

## Problems of Sustainable Tourism Development in Strandzha Nature Park

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**Abstract:** Strandzha Nature Park is the largest protected natural area in Bulgaria, established to preserve unique ecosystems and biodiversity, as well as the cultural heritage of the mountain. Strandzha Mountain is entirely on Bulgarian territory, being included in the five priority conservation areas in Central and Eastern Europe. It is situated on the second largest migratory path of birds in Europe - *Via Pontica*. The total number of species habitats is 121 and in this indicator the park is foremost among the protected areas in Europe.

During the last 15 years, many people in the area started to look for alternative sources of income and at present there are hundreds of tourism establishments that offer accommodation, food and sightseeing in the area. A regional trade mark has been developed and launched to distinguish those accommodation providers and other tourism services suppliers that cover certain requirements for sustainability, developed in a system of principles and concrete criteria, based on the concept of sustainable tourism development.

The current status of tourism development in the park includes tourism supply and tourism demand, the potential and carrying capacity of resources, and some data on resource efficiency. Problems discussed are those of territorial development conflicts in territorial planning and management.

**Key words:** *sustainable development, carrying capacity, tourism demand and supply*

### 1. Introduction

Before 1989, the Strandzha Mountain was one of the most undeveloped and depopulated areas in Bulgaria. With the establishment of the nature park in 1995, covering substantial part of its territory, many initiatives were undertaken aiming to push the development of tourism, but some conflicts started to appear originating from the discrepancies between the development restrictions, imposed in the protected area, and the entrepreneurs free market interests, respectively among the management bodies of the specific territory, being reflected in political fights and juridical battles.

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Strandzha Nature Park is situated in the most south-eastern part of the country, facing the Black sea to the east and bordering Turkey to the south. The geographical location of the park is marginal in terms of international transport corridors passing through the region (Corridor № 8, connecting the Adriatic to the Black Sea coast). The access to the park is via the international roads E-87 and II-98, and the road network within the park is not well developed. The distance from the regional center - Burgas, respectively from Burgas train station and Burgas airport to the main towns in the park - Tsarevo and Malko Turnovo are about 70-80 km. The launch of regular flights, especially during the summer from/to Burgas airport (apart from the charter programs of the international tour-operators) in the last several years, including low-cost companies as well, increases the number of unorganized arrivals in the region, from which the park as a destination can benefit directly.

The location of the park, on the border with Turkey, and the similarity of preserving nature of the mountain, create opportunities to develop trans-border partnerships for sustainable development and nature conservation, including further development of the idea to establish international nature park on both sides of the states.

The park is the largest protected area in Bulgaria (1,158 km<sup>2</sup>) - one percent of the territory of the country), established in 1995<sup>2</sup>. It is the only nature park in the country that includes settlements (together 21), providing a living environment for the local population (Management plan, 2005). Administratively the territory of the park falls in two municipalities, covering 100 % of Malko Turnovo Municipality to the west and 74,2 % of Tsarevo Municipality to the east with an outlet to the sea.

The relief of the park is low mountainous, with the following height distribution: 0-200 m – 38 %, 200-600 m – 60 %, above 600 m – 2 %, the maximum altitude being 710 m (Management plan, 2005). The area is in the Continental-Mediterranean climatic region, but its eastern part is strongly influenced by the Black sea. Along the coast, 7 sand beaches are identified with a total area of 355 760 m<sup>2</sup> (Pavlova et al., 2007).

The forests cover about 80 % of the territory of the park. The park is typical and only representative in EU of the biome of laurel forests and shrubs (*Laurilignosa*) (Assenov, 2001). During the Quaternary period the low mountain, its valleys and the warm coast provided shelter to tertiary flora relics which have survived to this day. The Euxinus types of forests are widespread, such as forests of eastern beech (*Fagus orientalis Lipsky*) and durmast oak (*Quercus polycarpa Schur*). Their kinship is further east in Asia Minor, the Caucasus, etc. - in the Euxinus biogeographical province. Some of the

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<sup>2</sup> Created as a Peoples' Park on Jan. 24, 1995 on the initiative of a group of Bulgarian environmentalists and foresters (under Art. 17 and Art. 22 of the Law on Nature Protection), Order № RD-30/24.01.1995 of the Minister of Environment (State Gazette №15/1995). In 2000 by Order № RD-350/14.07.2000 under the new Law on Protected Areas the park is re-categorized as Nature Park.

laurel representatives include the Strandzha periwinkle (*Rhododendron ponticum* L.), the Pontic rabid tree (*Daphne pontica* L.), the Strandzha blueberry (*Vaccinium arctostaphylos* L.), the laurel cherry (*Laurocerasus officinalis* M.J.Roemer) and others.

