in the Zasavica Special Nature Reserve. The survey showed that half of the respondents want to contribute to preserving nature and developing tourism in Zasavica. In contrast, the views on tourism and nature protection differ. It was pointed out that the respondents recognize the socio-cultural and economic benefits, as well as the negative impacts of tourism development on the environment.

The concept of ecotourism was researched in the PAs of Kopački Rit (Croatia) and Gornje Podunavlje (Serbia), in the Mura–Drava–Danube (Croatia) and Bačko Podunavlje (Serbia) Biosphere Reserves, with the aim of comparison. The results provide an insight into nature protection according to national legislation and international conventions, nature degradation and the challenges of managing PAs, cooperation between nature protection and tourism, projects on nature protection and the development of ecotourism and the involvement of the local community [46].

Linking ecotourism and wine tourism in Central Serbia is a process that recognizes opposing economic, ecological and social goals. Wine tourism promotes responsible and sustainable tourism because it ensures local development and helps maintain culture and tradition [47]. The subject of the manuscript written by Ivan and Jelena Božović [48] is the identification of ways of financing ecotourism in Serbia. However, aspects of institutional cooperation, legislation and agricultural and rural development programs are also pointed out. Matijašević-Obradović [49], in the analysis of investments in environmental protection, emphasized investments and current expenditures, as well as costs for activities related to protection. Depicting economic activities in the Fruška gora National Park, Bjeljac et al. [50] state that there is an evident conflict between those who advocate for the continuation of economic activity and those who strive to preserve biodiversity and protect nature.

Đurđić et al. [51] compared four PAs, selected on the basis of the area size (Djerdap National Park, Stara Planina Nature Park, Deliblatska peščara Special Nature Reserve, Vlasina Landscape of Exceptional Features), and the evaluation results enable improvement of the situation in the area of nature protection, development of tourism and accompanying infrastructure and education of visitors.

### 2.3. Methods, Techniques and Models of Evaluation of Ecotourism Destinations

The valorization of PAs implies the analysis of the current situation, the identification of the advantages and limitations of the tourist offer and the direction of tourism development. Tourist valorization defines the structural and value component of natural and anthropogenic resources [52]. Mojić [53], using the methodology of the World Tourism Organization, evaluated the natural and anthropogenic tourism resources of southern Serbia and defined their role in the development of certain forms of tourism and complementary activities.

Temimović and Glavaš [54] concluded, using the example of the valorization of the Pliva lakes, that the investigated hydrological resources are important for the development of selective forms of tourism, especially ecotourism, which enables the extension of the tourist season, an increase in the number of tourists and economic profit. Floričić and Jelenković [55] pointed out the importance of managing protected natural resources through the tourist valorization of national parks in Spain and Croatia.

Mayer [56] conducted a cost-benefit analysis of the Bavarian Forest, the oldest national park in Germany. In addition to surveys, qualitative interviews and secondary data sources, he also applied methods of environmental valorization. Barčić and Panić [57] used the comparative method and SWOT analysis in the ecological and spatial valorization of the Kopački Rit PA in order to indicate conservation measures and ways of managing natural values. Di Franco et al. [58] applied the “visitor satisfaction” model to investigate visitors’ behavior and preferences in a PA in southern Italy. This approach shows that the users’ views of natural resources services are necessary in the evaluation process.

The AHP method (Analytical Hierarchy Process) is also used to evaluate the value of PAs, which assigns priorities to different elements, whereby the evaluation and ranking help tourists choose locations [59]. Mansour et al. [60] used the AHP method to determine the suitability of the ecotourism destination Masirah Island in Oman, applying thirteen criteria. Kabassi et al. [61], using websites of national parks in Greece and the AHP method, investigated priorities related to their ecological value, visitor restrictions and environmental activities. The AHP method was also applied in the decision-making research on the management of the Fruška Gora National Park, using the following criteria: preservation of biodiversity, provision of environmental protection, tourism and leisure, theoretical research, protection of untouched nature, protection of natural/anthropogenic features, education and balanced use of natural resources [62].

In order to sustainably manage geodiversity in the territory of the city of Belgrade, Ilić [63] combined GIS (Geographic Information System) and AHP methods. She stated that the value of elements of geodiversity and their vulnerability affect how space is used. Using the SWOT-ANP-FANP method (combining the classic and fuzzy method of multi-criteria analysis), Arsić [64] classified ecotourism development strategies in the Djerdap National Park.

Bianco and Marcianó [65] applied the hybrid AHP-SWOT (A’WOT) method to evaluate the possibilities of ecotourism development in Calabria, Italy. The research results that included the participation of stakeholders showed that the improvement of natural resources has a positive effect on the local community’s economy. Kişi [66], using the same hybrid method, investigated a strategic approach to the development of sustainable tourism in the Turkish province of Zonguldak, considering the diversification of tourism products, sustainable visitor management system, branding, partnership and cooperation.

Using the A’WOT method, Forje et al. [35] stated that although there are strengths and opportunities for tourism development in the Campo Ma’an National Park in Cameroon, there are also many threats and weaknesses. For the successful development of ecotourism in this PA, coordinated activities of policy makers and ecotourism actors, adoption and implementation of the ecotourism development and management plan, and reforming the benefit sharing mechanism are necessary.

Cvetković and Šljivović [67], applying an integrated approach of the AHP method and SWOT analysis in the Kopaonik National Park in Serbia, concluded that these are favorable

potentials for the development of ecotourism, which have been inadequately used. The obtained results indicate that the development of ecotourism in the Kopaonik National Park will be mainly influenced by the diversity of geoheritage and the recognition of the destination. In perspective, it is necessary to reduce illegal construction, which threatens preserving natural values.

Dobričić et al. [68] prioritized the AHP-SWOT method to define the ecotourism development strategies in the Uvac Special Nature Reserve. The best-ranked is the SO strategy (maxi-maxi), which emphasizes the optimal use of agricultural production, healthy food and products of specific geographical origin. Ecotourism development should be harmonized with environmental protection requirements while respecting the local community's interests. That is why it is necessary to enable better traffic connections and integration of the tourist offer at the regional level.

The study by Aydin and Öztürk [69] aimed to investigate sustainable ecotourism in the Camili Biosphere Reserve in Turkey based on management criteria. First, twelve criteria and sixty-eight indicators were selected, which were defined by the World Tourism Organization, and then eleven criteria and 101 indicators were determined within the framework of the Delphi method and the attitudes of four expert groups. The AHP method was also used. The research results show that the Camili Biosphere Reserve is sustainable regarding the level of awareness and perception of stakeholders, socio-economic benefits for the local population, local participation, environmental education and practice, and visitor satisfaction.

By applying SWOT and TOPSIS techniques, the tourism potential of the West Lake in China was determined. The factors influencing tourism in the researched area were identified based on the questionnaire and the Delphi method in which experts participated. The TOPSIS technique helped rank strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities, and as a result, fifteen strategies were presented that should contribute to the tourism development. It was established that strengths have more importance than other elements, with the most important strategy based on the optimal use of natural and cultural attractions to attract tourists, create jobs and maximally reduce the seasonality of tourist visits [70].

In this paper, based on theoretical and applied knowledge, existing literature and the specifics of the PAs of Stara Planina and Suva Planina Mountains, the basic hypothesis (H0) is defined: *Protected mountain areas have significant potential for developing ecotourism due to their rich resource base.* Working hypotheses are added to the basic one:

**H1:** *Protected mountain areas have pronounced natural resources essential for developing ecotourism;*

**H2:** *Protected mountain areas have pronounced anthropogenic resources essential for developing ecotourism;*

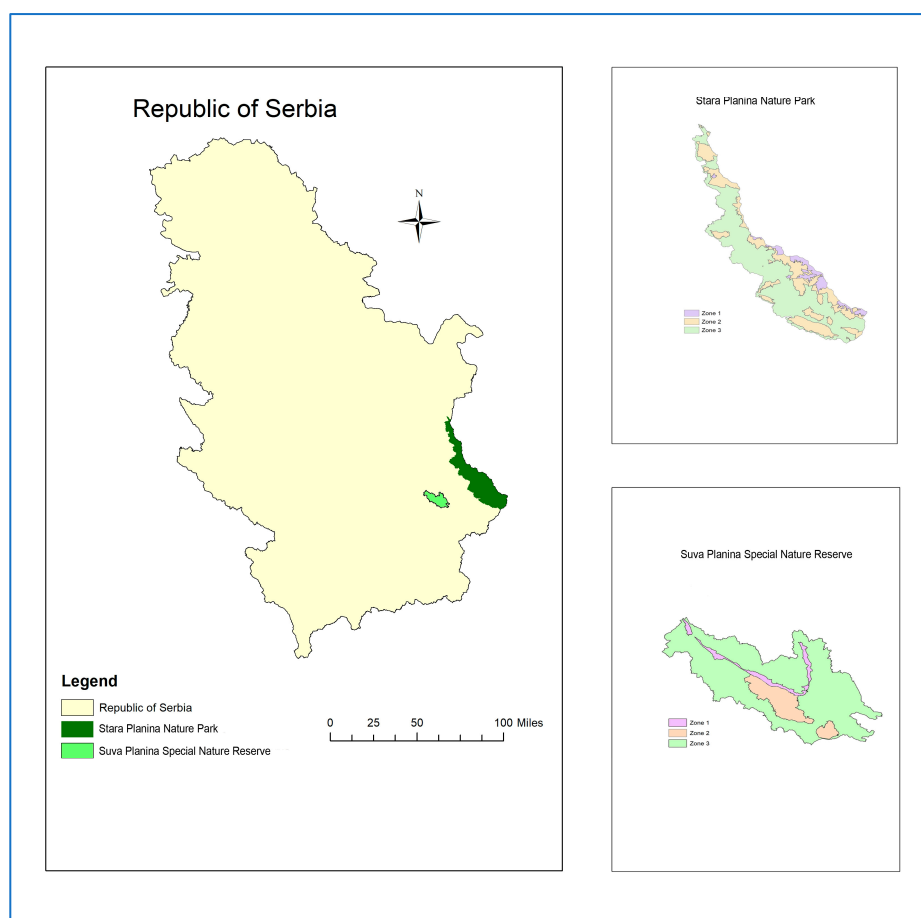
**H3:** *Protected mountain areas have a diverse tourist offer essential for developing ecotourism;*