The park encompasses 5 nature reserves (one of them is a biosphere reserve), 14 protected sites and 8 landmarks (Directorate of Strandzha Nature Park). At national level, the park is the protected area with the highest species diversity in all biological groups. Within the CORINE Biotope project, the region of Strandzha is defined as a priority in the ecological network of the country and one of the most important conservation areas in Europe, being at the same time one of five priority areas for conservation in Central and Eastern Europe. The Park has European significance for vascular plants, nesting birds and a variety of reptiles and global importance for mammals, invertebrates and tertiary forest vegetation (Directorate of Strandzha Nature Park). The entire territory of the park is included in the international ecological network NATURA 2000 and currently is preparing to be nominated for UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, under the Man and Biosphere Program.

The network of settlements comprises 19 villages and 2 towns mainly with recreational and agricultural functions. The total number of the population is about 6300 people with a tendency of decreasing (NSI, 2011). The park is rich in cultural monuments. The total number of the identified cultural sites is 475 and 45 % of them are outside of the settlements (Management plan, 2005). They are diverse in type and comprise tombs, dolmens, fortresses, old houses from the Revival period, churches and chapels, museums, etc., some of them being of national significance. Fire dancing is typical for the region and in 2009 it was officially subscribed in the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO, 2009).

The scientific interest in the mountain and the park is provoked not only by the unique nature and rich cultural heritage, which can be utilized for tourism development, but also by the anticipated conflicts at institutional and territorial level, which may prevent the planned development of tourism in the region, in the interest of all stakeholders.

## **2. Material and methodology**

The main objective of the paper is to identify and analyze the current state of tourism development in Strandzha Nature Park and to bring out the existing development problems, in the context of sustainable tourism development.

The study is based on existing models of the system of tourism (e.g. Bachvarov, Apostolov, 1982; Marinov, 2003; Vodenska, 2004; Gunn, 1988, etc.) and tourism destinations (Butler, 1980; Buhalis, 2000, etc.). These models help to identify the main elements of the tourism system within a destination and their interactions, facilitate the analysis and provide a structured approach to the issues of sustainability.

In the last 20 years sustainable tourism development as part of the overall sustainable development is discussed in numerous academic and practically oriented publications - Muller (1994), Murphy (1995), Hunter (1995), Pearce (1995), Jafari (1994), Clarke (1997), Dogramadjieva (2003) and others. Thus, there is no doubt about the need for such management of tourist activities and their impacts in the destination that would incorporate the basic principles of sustainable development (Assenova, 2002; Assenova and Vodenska, 2012):

- Integrity of economic development and environmental protection goals. From tourism point of view this means that tourist resources should be utilized in such a way so that it would simultaneously bring benefits for the local population as well as satisfaction to the tourists without causing serious damage of the natural and socio-cultural environment;
- Fair distribution of the wealth created by tourism product sales and also of the costs for the tourist resources preservation;
- Binding quantitative growth with the environment's quality improvement which is in the mutual interest of the local population and tourists, looking for attractive and unspoiled holiday environment.

The Global sustainable tourism development criteria (GSTD criteria), developed in 2008 ([www.gstcouncil.org](http://www.gstcouncil.org)) are considered as a step towards operationalization of sustainable tourism development at company level and in 2012 criteria for the destination level were also developed (<http://www.gstcouncil.org/sustainable-tourism-gstc-criteria/criteria-for-destinations.html>). Falling in 4 sections, they are related to demonstrate sustainable destination management (13 criteria), maximizing economic benefits to the host community and minimizing negative impacts (9 criteria), maximizing benefits to communities, visitors, and cultural heritage and minimizing negative impacts (7 criteria) and maximizing benefits to the environment and minimizing negative impacts (12 criteria). In general, they refer to adequate planning, monitoring of impacts, protection and efficient use of resources – all very closely related to carrying capacity.

Based on the overview, the study approach is demonstrated on Figure 1, presenting a model of the territorial tourism system studied. Attention is paid to the elements of the system and its governance. Some sustainability issues as carrying capacity and efficient use of resources are additionally discussed, but the main focus is on the management conflicts and problems, which seem to be crucial for the future sustainable tourism development in the area.

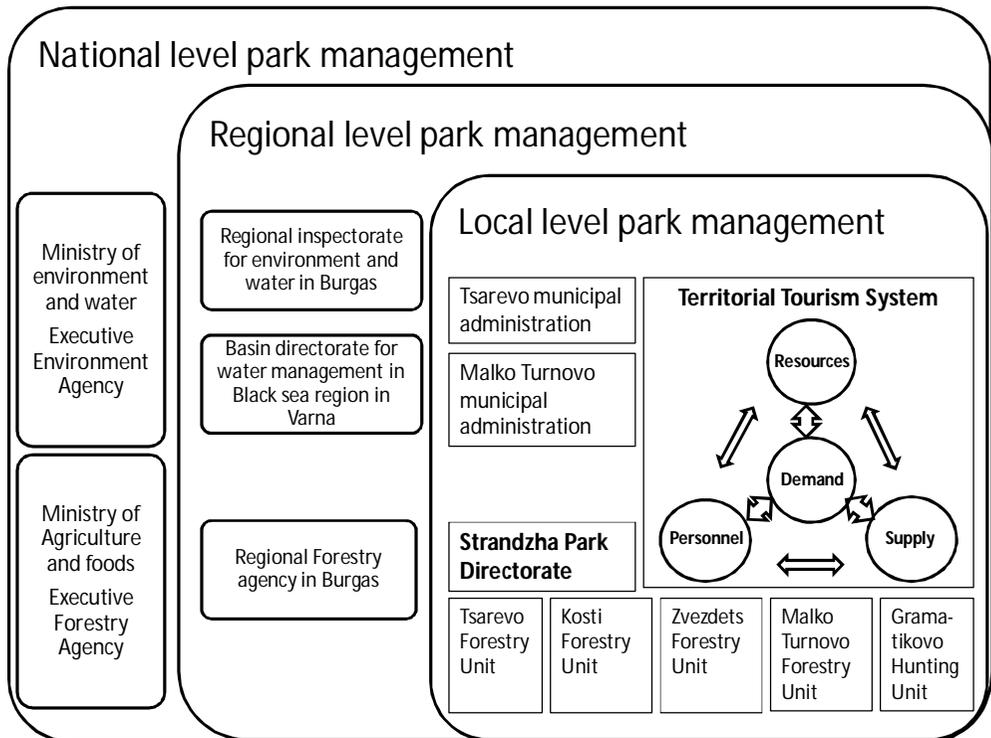


Figure 1. Model of the territorial tourism system of Strandzha Nature Park and its management

The methodology of the study is based on the combined use of different methods of collection, processing and analysis of information on the development and management of tourism at the local level, taking into account their advantages and disadvantages. The specific methods that have been applied in the study include:

- Use of secondary information, including review and systematization of publications and internet sources, planning documents, official statistics at regional and municipal levels, collecting information from local authorities and organizations involved in the development of tourism in the park's area;
- Collecting of primary data, including field study of the park, visits to the settlements, tourist sites and attractions, on-site visits to accommodation facilities and interviews with owners, NGOs representatives, municipal administration representatives, the park' Directorate representatives, etc.;
- Mathematical and statistical methods for processing quantitative information;
- Scientific analysis and synthesis of primary and secondary data.

The main sources of quantitative data about the current state of tourism development in the park are the National Statistical Institute (NSI), the National register of the categorized tourist facilities and the Municipal registers of the categorized accommodation and catering facilities, being part of the national one. NSI provides information at the municipal level both on demand and supply while the registers allow data processing at settlement level but on tourism supply only.

## **1. Research findings and discussion**

### **1.1. Tourism resources and products**

The resources for the development of tourism have already been presented in the introduction. Based on them the main tourism product in the coastal area of the park is the summer seaside recreation for independent and organized tourists coming for longer vacations. In the settlements situated near to the Black Sea coast, this type of tourism is combined with cultural and sightseeing tours, based on the rich cultural heritage. Yacht tourism is in perspective in Tsarevo and Ahtopol.