**H4:** *Protected mountain areas are characterized by underdeveloped infrastructure and depopulation as the dominant weaknesses of their resource base;*

**H5:** *The application of the integrated AHP-SWOT method enables the definition of priority strategies for the sustainable development of ecotourism in the researched mountain areas.*

### 3. Study Area

The subjects of the study are two mountain PAs of national and international importance located in the eastern and southeastern part of the Republic of Serbia—Stara Planina Nature Park (NaP) and Suva Planina Special Nature Reserve (SNR) (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Location of study area (authors).

Due to its exceptional natural and created values, the area of Stara Planina Mt. was proposed in 2020 by the Ministry of Environmental Protection for the sixth national park in the Republic of Serbia with the establishment of a three-level protection regime and a concept that will enable its sustainable development. Stara Planina Mt. is located in the east of Serbia and occupies the border area with Bulgaria, where the largest part of this mountain is located. It belongs to the Carpathian-Balkan mountains and extends over the territories of the municipalities of Zaječar, Knjaževac, Pirot and Dimitrovgrad. The area of the future national park is 120,908 ha, and the highest peak is Midžor (2169 m above sea level). The length of the mountain range is about 100 km and the width is about 30 km [71,72].

The biological diversity of this area consists of 1200 plant species, 150 species of nesting birds (golden eagle, saker and peregrine falcon, etc.), 30 species of mammals (lynx, bear, etc.), 6 species of amphibians, 12 species of reptiles, 26 species of fish, a large number of mosses, lichens, fungi and insects, autochthonous breeds of domestic animals and varieties of plant crops. Due to the values mentioned above, this PA granted international protection status as an area of international importance for birds, plants and butterflies (Important Bird Area—IBA, Important Plant Areas—IPAs and Prime Butterfly Areas), and as an EMERALD area and ecologically important area as a part of the national ecological network [73]. In addition to the above, according to the Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia, this area was proposed for entry into the Unesco MaB List of Biosphere Reserves and the Unesco World List of Geoparks [74]. The area of Stara Planina Mt. is rich in water and includes two regional water supply systems—Nišavski and Timočki.

The area of Stara Planina Mt. was under different forms of protection in the previous period. First, groups of trees were protected in 1966, and then seven strict nature reserves and three nature monuments with an area of about 300 ha were placed under protection in

the eighties of the 20th century. After that, the Stara Planina Nature Park was declared by the Government of the Republic of Serbia in 1997 [75] and in 2009 [76]. In the following period, the procedure to declare this area a national park will continue, with the appointment of the appropriate manager. In the past period, this area was managed by the Public Company (PC) “Srbijašume” (Table 1).

Numerous tourist values are present in this area and represent or can become part of the tourist offer: ethnographic values (old crafts, primarily kilim weaving and hard cheese production); cultural and historical values (Fortress on Crni Vrh Hill, Temska Monastery, Cave Church of St. Peter and Paul in Rsovci, stone village of Gostuša, a unique example of old architecture, etc.); events (“Prayer under Midžor” and “Sabor na Pandžir” events); landscape values (natural and anthropogenic, primarily rural landscapes), etc. [77]. The planning documents for this area emphasize agro (60% of settlements are agrarian), eco, rural and hunting tourism, with the reintroduction of large herbivores (European bison) in order to prevent the overgrowth of pastures, which is also a potential tourist attraction. In addition to the above, sports and recreation are planned on the shores of Zavojsko Lake. Numerous hiking trails are planned in the sub-mountainous area following the protection regimes [73,78].

In addition to various potentials in this area, there are also numerous problems of sustainable development, primarily expressed through depopulation (the number of inhabitants in rural settlements was reduced to a fifth in the period 1948–2002), unfavorable age structure and living standard of the local population, especially in rural areas, which is followed by insufficient infrastructure equipment.

**Table 1.** Basic information about PAs.

PA	Year of Protection	National Protection Status	International Protection Status	IUCN Category	Area
Stara Planina	1997	Nature Park		V	142,219 ha
	2009	Nature Park	Important Birds Areas Important Plant Area Prime Butterfly Area	V	114,332 ha
	2022	National Park (ongoing procedure)	Emerald area	II	120,908 ha
Suva Planina	2015	Special Nature Reserve	Important Birds Areas Important Plant Area Prime Butterfly Area Emerald area	IV	18,116 ha

Source: [73,79].

The second research area is Suva Planina Mt., located in the southeastern part of Serbia, which, in the geological and geographical sense, belongs to the Carpatho-Balkanides mountain system of Eastern Serbia on the very border with the older Serbian-Macedonian Massif. It extends over the territory of the municipalities of Niška Banja, Gadžin Han and Bela Palanka in altitude zones from 250 m to 1810 m, with the highest being Trem Peak (1810 m). The length of the mountain range is 45 km and the width is 15 km. Due to its exceptional natural and created values, this area was declared a special nature reserve in 2015 with an area of 18,116 ha with the introduction of a three-level protection regime (the first level includes 4.68%, the second 12.11% and the third 83.21% of the territory) [79]. The manager of this area is the PC “Srbijašume”, as it is for Stara Planina NaP (Table 1).

The main values of this area are exceptional faunal and floristic diversity, with endemic, relict, strictly protected and protected species (58 species of lichens, 1244 taxa of flora, 259 taxa of insects, 12 species of fish, 23 species of amphibians and reptiles, 139 species of birds and 26 species of mammals), as well as landscape, geological and geomorphological values. That is why this PA was granted international protection status as an area of international importance for birds, plants and butterflies (Important Bird Area—IBA,



Important Plant Areas—IPAs and Prime Butterfly Areas), and as an EMERALD area and ecologically important area as a part of the national ecological network. In addition to the unique living world, in the area of Suva Planina Mt., there are also objects of geological and cultural-historical heritage [79,80]. Unlike Stara Planina Mt., which is characterized by a wealth of water, Suva Planina Mt. at higher altitudes has almost no water sources, which is why it obtained the name “Suva” (meaning “dry”). More precisely, there are no significant natural water courses in this area, but many torrential watercourses, streams and occasional streams, dry valleys and surface springs exist. The area is well preserved, without significant and visible harmful human interventions.

The tourist aspect of the development of Suva Planina SNR is directed towards the following types of tourism: sustainable, sports-event, recreational, agro, eco, rural, transit, etc. More precisely, according to the established natural values and the development of the material base so far, the tourist offer of Suva Planina Mt. will be based on: the most valuable parts of the spatial units (Mosor, Sokolov kamen-Trem-Smrđan, Divna gorica, Valožje and Rubovac-Cerje (Rebrine)) under protection regimes; cultural and historical landmarks (the Monastery of Great Martyr Demetrius near the village of Divljana, the old Church of Holy Ascension in Veliki Krčimir, the Church of St. Elijah in Jagličije and the Monastery of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin near the village of Veta); favorable geo-traffic location of the area; tourist facilities of the rural zone of the mountain and others. A predominantly summer offer is planned in all settlements (III degree of protection), including the production of eco-food and ethno-craft products. However, despite the mentioned potentials and possibilities, the existing tourist and recreational offer is not sufficiently developed and affirmed [80,81].

Among the fundamental problems of sustainable development of this area, the very pronounced depopulation and aging of the population stand out (in the period 1948–2002, the number of inhabitants decreased by 74.63%), as well as insufficient infrastructural equipment.

#### 4. Materials and Methods

Integrated AHP-SWOT (or A'WOT) combines Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) and SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis.

SWOT analysis identifies various factors systematically formulated into a corporate strategy. This analysis is based on a logic that can maximize strengths and opportunities, while minimizing weaknesses and threats [82]. It relies heavily on the expertise and ability of the persons participating in the decision-making process. On the other hand, AHP uses “pairwise comparison” and gives SWOT factors quantitative measures and complements the shortcomings of SWOT analysis (such as the limitation of the analytical approach in assessing the relative importance of SWOT factors and evaluating alternative courses of action with them).