In the inland territory of Strandzha Nature Park, the basic types of tourism developed are ecotourism and rural tourism. Sports tourism (water sports, cycling and horse-riding), fishing, hunting is also regarded as a perspective for the area. At present, the tourist offers related to the interior of Strandzha Nature Park are of two main types:

- Day programs for mass tourists: In several villages attractions are developed for tourists from the seaside. In the village of Brashlyan, the package includes visit to the "St. Demetrius" religious school museum, stroll through the village, a folklore program with a demonstration of Strandzha crafts, tasting of local food specialties in the courtyard of an old house. In Brodilovo Village, the trip includes ride in a donkey cart and a folklore program, etc.
- Ecological (specialized) trips, the core of which are the specific interests and needs of tourists. The offers include a 15-day program for a walking tour passing through 10 villages (specially for French tourists), a tourist program for families with children, etc.

### **1.2. Tourism Supply**

The lowest level on which qualitative information about tourism supply is provided by NSI is the municipal level. The main source of information on accommodation establishments is NSI's data, which is in the monthly forms. Reporting refers to all establishments in use with 10 and more bed-places in the public and private sector including hotels, camping sites and other accommodation establishments (holiday settlements, mountain chalets, private flats, rest houses, bungalows and other short-time accommodation). According to NSI the total number of beds in the two municipalities discussed in 2010 is 4896 (NSI, 2011) and 99 % of them are in Tsarevo

Municipality. The fact that many establishments in the area of the park have less than 10 beds partly explains the discrepancy between the official data of NSI and the data, which can be derived from the National register of categorized facilities, providing the advantage that data can be obtained for every settlement. Thus, according to that register the number of available beds in the two municipalities is more than twice higher – 10206 in total (National Tourism Register, 2011) while the number of beds within the territory of the park is exactly 3504 (National Tourism Register, 2011).

In the park, categorized accommodation establishments are registered in 10 settlements. Out of them 4 are at the sea shore – Varvara, Ahtopol, Sinemorets and Rezovo, and the other 6 are inland – Malko Turnovo, Gramatikovo, Zavernovo, Brodilovo, Bulgari and Brashlyan. Actually, 92 % of the beds are concentrated in the 4 settlements at the coast mentioned above.

The dynamics of tourism supply based on NSI data are presented on Figure 2. The figure clearly demonstrates the sharp decline in the number of beds during the transition period, starting from 1989 till about 2005. It is followed by a short period of recovery till 2007 and fluctuations after 2007 related to the continuing economic and financial crises.

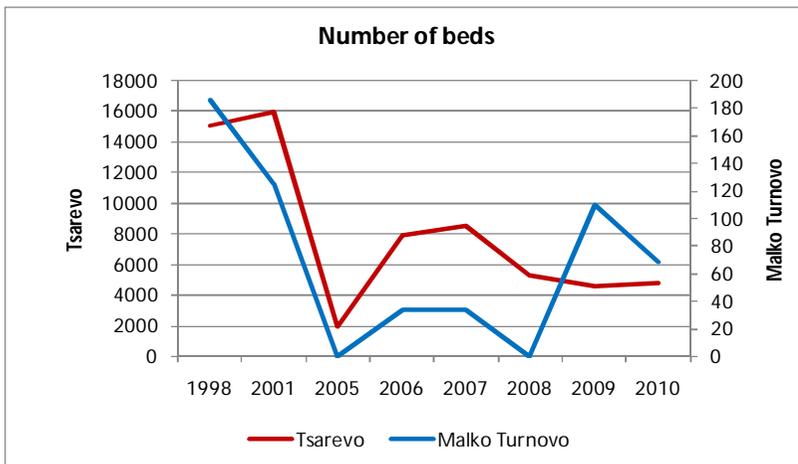


Figure 2. Dynamics of tourism supply (NSI, 2011)

Based on data from the National register it can be concluded that the accommodation structure in the park is diverse in type. Generally, the bungalows, hotels and rooms for rent prevail, but relatively high is also the share of the family run hotels and guest houses (Figure 3). The high share of bungalows is due to their large number at the seaside. As expected the structure is most diverse in the coastal villages, especially in the bigger ones – Ahtopol and Sinemorets, while in the interior of the park it is represented only by guest houses, rooms for rent, pensions and a few small hotels.

The category structure (Figure 3) shows that nearly 50 % of the beds are in one-star establishments, another 30 % being in 2-star facilities. The establishments of the highest quality (4 stars) are mainly at the seaside. It should be pointed out that nearly all the accommodation facilities are eight new constructions or which are entirely renovated and/or refurbished recently. Although there is a high share of low-category sites they usually offer services and equipment of higher quality than required by the Categorization Regulation (2009).

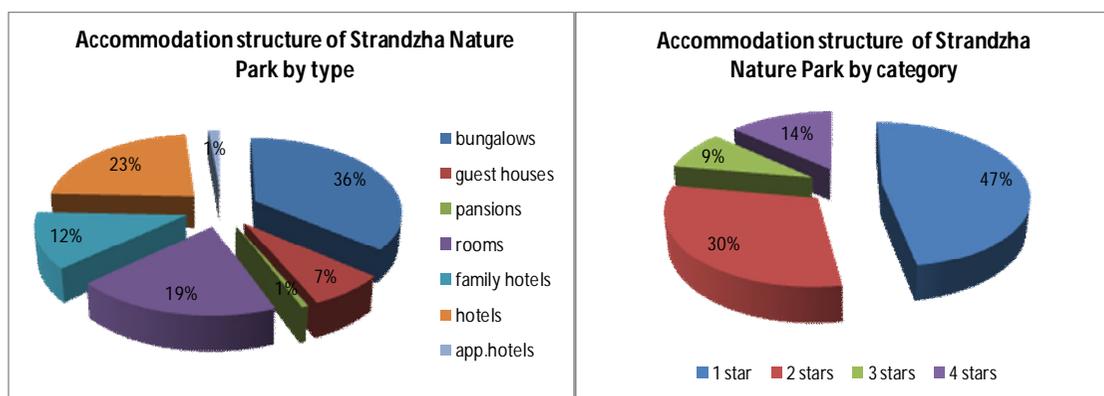


Figure 3. Accommodation structure of Strandzha Nature Park by type and category (National Register, 2011)

In 2010, the total amount of income generated by the accommodation facilities in the studied area is about 930 000 EUR, of which 97% are generated in Tsarevo Municipality.

Due to the seasonality of tourism, the establishments at the coast operate only in the June – September period while those located in inland settlements are open usually all year round. For that reason, the relative occupancy rate of the accommodation facilities (referred to the operation period) in 2010 is extremely low – totally for the area it is 21,6 %, respectively 22,2 % in Tsarevo Municipality and 5,4 % in Malko Turnovo Municipality (Table 1). At the same time, the price level in Malko Turnovo Municipality is 4 times higher compared to Tsarevo Municipality, which together with the longer period of operation explains the twice higher income per bed per year, despite the lower income per tourist because of the shorter stay.

Tourist infrastructure is represented by hiking trails, sports facilities (swimming pools, tennis courts, cycling, horse-riding, etc.), hunting grounds, etc. About 300 km of trails are marked and maintained by the Directorate of the park, providing resting places, shelter and tapped water. There are also many paths that are not marked and require the use of local guides. In the two municipalities, there are only 5 registered companies acting as tour-operators in the region.

Table 1. Efficiency indicators of the accommodation facilities (НСИ, 2010)

Efficiency indicators	Tsarevo Municipality	Malko Turnovo Municipality	Total
Relative occupancy rate (%)	22,2	5,4	21,6
Average income per tourist (EUR)	49	35	49
Average income per bed (EUR)	187	392	190
Average income per night (EUR)	8	27	9

### 1.3. Tourism demand

The pattern of tourism demand is pretty similar to the dynamics of available beds. Being in a border area the current territory of the park in the past suffered from the restricted access for people, respectively tourists. Nevertheless in the fall of the new millennium Malko Turnovo Municipality attracted about 3000 tourists, while Tsarevo Municipality had about 90 000 visitors (Figure 4). In 2010, the park's area was visited only by about 19 000 tourists, 96 % of them, being registered at the seaside. They have spent more than 108 000 overnights, 9 times less than in 2001, but the territorial distribution is almost the same - 99 % of the overnights being in Tsarevo Municipality.

The average length of stay in the two municipalities is quite different because of the different purpose of visit. Longer vacations are typical for the coastal part, but their length gradually decreases from 9,3 in 1998 to 5,9 days in 2010, while in the area of Malko Turnovo, during the same period, the length of stay varies between 1,1 and 2,5 days, being 1,3 days in 2010.