As stated by Božić et al. [83], the AHP method provides the possibility to determine the importance of each criterion (by calculating the weight of the criteria and creating a hierarchy), which means that the calculated weight will determine the effect of a particular criterion in the overall evaluation. This methodological procedure includes four basic steps: defining the problem; structuring the decision hierarchy (i.e., comparing all alternatives in pairs, individually for each criterion, using Saaty's scale); construction of a set of pairwise comparison matrices and weighting of priorities in the next lower level using the priorities obtained by comparison. The fourth and final step is done for each attribute. Then, to each attribute in the lower level, its measured value is added and its absolute priority is obtained. This process of “weighing” and adding continues until the final priorities, i.e., the alternatives are obtained at the lowest level, at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Quantitative evaluations of the mutual comparison of pairs of attributes at a particular hierarchy level are added to the reciprocal comparison matrix. In this matrix, the attributes in the upper triangle are symmetrically reciprocal to those in the lower triangle. In contrast, the attributes on the base diagonal are proportional to the value of 1.

For each pair of indicators (C1, C2, C3...), the importance of the dominance of one indicator over the other is determined. An illustrated example is shown in Table 2. Element  $a_{ij}$  represents the comparative advantage of  $C_i$  over  $C_j$  using the fundamental scale. When filling the matrix, the rule applies that the element  $a_{ij}$  has the value 1 for  $i = j$  and that  $a_{ij} = 1/a_{ji}$ .

**Table 2.** Pairwise comparison matrix.

	C1	C2	C3	...	Cj
C1	a11	a12	a13	...	a1j
C2	a21	a22	a23	...	a2j
...	...	...	...	...	...
Cj	aj1	aj2	aj3	...	ajj

Source: [84].

Then, the normalized weight  $w_j$  is determined using the geometric mean method, which is shown by the following formulas:

$$GM_i = \left( \prod_{j=1}^n a_{ij} \right)^{1/n} \quad (1)$$

$$w_j = GM_i / \sum_{i=1}^n GM_i \quad (2)$$

where  $GM_i$  is the geometric mean, and  $w_j$  represents the weight of the “j” criterion. AHP is based on the idea that the relative importance or preference of criteria and alternatives can be expressed in terms of pairwise comparison ratios. When decision-makers compare two elements, they provide a judgment that represents how many times more important or preferable one element is over the other. These judgments are inherently multiplicative in nature, meaning that they are better suited for multiplication than addition, leading to much more suitable use of geometric averaging.

It is necessary to calculate the degree of consistency by first determining the maximum eigenvalue of the matrix  $\lambda_{max}$  and then calculating the consistency index  $C_i$  based on it:

$$C_i = (\lambda_{max} - n) / (n - 1) \quad (3)$$

where  $n$  represents the number of criteria that were compared.

The degree of consistency is calculated according to the following formula:

$$C_r = C_i / R_i \quad (4)$$

where  $R_i$  is the random consistency index [84]. If the degree of consistency ( $C_r$ ) is less than 0.10, the result is reliable, with no need for modifications in comparisons and recalculations. If this value is higher, it is necessary to review the final result, determine the causes of the inconsistency, and then eliminate them to a certain extent by repeating the comparison in pairs.

Socio-economic decision-making, risk assessment and development strategies are important fields of AHP–SWOT analysis [85], whereby the application of AHP in evaluating SWOT factors appeared to support strategic decision-making. The A’WOT method aims to improve the information base in a quantitative sense for strategic planning [66]. AHP allows decision-makers to assign relative priority to each factor through pairwise comparisons and analytically assists in conducting a SWOT analysis.

The A’WOT method proposed by Kişi [66] consists of the following steps: conducting a SWOT analysis, comparing the SWOT factors within each of the SWOT groups, using the AHP methodology, determining the importance of the SWOT groups among themselves and evaluating the results obtained.

Using AHP, the best-ranked elements of the SWOT groups are compared to obtain the weighting factors of the whole group, namely S, W, O and T. Multiplying the weight of the group by the weight of the elements within the group ( $w_{si}$ ,  $w_{wi}$ ,  $w_{oi}$ , and  $w_{ti}$ ) gives the value of the resulting weights— $W_{rsi}$ ,  $W_{rwi}$ ,  $W_{roi}$  and  $W_{rti}$ , as shown in the following formulas:

$$W_{rsi} = S \times w_{si} \quad (5)$$

$$W_{rwi} = W \times w_{wi} \quad (6)$$

$$W_{roi} = O \times w_{oi} \quad (7)$$

$$W_{rti} = T \times w_{ti} \quad (8)$$

The last step is to choose the best and most affordable strategy. The main goal of strategy formulation is to change the current state or return from poor to an expected state [82]. The TOWS (Threats, Opportunities, Weaknesses, Strengths) matrix is used in that case. This matrix essentially represents a changed order of SWOT analysis, starting from the defined elements of SWOT analysis, on the basis of which four strategies based on internal factors and their response to external factors are formulated: SO, WO, ST and WT.

According to Šljivović [86], after formulating strategies, it is necessary to reanalyze the factors that are part of the SWOT analysis and calculate their effectiveness. In the expert analysis, the efficiency of the strategy is determined according to the elements from the SWOT groups. Thus, the efficiency coefficients of strategy  $j$  are obtained in a way to use the strengths— $S_i$  ( $E_{sij}$ )—to reduce the weaknesses— $W_i$  ( $U_{wij}$ )—to use opportunities  $O_i$  ( $U_{oij}$ ), or to face threats  $T_i$  ( $U_{tij}$ ).

The global value  $V_j$  of the “ $j$ ” strategy is determined according to the following formula:

$$V_j = \sum_{i=1}^K U_{Sij} W_{rsi} + \sum_{i=1}^L U_{Wij} W_{rwi} + \sum_{i=1}^M U_{Oij} W_{roi} + \sum_{i=1}^N U_{Tij} W_{rti} \quad (9)$$

The numbers of the items within the SWOT analysis are labeled K, L, M and N, and the strategy with the highest value of  $V_j$  is considered the best-ranked.

For this research, the relevant available literature, study and planning documentation, as well as the results of the conducted survey were used. The evaluation of the elements of the hierarchy was carried out by anonymous surveyed expert representatives of the following relevant institutions: PC “Srbijašume” (the manager of the PAs that are the subject of this research), the Institute for Nature Protection of Serbia, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management of the Republic of Serbia, the Ministry of Environmental Protection of the Republic of Serbia, the Department of Geography, Tourism and Hotel Management, Faculty of Sciences, University of Novi Sad and the University of Belgrade Faculty of Geography. A total of 25 anonymous experts participated in the evaluation process.

Two individual questionnaires for the Stara and Suva Planina Mountains were delivered to the experts, which described the entire hierarchy of problems. The AHP method was explained to the participants and they filled in the appropriate matrices after studying the decision problem. First, the respondents were invited to assign appropriate numerical values to each factor in the used model, using Satie’s scale, with the aim of assigning a degree of importance. After evaluating all the factors, weighting coefficients for the model’s factors were made at all levels. Each respondent’s answers were given the same weight, i.e., all participants had equal influence in making the final decision.

## 5. Results

This section contains an analysis of the results obtained in two selected protected areas in Serbia—Stara Planina NaP and Suva Planina SNR.

### 5.1. Evaluation of the Stara Planina NaP

The SWOT analysis of this area, based on the definition of basic strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for ecotourism development, is shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** SWOT analysis of Stara Planina NaP.

Strengths (S)	Weaknesses (W)
S1 (flora diversity)—natural floristic wealth with 1200 plant species, of which over 100 belong to endemic species of the Balkans; S2 (geomorphological diversity)—the presence of numerous geomorphological forms; S3 (natural environment)—preserved natural environment; S4 (hydrography)—richness in clean river courses and waterfalls; S5 (sediments)—sediments of different ages, which represent geoheritage of universal value; S6 (cultural values)—cultural and historical monuments from the pre-Christian period to the 19th century (primarily Serbian Orthodox churches and archaic ethno-objects).	W1 (lack of knowledge)—insufficient knowledge of the manager in the field of tourism and promotion of the natural area; W2 (poor infrastructure)—insufficient infrastructural equipment in natural area for visitors; W3 (weak inventiveness)—lack of innovation in the tourist offer according to world standards; W4 (depopulation)—an area of depopulation with a large number of older adults; W5 (weak eco-awareness)—insufficient environmental awareness of the local population.
Opportunities (O)	Threats (T)
O1 (unique tourist brand)—the creation of a unique tourist product; O2 (international cooperation)—the possibility of cooperation with Bulgaria through EU IPA funds for tourism; O3 (local products)—offer of local products (organic food) on the regional and national market; O4 (raising awareness)—raising awareness of ecotourism destinations among the urban population; O5 (small enterprises)—development of small and medium-sized enterprises in partnership with PA; O6 (rural-ecotourism symbiosis)—symbiosis of rural and ecotourism.	T1 (poor cooperation)—poor cooperation and mixed competencies of PA management and the most important stakeholders; T2 (grey economy)—a relatively large share of the grey economy; T3 (non-compliance with regulations)—non-compliance with regulations for the protection of localities and sensitive biodiversity in PA; T4 (low investment)—lack of interest of local and foreign investors in investing in this region; T5 (competitiveness of other destinations)—increased interest of tourists in other tourist destinations.