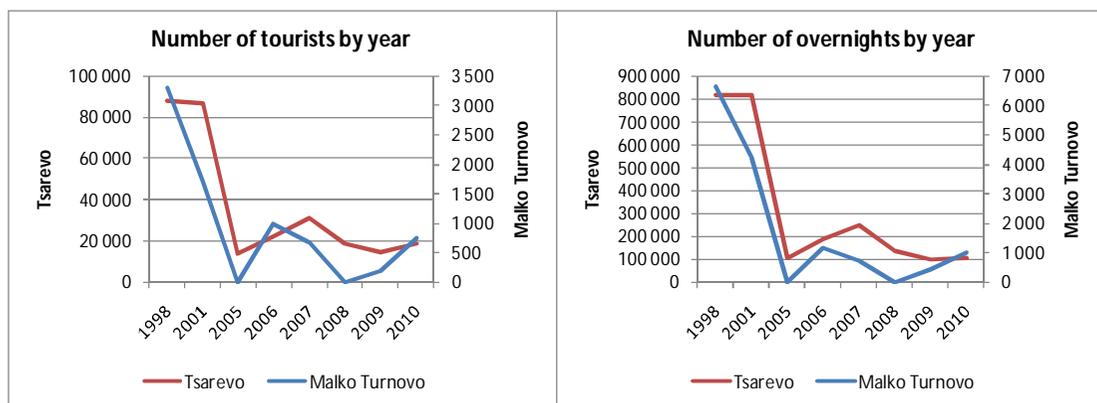


Figure 4. Dynamics of tourism demand (НСИ, 2010)

The main generating market for the park's area is the Bulgarian market. In 2010 in Malko Turnovo Municipality Bulgarians comprise 93 % of both the tourist arrivals and the overnights. In Tsarevo Municipality, the share of Bulgarians is 86 % of the tourist

flow and 89 % of the overnights. Totally the area was visited by about 2100 foreigners and only 3 % of them stayed in Malko Turnovo Municipality. The majority of foreigners come from Central and Eastern Europe – mainly Czech Republic, Russia, Poland and Serbia. The organized tourists from Western Europe arrive from Germany, Finland and Sweden (Figure 5). There is considerable difference in the origin of tourists visiting Malko Turnovo Municipality, regarded as the heart of the park. They come mainly from Turkey, USA, Switzerland and Germany.

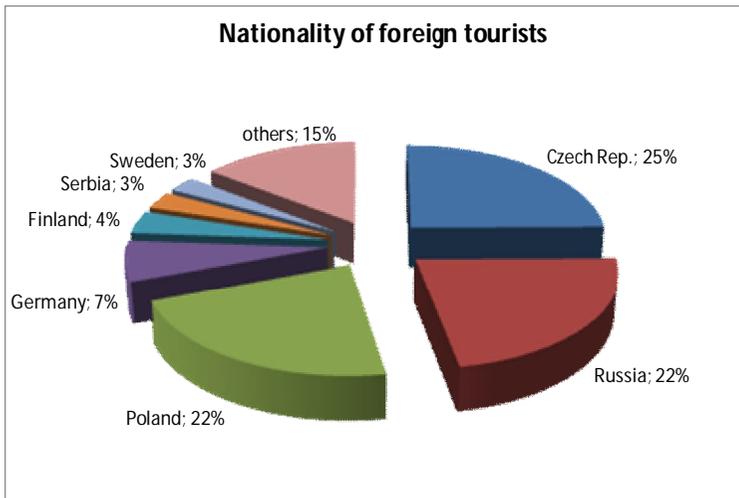


Figure 5. Nationality of foreign tourists (NSI, 2010)

#### 1.4. Personnel

The local population is decreasing in number, being about 6300 in 2011, the natural growth is negative, and that is a stable tendency in the last years. In Tsarevo Municipality the age structure is more favorable, compared to Malko Turnovo Municipality – the group up to 17 years of age is about 17 % in both municipalities, but in Tsarevo the active population (age 18 – 64) is 64 %, while in Malko Turnovo the aged above 65 form a considerable share – 32 %. Moreover, in 9 of the villages in the last municipality there are no inhabitants younger than 40 years.

Since the very start of tourism development in the country, in the mid of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the general understanding regarding tourism development in the studied region is that the small number of the local population determines the lack of human resources for the provision of tourist services. In small companies and establishments, for which tourism is mainly a family business, the self-employment is a way to generate revenue from tourism, but the establishments with bigger capacity are forced to recruit personnel from within the entire country.