Source: The authors.

Stara Planina Mt. represents one of the most preserved natural environments in Serbia, with a large number of biological species and ecosystems, high quality of the environment, attractive geological, geomorphological and hydrographic objects, cultural monuments and ethnological objects and their environments, which represent exceptional strengths for the development of ecotourism.

The flora of Stara Planina Mt. is represented by about 1200 taxa (species and sub-species), of which about 150 are in a certain category of danger, and 48 are on the European Red List of flora. A more significant number of species are endemic (116) and plants with the status of natural rarities (40) [73].

The area of Stara Planina Mt. is characterized by a diverse lithological composition, with a particularly significant diversity of Mesozoic sediments, with full stratigraphic development of the Triassic, Jurassic and Cretaceous periods and the presence of numerous fossils in the rocks, which increases the attractiveness of the landscape. The geomorphological diversity is represented by a dynamic and highly dissected relief, with a mountain ridge as the primary morphological determinant and the highest peak over 2000 m (Midžor 2169 m above sea level). The area is characterized by a complex of valleys and ravines, with a vertical cut of 800–1000 m in relation to the top of the watershed, as well as very steep slopes and rocky cliffs on sections of the mountainsides or cuts of the river valleys (Babin Zub Peak, Vladikina Ploča Gorge, Temska River Gorge, Rosomačka River Gorge, Rosomački Vrh Peak, etc.). The diversified river network, with interesting hydrographic phenomena in terms of tourism (springs, thermal springs, mini-sinks, ponds, etc.), is also one of the recognizable characteristics of the area [78].

Particularly significant cultural assets are found in remote mountain villages in the form of ethnic heritage. In these villages, the ambience and architecture of the archaic villages of Stara Planina Mt. have been preserved (almost unchanged since their creation in the 19th century), and due to the abandonment of rural settlements, these buildings are exposed to deterioration and demolition.

The development chances of this area are reflected in the symbiosis of rural and ecotourism, where ecotourism programs and activities based on the promotion of local heritage (authentic lifestyle, organic production based on local agriculture, etc.) can be a significant competitive advantage of Stara Planina Mt. compared to other areas in Serbia. Considering the border position of the mountain, the possibility of cross-border cooperation with Bulgaria through joint projects based on the use of international funds is also a course of action that should be encouraged.

In addition to the mentioned strengths and opportunities, there are weaknesses whose impact should be reduced to a minimum so this area can develop and achieve the desired ecological and economic effects. Stara Planina Mt. is characterized by a long-standing problem of pronounced depopulation, where in less than a decade, this area lost one-third of its population, and negative tendencies were observed in most settlements [87]. The existing tourist and recreational offer, except within specific tourist-recreational complexes (locality Babin Zub, Crni Vrh settlement), is insufficiently developed and affirmed. In addition, it is not adequately integrated with the activities of protection, arrangement, presentation and cultural use of natural and created values, as well as with complementary activities [78]. The absence of an organized performance as well as the lack of innovation in the tourist offer in accordance with international standards are two of the general weaknesses when it comes to the development of tourism in this area. The content of tourist services is low, and at the same time, the quality of staff in tourism and catering is low. Poor traffic infrastructure, the quality of the local road network, and the lack of accompanying tourist infrastructure and content have a limiting effect on the use of the tourist potential of this area [88]. To this should be added the absence of a visitor center and the necessity of improving the local guide service to improve the overall tourist experience [89].

Also, the extremely restrictive concept of using natural resources causes non-compliance with existing legal regulations and the emergence of conflicts between the protected area and the local community. Similar to other protected areas in the country, these conflicts are most often related to illegal construction and land use and affect the sustainable development of the local population [90].

Insufficiently defined competencies for managing the future sustainable development of Stara Planina Mt. (except in the forestry sector) can be seen as a specific threat. This mainly refers to the organization of tourist and other development entities based on the achievement of personal profit and the weak cooperation of the management with other stakeholders. The mixed responsibilities of state authorities, managers and local authorities (municipalities) make organized tourism development even more difficult.

Through the synergy of all respondents' responses, individual factors were analyzed, and weight coefficients were obtained. In this way, the most/least dominant factors used to valorize the potential of the Stara Planina Mt. were identified (Table 4). Table 4 also shows the final results of the resulting weights ( $W_{rsi}$ ,  $W_{rwi}$ ,  $W_{roi}$  и  $W_{rti}$ ).

After the data analysis, it was determined that the most important strengths subfactor is S1 (flora diversity), i.e., natural floristic richness with 1190 plant species, of which over 100 belong to endemic species of the Balkans) (0.141), followed by S4 (hydrography), which is reflected in the cleanliness and abundance of river flows and waterfalls (0.099); the least dominant subfactor is S6 (cultural values), represented by cultural-historical monuments dating from the pre-Christian period to the XIX century (0.050). When it comes to weaknesses, the most dominant subfactor is W2 (poor infrastructure), i.e., weak infrastructural equipment of the natural area for visitors (0.712), followed by insufficient knowledge of the manager in the field of tourism and promotion of the potential of the

natural asset—W1 (0.044); the least important subfactor was the lack of innovation in the tourist offer according to world standards—W3 (0.024).

**Table 4.** The global weight of the criteria of the SWOT analysis of the Stara Planina NaP.

SWOT Group	Group Weight	SWOT Factors	Group Elem. Weight	Resulting Weights
Strengths	0.520	S1 (flora diversity)	0.141	0.07332
		S4 (hydrography)	0.099	0.05148
		S3 (natural environment)	0.088	0.04576
		S2 (geomorphological diversity)	0.086	0.04472
		S5 (sediments)	0.056	0.02912
		S6 (cultural values)	0.050	0.026
Weaknesses	0.201	W2 (poor infrastructure)	0.712	0.14311
		W1 (lack of knowledge)	0.044	0.00884
		W4 (depopulation)	0.035	0.00703
		W5 (weak eco-awareness)	0.026	0.00523
		W3 (weak inventiveness)	0.024	0.00482
Opportunities	0.078	O3 (local products)	0.017	0.00133
		O2 (international cooperation)	0.016	0.00125
		O1 (unique tourist brand)	0.015	0.00117
		O5 (small enterprises)	0.012	0.00094
		O6 (rural-ecotourism symbiosis)	0.010	0.00078
		O4 (raising awareness)	0.007	0.00055
Threats	0.201	T3 (non-compliance with regulations)	0.059	0.01186
		T1 (poor cooperation)	0.039	0.00784
		T5 (competitiveness of other destinations)	0.037	0.00744
		T4 (low investments)	0.034	0.00683
		T2 (grey economy)	0.031	0.00623

Source: The authors.

The most significant SWOT subfactor within the identified opportunities is the offer of local products (organic food) on the regional and local market—O3 (0.017). The second subfactor has approximately the same local importance—the possibility of cooperation with Bulgaria through EU IPA-funds for tourism—O2 (0.016), while the lowest rated subfactor is O4 (raising awareness), which refers to the development of awareness among the urban population for ecotourism destinations (0.007). Non-observance of local protection regulations and sensitive biodiversity in natural areas—T3 (0.059)—is the most significant SWOT subfactor within the identified threats. The poor cooperation between the management of the natural area and the most important stakeholders (T1) was rated slightly lower—0.039—while the least dominant subfactor is the relatively large share of the gray economy—T2 (0.031).

In order to determine the weight of the group (S, W, O and T), the AHP procedure was used. The top-ranked elements within each SWOT group were compared with each other, and the comparison values, along with the calculated group weights, are given in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Calculation of group weights within the SWOT analysis of Stara Planina NaP.

	S1	W2	O3	T3	Group Weights (S, W, O and T)
S1 (flora diversity)	1	3	5	3	0.520
W2 (poor infrastructure)	0.333	1	3	1	0.201
O3 (local products)	0.2	0.333	1	0.333	0.078
T3 (non-compliance with regulations)	0.333	1	3	1	0.201

Source: The authors.

The degree of consistency of the matrix is  $CR = 0.016067$ , which is an acceptable value, and indicates that the analysis is adequate and that there is no need for a new evaluation of weight criteria.

#### Potential Strategies for the Development of Ecotourism in Stara Planina NaP

The absence of ecotourism development strategies in Stara Planina NaP requires special attention and the gradual inclusion of ecotourism in protection programs. For this reason, an integral AHP-SWOT method was used to prioritize strategies based on previously defined SWOT criteria.

The defined strategies indicate the chronological order of necessary activities for the protected area to reach the level of a recognizable ecotourism destination. The proposed strategies that could serve as a starting point for introducing the concept of ecotourism are presented below. The best-ranked subfactors within each SWOT group (shown in Table 4) are S1 (flora diversity), W2 (poor infrastructure), O3 (local products) and T3 (non-compliance with regulations). Applying the TOWS matrix, several strategies (SO, ST, WO and WT) were determined and explained below.