### 1.5. Carrying capacity and resource efficiency

There is not enough data to make definite judgments about the pressure exerted to all types of available tourism resources, but the observations during the field study and some calculations help to draw conclusions about the level of their utilization.

There is strict control of visits to the nature reserves incorporated in the park, as follows:

- "Vitanovo" Reserve (1112.4 ha) – entry is allowed only with specific permission from the Ministry of Environment and Water to conduct research or for specialized tourism visits under strict rules and keeping to selected routes;
- "Sredoka" Reserve (607.8 ha) – only research is allowed as well as tourist visits following 3 strictly regulated and marked tourist routes;
- "Silkosa" Reserve (396 ha) - tourist visits are allowed only along a marked trail under the supervision of a park ranger.

The beaches' capacity is about 28540 people being there at the same time (the norm for disposable beach area per tourist varies between 8 m<sup>2</sup> and 12 m<sup>2</sup> depending on the width of the beach). Based on bed capacity adjacent to the beaches the current disposable beach area is 110 m<sup>2</sup> per tourist and the level of utilization are 11 % (Асенова, 2012).

The cultural resources in the area are not largely exploited yet. The lack of quantitative data on visits of tourist sites and attractions makes it impossible to determine the current load pressure, but available information indicates gatherings of large numbers of people (2000-3000 at the same time) for various celebrations and cultural events, e.g. during the fire dancing in Bulgari Village, as well as on eco-trails in the nature park, but there is no evidence of negative impact on the physical environment.

Although observations and available data indicate that there is a substantial margin till reaching high degree of utilization of beaches and the other tourism resources, it is advisable to monitor the load pressure on beaches, especially during the peak of the season and peoples' gathering at single events in order to plan measures for avoiding irreversible changes in natural systems and/or damage to cultural attractions and sites.

In terms of sustainable development and carrying capacity, the data on tourism supply and demand is also often used to assess the impact exerted on natural and social environment by considering the territorial receptive structure (supply approach) and the tourist arrivals pressure on a specific territory (demand approach) (Santonocito, 2009, etc.). Since the available data on demand is at the municipal level, only some indices measuring the supply impact are calculated and presented in Table 2. Both of the calculated indices have a comparatively low value, which means that the receptive structure still has low territorial impact and low socio-economic impact in terms of importance of tourism for the local economy.

Table 2. Indices of tourism supply impact

Indices	Measure	Value
Index of territorial density	Ratio b/n the number of beds and the area in km <sup>2</sup>	3,03
Index of tourist function	Ratio b/n the number of beds and the sum of the beds and the local population	0,36

There are no full data on the use of water and energy by the tourism sector in the region, but many of the establishments have been involved in projects aiming to help them to introduce resource efficient measures. Some calculations show that in the Municipality of Tsarevo, the average water consumption per guest-night is 289 l while in the family run hotels it is much lower (30-50l). Compared to international benchmarks ("average" performance – 250-300 l) data provided shows that the level of water use is within the normal limits (Assenova, 2012).

Table 3. Use of electricity in accommodation facilities. Village of Brashlyan

Settlement	Facility	Use of electricity per year per m <sup>2</sup> (kWh/m <sup>2</sup> )	Use of electricity per guest night (kWh)	Energy performance
Brashlyan Village	Sarmashik Hotel	181,01	294,13	Excellent A
	Guest House Zhechka Kaloyanova	281,41	313,57	Average C
	Guest House Nanka Chaikova	232,33	424,00	Above average B
	Guest House Veska Stamatova	30,00	24,00	Excellent A
	Guest House Maria Kichukova	372,41	90,76	Below average D
	Guest House Syika Yankova	376,83	257,5	Below average D
	Guest House Stanka Buhleva	224,00	186,67	Above average B

Some energy efficiency measures are also implemented in the accommodation facilities, including the use of renewable energy sources. An example is provided by the Brashlyan village, where one hotel and 6 guest houses have been audited and consulted on possible measures to reduce the use of energy (Table 3). The data shows that, with

the exception of two establishments, the energy performance is at average or above the average level.

The reason for the below average performance in some establishments is the fact that the houses are authentic and very old (250-350 year), in the typical for the region architectural style, with a stone ground floor and main floor with plank walls plastered inside. Any reconstruction of those houses should comply with preservation of the appearance, and for that reason the only possibility is to use internal insulation systems. Usually heating is done with wood stoves while domestic hot water is provided by electric heaters. Solar panels are also used for water heating (e.g. Sarmashik Hotel).