SO—a strategy that would use the diversity and high quality of floristic tourism values in order to offer products of local character (organic food) on the regional and local market. This type of development would serve as a basis for promotional activities and attracting potential tourists as users of tourist services and content. Mimović et al. [91] point out that the expansion of the existing range of services, contents and activities through different directions of vertical, horizontal, concentric and/or conglomerate diversification will result not only in preserving the existing base of tourists but will also have a substantial effect on attracting new ones. In this way, a basis is created for developing a specific competitive advantage of a tourist destination in its long-term development.

ST—a strategy that would promote the natural floristic wealth with many endemic species of the Balkans to ensure compliance with regulations for the protection of localities and sensitive biodiversity in the protected area. According to Samardžić [92], the specific wealth of Stara Planina Mt. is biodiversity, represented by numerous species, some of which are under the strictest protection, of domestic and international character and are on the list of endangered species in the Red Book of Serbia as endemic and relict species, while many are recorded on the European and world Red List of species. Stankov et al. [93] point out that many modern tourists seek experiences that provide a sense of closeness to natural values and the local community. Any tourist destination that intends to attract such visitors must protect its resources, i.e., respect the prescribed protection regimes and sustainable development of natural resources.

WO—a strategy that would use the offer of products of local character to improve the quality of the existing infrastructural equipment of the area for visitors. The type of development would stimulate ethno and ecotourism based on traditional village hospitality, the production of ecologically correct food and the presence of old crafts and their products. The development of the mentioned type of tourism should be planned in accordance with a series of complementary activities, which, through investments, lead to an increase in income. In this case, the income increase should be used to complement the necessary

infrastructure and rehabilitation of the existing one, as well as the reconstruction and conservation of buildings of architectural heritage.

WT—a strategy that would use the protection of special natural values, heritage monuments and renewable natural resources with the aim of infrastructural equipment and spatial arrangement for the needs of (eco)tourism. This strategy would be based on compliance with the regulations for the protection of sensitive biodiversity in the PA, raising the level of awareness of the local community in order to preserve biodiversity and educating all users of Stara Planina NaP in the sphere of implementing prescribed regimes of protection and sustainable waste management. In this way, the strategy would contribute to the preservation and maintenance of the protected area, tidiness, cleanliness, environmental diversity, planned construction and infrastructural equipment of the area for the needs of (eco)tourism.

Before ranking the strategies, the efficiency coefficients of individual strategies ( $E_{sij}$ ,  $E_{wij}$ ,  $E_{oij}$  и  $E_{tij}$ ) were determined using the AHP method, and are shown in Table 6.

**Table 6.** Efficiency coefficients of individual strategies of Stara Planina NaP.

	SO	ST	WO	WT
Es <sub>1</sub>	0.566	0.263	0.118	0.055
Es <sub>2</sub>	0.386	0.386	0.059	0.169
Es <sub>3</sub>	0.566	0.263	0.118	0.055
Es <sub>4</sub>	0.570	0.178	0.049	0.202
Es <sub>5</sub>	0.473	0.139	0.050	0.338
Es <sub>6</sub>	0.175	0.093	0.073	0.660
Ew <sub>1</sub>	0.420	0.420	0.044	0.116
Ew <sub>2</sub>	0.083	0.059	0.314	0.544
Ew <sub>3</sub>	0.670	0.147	0.095	0.088
Ew <sub>4</sub>	0.392	0.278	0.165	0.165
Ew <sub>5</sub>	0.392	0.278	0.165	0.165
Eo <sub>1</sub>	0.647	0.090	0.119	0.144
Eo <sub>2</sub>	0.392	0.278	0.165	0.165
Eo <sub>3</sub>	0.557	0.060	0.322	0.060
Eo <sub>4</sub>	0.392	0.278	0.165	0.165
Eo <sub>5</sub>	0.392	0.278	0.165	0.165
Eo <sub>6</sub>	0.642	0.167	0.099	0.091
Et <sub>1</sub>	0.392	0.278	0.165	0.165
Et <sub>2</sub>	0.392	0.278	0.165	0.165
Et <sub>3</sub>	0.077	0.619	0.050	0.255
Et <sub>4</sub>	0.392	0.278	0.165	0.165
Et <sub>5</sub>	0.672	0.135	0.088	0.104

Source: The authors.

Table 6 shows the values of the efficiency coefficients of the strategies—SO, ST, WO and WT. The mentioned strategies are compared to the stated strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. How they are compared is characteristic of AHP analysis: which of these two strategies is preferred (according to Satie’s scale of comparison) in relation to the threat factor specified in the SWOT analysis or which of these two observed strategies is preferred in relation to the chance factor and enables their better use and for how much. Comparisons of the mentioned strategies were made with all the strengths, weaknesses,



chances and threats of Stara Planina NaP, and the results are shown in Table 6. After that, the strategies were ranked, and the results are given in Table 7.

**Table 7.** Ranking of ecotourism development strategies in Stara Planina NaP.

Strategy	Value	Rank
SO	0.441	1
ST	0.231	2
WO	0.123	4
WT	0.206	3

Source: The authors.

The obtained results shown in Table 6 using the AHP and SWOT methodology for prioritization of strategies for sustainable development of ecotourism in Stara Planina indicate the following order of strategies: SO–ST–WT–WO.

The final analysis of the obtained results indicates that the experts were objective and concise in their assessment, which simultaneously indicates the methodology's correctness.

### 5.2. Evaluation of the Suva Planina Special Nature Reserve

The Suva Planina SNR is located in Eastern Serbia, in the southwestern part of the Carpathian-Balkan mountain system. Different types of values—biological, landscape, geological and geomorphological—as well as the exceptional faunal and floristic diversity and objects of cultural-historical heritage represent excellent potential for developing ecotourism. Table 8 shows the SWOT analysis of the Suva Planina SNR.

The biological values of Suva Planina SNR are represented by an exceptional faunal and floristic diversity, which is reflected in a large number of endemic, relict, strictly protected and protected species of plants and animals. For most plant species from these categories, Suva Planina is the only known locality in the flora of Serbia. When it comes to fauna, insects, although insufficiently studied, make up the most numerous faunal category [80]. Suva Planina is also a massif with exceptional phenomena and forms of karst relief and sediments of different ages. Limestones form the base of the mountain, and the entire area represents a unique karst area, which covers the largest areas in the limestone regions of Eastern Serbia with developed karst relief elements [79]. Suva Planina is also a traditional hiking destination, characterized by ethno-objects from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with characteristic architecture specific to this area.

**Table 8.** SWOT analysis of Suva Planina SNR.

Strengths (S)	Weaknesses (W)
S1 (preserved nature/biodiversity)—preserved nature and a high degree of biological diversity;	W1 (poor tourist equipment)—lack of facilities for information, rest, supply, recreation, education and entertainment of visitors;
S2 (flora diversity)—1261 plant species, mostly of endemic character and protected;	W2 (illegal construction)—with the usual environmental problems (wastewater disposal, endangering natural ecosystems, etc.);
S3 (entomofauna)—exceptional diversity of entomofauna reflected in 259 established taxa;	W3 (poor infrastructure)—poor infrastructural and communal equipment of the settlements;
S4 (karst relief)—extraordinary phenomena and forms of the karst relief and sediments of different ages rich in fossil flora and fauna;	W4 (unfavorable demographic structure)—with a significant share of settlements with an elderly population;
S5 (complementary tourist motives)—protected areas in the surroundings (Jelašnička and Sićevačka gorges);	W5 (lack of professional staff)—lack of professional capacity to manage the territory as a natural area and tourist destination;
S6 (ethno-objects)—the presence of houses, barns, mills, etc., with characteristic architecture for this area, (XIX–XX century);	W6 (poverty)—the problem of poverty faced by the municipalities on whose territory the PA is located;
S7 (mountaineering destination)—traditional event “Winter climb to the Trem” (1000 mountaineers from the country and region)	W7 (significant mining-geological area)

Table 8. Cont.

Opportunities (O)	Threats (T)
O1 (new capacities)—renovation of existing and construction of new tourist facilities;	T1 (violation of legal regulations)—non-observance of prescribed regulations and conditions for carrying out activities in the protected area;
O2 (vicinity of Niska Banja Spa)—a tourist center that includes environmental issues and nature protection among the priority activities for the further development of tourism;	T2 (inadequate visitor management)—inconsistent with the capacities of the area (uncontrolled visits, group sizes and length of stay, mass tourism);
O3 (improving interregional cooperation)—transfer of knowledge and good practices with Bulgaria;	T3 (absence of cooperation at the local level)—failure to establish cooperation between local self-governments and thereby creating a competitive atmosphere in the development of the area;
O4 (IPA funds)—use of international IPA funds;	T4 (absence of regional initiatives)—in the field of environmental and nature protection
O5 (training and education)—implementation of education programs and professional training of staff for the management of natural resources;	T5 (inadequate employee structure)—incomplete structure of employees in the Public Company in charge of managing protected area and natural resources;
O6 (“green zone”)—promotion and presentation of the area as a green zone in the function of tourism development and organic food production;	T6 (regional economic crisis)—deepening of the economic crisis in the region, which affects the accommodation and catering industry;
O7 (sustainable local development)—determination of municipalities towards sustainable development in the agriculture and tourism sector	

Source: The authors.

The main causes of degradation are unplanned and uncontrolled cutting of forests; afforestation of habitats with species occupying natural forests; uncontrolled collection and exploitation of plant and animal species; animal husbandry; uncontrolled building construction and garbage disposal; hunting and poaching and harassment of animals, especially in the reproductive period by tourists, mountaineers and locals [94]. All the activities carried out during the exploitation of mineral raw materials inevitably impact the environment, as is the case in the foothills on the southwest side of Suva Planina Mt. (the presence of lime kilns).

The emergence of depopulation, economic infirmity and aging of the population are aggravating factors in implementing the concept of protection through sustainable development, which is based on relying on local forces, their participation in the management of natural resources using traditional knowledge and experience gained in coexistence with the natural environment. An additional threat is the lack of professional staff, i.e., the inadequate structure of employees in institutions responsible for the management of the PA and the organization and development of tourism, which is a problem existing in other PAs in Serbia [95]. The absence of cooperation between local self-governments and, thus, the creation of a competitive atmosphere among actors involved in the development of the wider area of Suva Planina Mt., as well as the small number of regional initiatives related to environmental issues, may directly threaten the progress of this PA in the future.

Rural settlements provide an opportunity for the organization and development of ethno-eco tourism. In order to direct traditional and organic agricultural production and develop the economy, it is necessary to implement activities in village revitalization and development of traditional forms of agricultural production, establishing a brand and popularizing organic production. The development of the economy is possible through old crafts (pottery, weaving, etc.) as well as by defining production programs that should include products of domestic handicrafts (knitting sweaters, crocheting and embroidering curtains and tablecloths, weaving folk cloth, carpets and rugs and making souvenirs for tourists). The improvement of interregional cooperation with Bulgaria, through the implementation of projects of various international funds, would represent a positive step and a stimulus for progress, both for the Suva Planina SRP and the municipalities on whose territory it is located.

Based on identifying relevant internal and external factors in Suva Planina SNR, a SWOT analysis was made that included the most important parameters and represents the starting point for defining the optimal scenarios for future ecotourism development.

Through the synergy of all respondents' responses, individual factors were analyzed, and weighting coefficients were obtained that indicate the most/least dominant factors used to valorize the potential of Suva Planina SNR in the function of ecotourism development (Table 9).

**Table 9.** The global weight of the SWOT analysis criteria of Suva Planina SNR.

SWOT Group	Group Weight	SWOT Factors	Group Elem. Weight	Resulting Weights
Strengths	0.519	S1 (preserved nature)	0.110	0.05709
		S4 (karst relief)	0.081	0.04204
		S2 (flora diversity)	0.079	0.04100
		S7 (mountaineering destination)	0.067	0.03477
		S5 (complementary tourist motives)	0.065	0.03373
		S3 (entomofauna)	0.064	0.03322
		S6 (ethno-objects)	0.052	0.02698
Weaknesses	0.102	W6 (poverty)	0.020	0.00204
		W3 (poor infrastructure)	0.019	0.00194
		W5 (lack of professional staff)	0.018	0.00184
		W1 (poor tourist equipment)	0.014	0.00143
		W4 (unfavorable demographic structure)	0.012	0.00122
		W7 (significant mining-geological area)	0.009	0.00092
		W2 (illegal construction)	0.008	0.00082
Opportunities	0.264	O4 (IPA funds)	0.047	0.01241
		O2 (vicinity of Niska Banja Spa)	0.043	0.01135
		O1 (new capacities)	0.042	0.01108
		O3 (improving interregional cooperation)	0.041	0.01082
		O5 (training and education)	0.033	0.00871
		O6 ("green zone")	0.031	0.00818
		O7 (sustainable local development)	0.026	0.00686
Threats	0.116	T5 (inadequate employee structure)	0.026	0.00302
		T1 (violation of legal regulations)	0.024	0.00278
		T2 (inadequate visitor management)	0.020	0.00232
		T3 (absence of cooperation at the local level)	0.019	0.00220
		T4 (absence of regional initiatives)	0.016	0.00186
		T6 (regional economic crisis)	0.010	0.00116

Source: The authors.

At the second level of the model, the most important strengths subfactor is preserved nature/biodiversity (S1) (0.110), followed by the presence of characteristic and diverse karst relief (S4) (0.081), while the least dominant subfactor is the presence of ethno-objects with the characteristic architecture of this area (S6) (0.052). The most dominant subfactors in the weaknesses category are related to the problem of poverty faced by municipalities—poverty (W6) (0.020), and poor infrastructural and communal equipment of settlements (W3) (0.019)—while the lowest scored subfactor is illegal construction (W2) (0.008).

The most significant SWOT subfactor within the identified opportunities is the use of donor (IPA) funds (O4) (0.047), followed by the subfactor related to the proximity of the tourist center Niška Banja, where the protection of the environment and nature are among the priority activities for the further development of tourism (Q3) (0.043). The least dominant subfactor from this group is the determination of municipalities towards sustainable development in the agriculture and tourism sector (O7) (0.026). Regarding threats, the most dominant subfactor refers to inadequate employee structure (T1) (0.026). It is immediately followed by violations of legal regulations (T2), with a slight difference in factor weights (0.024). The lowest rated subfactor is the regional economic crisis (T6) (0.010).

After identifying the best-ranked elements within each SWOT group, they were compared with each other using the AHP methodology. The comparison values, along with the calculated group weights, are shown in Table 10.

**Table 10.** Calculating the weights of groups within the SWOT analysis of Suva Planina SNR.

	S1	W6	O4	T5	Group Weights (S, W, O and T)
S1 (preserved nature/biodiversity)	1	5	3	3	0.519
W6 (poverty)	0.2	1	0.333	1	0.102
O4 (IPA funds)	0.333	3	1	3	0.264
T5 (inadequate employee structure)	0.333	1	0.333	1	0.116

Source: The authors.

The degree of consistency of this matrix is  $CR = 0.042475$ , which is an acceptable value. This also indicates that the analysis is adequate and that there is no need for a new evaluation of weight criteria.

#### Potential Strategies for the Development of Ecotourism in Suva Planina SNR

Similar to the first analyzed case, the absence of ecotourism development strategies in this special nature reserve requires specific attention from different interest groups and the progressive inclusion of ecotourism in the protection programs, while the ranked priorities of the defined strategies indicate the order of necessary activities. The most dominant subfactors within each SWOT group (shown in Table 9) are the following: S1 (preserved nature), W6 (poverty), O4 (IPA funds) and T5 (inadequate employee structure). By applying the TOWS matrix, the following strategies were generated—SO, ST, WO, WT—and are explained below:

SO—a strategy that would use the area's preserved nature and a high degree of biological diversity for application with the projects to ensure the use of donor funds (IPA). Suva Planina Mt. was protected as a natural area of exceptional international and national importance. It represents one of the biodiversity centers of the Balkan Peninsula and is classified in the I category for preserving biological, landscape, geological and geomorphological values [94]. EU funds are intended to reduce regional disparities between member countries and candidate countries and strengthen state institutions with the aim of faster integration into the EU and preparation for using structural and cohesion funds after the joining process is over. An important characteristic of pre-accession funds is the need to apply with quality and sustainable projects [96], which can be used for ecotourism and overall development of this PA.

ST—a strategy that would implement programs of education and professional staff training for the management of PA and the presentation and popularization of natural and cultural values. Planning and organizing educational programs for the development of ecotourism for employees and interested associates is also a necessary integral part of planning and implementing activities for the development of ecotourism. The continuous training and development of employees' competencies are highlighted as necessary actions for the sustainable management of PAs and the development of visitor management [97].

WO—a strategy based on using IPA funds to overcome the poverty faced by municipalities in the territory of the PA. According to Gajić and Cvetanović [43], the most important role of ecotourism is the impact on the well-being of the local community and nature protection. This implies a particular economic benefit from this type of tourist movement in the form of population employment and other opportunities for generating income. The mentioned strategy would use donor funds to overcome poverty, contribute to the economic stability of local communities and more intensive protection of natural resources.

WT—a strategy through which education programs and professional staff training for the management of PA would be implemented to overcome the poverty faced by municipalities. This would include the training of staff working in the management of the PA and the education of the local population in the field of tourism valorization and protection of the natural and anthropogenic values of Suva Planina SNR. The goal of such a strategy is to provide more significant benefits for the local environment and direct activities for developing private-public partnership business models (for example, green entrepreneurship support program).

Before ranking the strategies, the efficiency coefficients of individual strategies ( $E_{sij}$ ,  $E_{wij}$ ,  $E_{oij}$  и  $E_{tij}$ ) were determined using the AHP method and are shown in Table 11.

**Table 11.** Efficiency coefficients of individual strategies in Suva Planina SNR.

	SO	ST	WO	WT
Es1	0.561	0.285	0.072	0.082
Es2	0.545	0.315	0.070	0.070
Es3	0.545	0.315	0.070	0.070
Es4	0.545	0.315	0.070	0.070
Es5	0.434	0.307	0.129	0.129
Es6	0.287	0.494	0.105	0.114
Es7	0.434	0.307	0.129	0.129
Ew1	0.230	0.147	0.429	0.194
Ew2	0.341	0.286	0.170	0.203
Ew3	0.341	0.286	0.170	0.203
Ew4	0.341	0.286	0.170	0.203
Ew5	0.113	0.402	0.065	0.420
Ew6	0.145	0.068	0.537	0.251
Ew7	0.343	0.243	0.172	0.243
Eo1	0.343	0.243	0.172	0.243
Eo2	0.343	0.243	0.172	0.243
Eo3	0.343	0.243	0.172	0.243
Eo4	0.393	0.086	0.446	0.075
Eo5	0.156	0.441	0.081	0.322
Eo6	0.446	0.393	0.075	0.086
Eo7	0.084	0.088	0.458	0.370
Et1	0.343	0.243	0.172	0.243
Et2	0.343	0.243	0.172	0.243

**Table 11.** *Cont.*

	SO	ST	WO	WT
Et <sub>3</sub>	0.343	0.243	0.172	0.243
Et <sub>4</sub>	0.343	0.243	0.172	0.243
Et <sub>5</sub>	0.109	0.295	0.067	0.533
Et <sub>6</sub>	0.340	0.286	0.170	0.203

Source: The authors.

Table 11 shows the values of the efficiency coefficients of strategies SO, ST, WO and WT. An identical way of comparing strategies, as in the case of the previous PA, was also carried out in the case of Suva Planina SNR. After determining the efficiency coefficients, the strategies were ranked (Table 12).

**Table 12.** Ranking of ecotourism development strategies in Suva Planina SNR.

Strategy	Value	Rank
SO	0.391	1
ST	0.287	2
WO	0.157	4
WT	0.165	3

Source: The authors.

The results obtained using the AHP and SWOT methodology for prioritization of strategies for sustainable development of ecotourism in Suva Planina SNR indicate the following order of strategies: SO–ST–WT–WO.

The analysis of the results obtained in this case also indicated objectivity and coexistence in the evaluation by experts, pointing out the correctness of the applied methodology.

## 6. Discussion

The main task of tourist valorization is the evaluation, categorization and positioning of tourist resources in order to present the values of different contractive zones, contents necessary for the stay of tourists and material equipment on the tourist market [98]. In this study, using the integrative AHP–SWOT method, an evaluation of the tourist attractions of two selected PAs in Serbia was carried out with the aim of the future development of ecotourism.

The use of the integrated AHP–SWOT method showed that in both PAs, the best-rated subfactors in the strength domain refer to natural floristic richness and especially hydrographic features (Stara Planina Mt.) or karst relief (Suva Planina Mt.). The results confirmed that both mountain areas have significant resources for ecotourism development. The research identified the presence of numerous natural and, to a lesser extent, anthropogenic resources that represent the basis for the future organized development of ecotourism activities. Although these territories belong to different categories of PAs, the SWOT analysis registered certain similar types of ecotourism resources, such as biogeographic diversity, with the presence of a large number of endemic species, as well as species entered in the book of the Red Flora of Serbia. Due to biological values primarily, i.e., significant species and ecosystem diversity, both research areas have been granted international protection status for many years. Also, ethnographic heritage is present on both mountains, represented by buildings with the characteristic architecture of the archaic Serbian villages of Eastern Serbia originating from the 19th and 20th centuries. However, in addition to similarities, certain differences were also registered, which are most pronounced in the case of hydrographic tourist values. While Stara Planina Mt. is characterized by the presence of numerous rivers with steep longitudinal profiles, rocky

cascades and pronounced meanders, Suva Planina Mt., due to the dominance of the karst relief, is poor in surface water, which does not represent an important tourist resource. Based on everything previously stated, it can be concluded that the hypothesis H1 was confirmed, while the results partially confirmed hypothesis H2.

The analysis also showed that the most important factors for the development of ecotourism are the products of local character that should be offered on the regional market, as well as the use of the geographical position of both areas (state border vicinity) through the use of donor funds (IPA funds). The symbiosis of rural and ecotourism constitutes a specific development opportunity for these two PAs, where the population and households of mountain villages represent a significant part of the social basis of ecotourism development. Although both PAs are characterized by depopulation, with a large percentage of the old population, there are different models of involving community members in promoting local heritage (gastronomy, architectural elements, etc.) through designing an offer for visitors based on ecotourism principles. In this regard, it is emphasized that the older members of the community have a significant potential for the interpretation of agricultural tradition and historical elements related to the way of life in these areas [99]. Also, the border geographical position should be used to increase the region's economic importance and attract investments and financing in the sphere of agriculture and tourism. In this sense, it is important to mention farm tourism as a notable segment of the tourist offer in rural areas [100].

The existence of buildings of folk architecture and archaic ambient units in villages has an exceptional value, the most important being the preserved buildings made of autochthonous material—residential buildings and commercial buildings of mills, lathes, rolling mills, etc. The most interesting ambiances are positioned in the cores of high-density villages [78,79]. On Stara Planina Mt., there are certain small buildings that are partially following the local architectural tradition in terms of architecture. However, these are far from the criteria that apply to the ideal accommodation type in the ecotourism framework—eco-resorts—both in terms of architecture and business organization, which must be aligned with ecological principles [93]. Businesses owned by the local community that provide tourism services, with architecture and ambience that emphasize local heritage and culture, are essential to any ecotourism destination [101]. In this sense, Marjanović et al. [89] emphasize that the geotourism development of Stara Planina Mt. should be directed towards constructing rural tourist households or other environmentally friendly accommodations. Consequently, encouraging the construction of such facilities is interpreted as a significant development opportunity and a way of future inclusion of the local population in protection and tourism development.

The analysis of the subfactors within the weakness category showed that the most dominant ones are the weak infrastructure of the natural area (Stara Planina Mt.) and the overall poverty of the municipalities within which the PA is located (Suva Planina Mt.). The fundamental limitation for the sustainable use of the potential of both PAs is represented by pronounced processes of depopulation of mountain villages, which is followed by underdeveloped transport and communal infrastructure, poor access to health care and other essential services, as well as the absence of realistic prospects for getting out of the deep-rooted poverty of the agricultural population. All of the above confirmed the H4 hypothesis. In such conditions, the participation of the local population in the realization of the long-term development goals is minimal, since they perceive the protection as a limitation rather than a chance for progress and improvement of living conditions [73]. Previous studies point out the age of the local population and the absence of modern knowledge about small businesses and marketing as important reasons for this situation [102]. In this sense, the PA or other organizations should help these villages with infrastructure development, knowledge transfer, financial support and joint marketing in order to preserve these places. Without such support, the extinction of these settlements becomes the most likely scenario [103]. In this regard, and with the aim of more transparent and sustainable management, the PC "Srbijašume" proposes the formation of municipal

forums of interested parties [73]. The idea of involving the local population in the decision-making process through the action of certain bodies, usually of different types of councils, is not new and has been implemented in many PAs [104–106], among others in national parks in Serbia. Tara NP formed the User Council, a legal body that was established to solve various important issues related to this NP and improve the cooperation of interested parties [90].

Previous research [107] highlighted communal waste and the unresolved problem of wastewater as the most significant environmental problems in Stara Planina Mt. Unsatisfactory communal facilities in settlements and low level of communal hygiene in rural areas are reflected in the absence of an organized waste collection system, the existence of local garbage dumps, often located in the most unacceptable locations next to roads, and inefficient and environmentally unacceptable methods of handling wastewater. Also, the state of local roads on certain sections of both PAs is very bad, significantly reducing the accessibility and quality of arrivals to the most attractive tourist spots or potential accommodation capacities for rural tourism [78,80].

Numerous reasons for the aforementioned situation, rooted in the past (industrialization and population outflow from mountain villages, political isolation by neighboring Bulgaria, marginalization of border areas in development documents, etc.) [99], also affected the overall tourism development. Except for the location of Babin Zub on the Stara Planina Mt., where a popular and well-known ski resort was established and whose promotion is carried out at the national level, both PAs are characterized by a relatively low level of quality of the existing tourist facilities—the accommodation facilities are mainly of a low category, with the necessary upgrading of equipment of the facilities themselves and accompanying contents. Although Stara Planina Mt. is included in the priority destinations by the current state tourism development strategy [108], primarily because of its potential to provide an offer throughout the year—sustainable rural tourism, ecotourism, agrotourism, cultural and winter sports tourism—the existing tourism resources are still inadequately used.

The existing tourist offer on Suva Planina Mt. is not sufficiently affirmed, organized and connected among the municipalities where the PA is located. In the past, it primarily relied on youth tourism within the Children's Resort complex near the settlement of Divljana, and today, it is focused mainly on recreational tourism and organized hiking tours ("Bojanine vode" recreational area). The research also identified various problems of tourism development (poor content of tourist services, low quality of employees in tourism and catering, lack of cooperation between different stakeholders, etc.), which are also recorded in other PAs in Serbia [95]. All of the above disproved the hypothesis H3.

The use of the integral AHP–SWOT method based on previously defined SWOT criteria enabled the definition and prioritization of several development strategies, which indicated the chronological order of necessary activities to reach the set goals (confirmation of hypothesis H5). The results highlighted the importance of using the diverse and high-quality flora of Stara Planina Mt. for creating an offer based on local products (organic food). The offer should be placed on the regional and local market while respecting the regulations for protecting sensitive biodiversity in natural resources. In accordance with these results, recommendations were made in the planning documents adopted for this area, such as management plans and spatial plans, which emphasize the sustainable use of natural resources for (eco)tourism development. Thus, Stara Planina Mt. is treated as a space of natural assets and main natural tourist potentials in the strategic framework of sustainable development of the Republic of Serbia, which requires the harmonization of all projects, programs and plans with the concept of protection and sustainable development in order to avoid negative consequences for the state of the environment. For sustainable development, the aforementioned documents propose organic food production, traditional animal husbandry and the preservation of indigenous sheep breeds, beekeeping and honey production, cultivation and purchase of medicinal and aromatic plants, and controlled



collection of forest fruits and mushrooms [73,78], and the mentioned activities can be stimulated through a combination of eco and rural tourism.

In the case of Suva Planina Mt., priority activities in the future should be directed towards the use of preserved nature and the high degree of biological diversity of the area for the purpose of applying for donor funds from IPA funds. Also, the emphasis should be placed on implementing the education and professional training program for managing natural resources and the presentation and popularization of natural and cultural values. According to the planning documents, Suva Planina Mt. is treated as part of the pastoral agricultural macro-region (primarily for the development of sheep and cattle breeding), where preserved pasture areas occupy the majority of agricultural land, with facilities for the production of food of high biological quality, the development of beekeeping and the collection of medicinal herbs and forest fruits [80,81]. All of the above provides a realistic basis for the organization of ecotourism activities and other complementary forms of tourism (rural, agro). The spatial plan also proposes training and education for various users of PA (local self-government, owners of small businesses, artisans, collectors and harvesters of local plants) to improve skills and adequate use and popularization of natural and anthropogenic values, following defined strategies in this research.

In general, the overall results of the study indicated that protected mountain areas have significant potential for developing ecotourism due to their rich resource base, which confirmed the basic research hypothesis (H0). An overview of the status of the hypotheses after the conducted research is given in Table 13.

**Table 13.** Overview of the status of the hypotheses after the conducted research.

Hypotheses	Status
H0: Protected mountain areas have significant potential for developing ecotourism due to their rich resource base.	Confirmed
H1: Protected mountain areas have pronounced natural resources essential for developing ecotourism.	Confirmed
H2: Protected mountain areas have pronounced anthropogenic resources essential for developing ecotourism.	Partially confirmed
H3: Protected mountain areas have a diverse tourist offer essential for developing ecotourism.	Disproved
H4: Protected mountain areas are characterized by underdeveloped infrastructure and depopulation as the dominant weaknesses of their resource base.	Confirmed
H5: The application of the integrated AHP-SWOT method enables the definition of priority strategies for the sustainable development of ecotourism in the researched mountain areas.	Confirmed

The results of this research can be analyzed in the context of contemporary knowledge worldwide. In the example of Campo Ma'an National Park in Cameroon, the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for ecotourism development were analyzed. Strengths are shown through six sub-criteria, of which rich biodiversity had the greatest weight (0.416), and weaknesses were analyzed through eight sub-criteria, among which poorly developed infrastructure (0.357) stands out, which is in agreement with the results obtained in this research. Also, similar to the defined strategies for two PAs in Serbia, the strategies for the development of tourism in the national park and its surroundings are also defined here, which are based on: the adoption and implementation of the draft plan for the development and management of ecotourism; maintenance and improvement of roads; public-private partnership and training for park workers and community members on ecotourism development and reforming benefit-sharing mechanisms [35].

The dominance of the natural conditions of the area is the main strength of West Lake in Zhejiang Province, China, while insufficient tourism offers, individual target audiences and outdated tourist routes represent the main threats and weaknesses. Similar to this study, when ranking the strategies, emphasis was placed on the optimal use of the natural,

cultural and historical potentials and attractiveness of the lake, as well as formulating strategic plans to maximize the potential to attract tourists throughout the year [70].

The results obtained in this research are in agreement with previous studies that analyzed other PAs in Serbia. Thus, for example, the ranking of ecotourism development strategies in Kopaonik NP and Uvac SNR resulted in the following order—SO-ST-WO-WT, which partially differs from the one obtained in this study. In both PAs, as in the case of this research, the highest value was assigned to the SO strategy, which in Kopaonik NP refers to biological diversity and the mountain as a destination where tourism is more developed compared to other mountains, while in Uvac SNR, it is based on improving the agriculture—ecotourism connection, hospitality and rural tourism [67,68].

## 7. Conclusions

Ecotourism is often a catalyst for encouraging ecological sustainable development, because it implies a harmonious relationship with nature, local communities, their cultures and customs. Given that it emphasizes activities that influence the minimization of the negative aspects of conventional tourism on the environment and the strengthening of the cultural integrity of the local population, various international institutions and global environmental organizations have supported this type of tourism as a useful development strategy.

The main goal of this study was to evaluate the tourist attractiveness of two mountain PAs in Serbia—Stara and Suva Planina Mountains—to develop ecotourism and establish future directions of its development through the definition of priority strategies. This research advances knowledge about strategic decision-making in PAs and contemporary methods that support this process. Specifically, this study highlights the significance and suitability of implementing AHP–SWOT in the subject field since it relies on scientifically based and reliable decision-making that can really be put into action. Since the outcomes of the analyzed factors in this study represent original findings on the strengths and weaknesses of the investigated area regarding ecotourism development, this research contributes significantly to the literature on this issue.

In general, the results confirmed the presence of numerous natural and, to a lesser extent, anthropogenic resources that represent the basis for the future organized development of ecotourism activities. However, significant weaknesses were also registered, represented by overall poverty, underdeveloped infrastructure and, above all, depopulation as a century-old problem of this area. Due to the present limitations, the rich natural potentials are not properly utilized or adequately valorized. This is also confirmed by the existing tourist offer, which is characterized by insufficient connectivity and organization at the local level, as well as by poor quality of services and professional staff. Building on this, using the integral AHP–SWOT method based on previously defined SWOT criteria enabled the definition and prioritization of several development strategies, of which the ones with the greatest weight are based on the use of the variegated biodiversity of both PAs.

From a developmental and managerial perspective, various implications can be highlighted. Future actions should be aimed at maximizing the detected advantages, which means creating a development policy, drafting legislation, adopting structural plans and standards, and determining the institutional elements necessary for the development and management of ecotourism. Social mobilization activities, including different capacity training and community development projects, could enhance communication channels and contacts between stakeholders. Ecotourism development, as defined in international frameworks, is still in the initial stage of development in Serbia due to insufficient motivation of both potential creators of this tourist product and intermediaries—travel agencies—primarily due to low profitability. In order to enable further progress, adequate funds are needed for the planning and long-term management of the ecotourism destination, as well as creating state funds to protect areas for the controlled development of ecotourism. Targeted investments and credit stimuluses by the state directed toward agriculture development (strengthening livestock production), along with improving tourism and comple-

mentary activities (construction of road and communal infrastructure, modernization of tourist capacities), are also necessary.

Studies on evaluating possibilities for ecotourism development are beneficial to destination managers for the formation of successful strategic plans. Accordingly, this research represents an impulse toward the adequate progress of PAs and offers the officials a chance to take suitable actions. The evaluation gave good results that can be considered permanent and used in further research of the resource base of other PAs and the creation of new tourist products. This study has certain limitations that should be addressed in future research. It should be emphasized that external experts, on whose opinion the results of this study are based, can show a certain amount of subjectivity when determining the importance of criteria, which affects the value of the results. Sometimes their knowledge of the local peculiarities of the territory being studied can also be questionable. Therefore, it is recommended to include representatives of other, local groups (local population, non-governmental organizations, local tourist organizations. . .) in future research. When it comes to tourists, it is possible to do a more precise sampling and only include those who experience themselves as ecotourists. Since modern tourism research is increasingly emphasizing the studying of the motivation behind the tourists' arrivals, their needs, and in the case of ecotourism, the demand for ecotourism products, the upgrade of this research would include the analysis of the mentioned social aspect of tourism. Given that this study is based on one of the methods of multi-criteria decision-making, which implies the presence of a large number of factors and sub-factors, subsequent research could be focused on the analysis of individual segments, i.e., strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, in particular. As tourist destinations suffer transformation over time, this causes attitudes of different stakeholders about the strengths/weaknesses and opportunities/threats to change and evolve, and so future research should regularly explore the relationship between these attitudes and destination change. It would be helpful to perform follow-up research in a few years to ensure a longitudinal approach to tourism development studies.

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