### **1.6. Functions and activities of Strandzha Nature Park Directorate**

The Strandzha Nature Park Directorate is a specialized territorial unit of the Executive Forestry Agency. Among the function of the Directorate<sup>3</sup> (2012) some are directly or indirectly related to sustainable tourism development, namely to:

- plan, organize, coordinate, supervise and participate in the implementation of activities and projects related to: research, maintenance and restoration of biodiversity, conservation and restoration of natural habitats and of populations of plant and animal species and the condition of their habitats, conservation and management of landscape components, regeneration and protection against erosion, construction and maintenance of architectural elements to serve recreation and tourism facilities, ensuring the protection of cultural values, as well as, the monitoring stations, development and publishing of information, advertising, educational and other promotional materials;
- monitor the tourist loads within the park;
- organize the construction and operation of visitor and information centers;
- coordinate and supervise recreational and tourism activities;
- participate in the development process and implement management plans for the park and protected areas within its territorial scope and related structural and technical plans and projects;
- propose to the competent authorities changes in management plans for the park, as well as projects, plans and programs for sustainable use of natural
- resources, conservation of biological and landscape diversity, tourism and recreation, conservation of cultural heritage;
- organize and implement activities towards preservation of cultural heritage

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<sup>3</sup> Organic Rules of the Nature Park "Strandzha", in force since 10.02.2012, issued by the Executive Forestry Agency of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food. State Gazette, issue 12, 10 February 2012.  
<http://www.lex.bg/bg/mobile/ldoc/2135774860>

Table 4. Activities of Strandzha Nature Park Directorate directed towards sustainable tourism development (Directorate of Strandzha Nature Park)

Year	Activity
1997	Preliminary survey of needs and opportunities for development and inventory of resources is carried out.
1998	Local associations in 5 villages are created with the goal to work for the restoration and preservation of cultural traditions and promoting the development of ecotourism in the park. First guest houses and rooms for rent are opened. Trainings for locals to provide and improve the quality of tourist services are organized. Fire-dancing rite is revived in Bulgari Village.
1998/ 1999	The first tourist guide "Where to stay in Strandzha Natural Park" is prepared, published and widely distributed.
1999	The first detailed tourist map of the Strandzha Nature Park is prepared and published. Information points for environmental and tourist information are set up in 5 settlements.
2001	A permanent interactive exhibition of the park is opened in one of the buildings of the Museum complex in the town of Malko Turnovo.
2002	A trip for journalists from national and regional media is organized. For the first time the Periwinkle Festival is organized since then held annually in May.
2006	16 local people are trained to provide guiding services in the park, and 20 residents are trained as animators.
2007	Visitor information centre is opened in the town of Malko Turnovo. The first general guide for Strandzha Nature Park is prepared and published.
2008	The general guide for the park is published in English. Altogether 30 brochures, leaflets and catalogues with tourist information in Bulgarian, English, Russian, French and German language are prepared and distributed. The number of beds in the park, excluding the coastal settlements reached 600. Tourist infrastructure is developed including 7 interpretive nature trails, 300 km of marked trails, 20 shelters, 4 observation towers. Additional services are developed including craft demonstrations, archaeological tours, folklore and traditional celebrations, cycling routes, nature at nights, etc. Regional certification mark "Strandzha" is patented and launched.
2009/ 2010	Creating of a database and monitoring system for biodiversity and socio-economic characteristics of the region is initiated. Preparation of full documentation for the nomination of the park as a biosphere reserve starts. The slogan of the park – "Adventure for the senses" is selected. Exposition "Rare and endangered species of Strandzha" is opened.
2011	Mapping of NATURA 2000 protected sites starts. New tourist map of Strandzha Nature Park is published.
2012	Project for preservation and restoration of 11 rare and endangered plant species within Strandzha Nature Park starts. Development of 7 new tourist routes in undertaken.

together with the regional authorities, the central and local authorities, as well as owners and operators of sites with cultural value; organize and carry out activities related to cultural traditions - festivals, symposia, workshops, fairs;

- liaise with governmental institutions and organizations, research and educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, individuals and entities interested or working in the field of biodiversity conservation, forestry, heritage, recreation and tourism.

Right after the establishment of the Directorate as a unit, it started the fulfillment of initiatives for sustainable tourism development in the park, working together with the local population to enhance the development of the local tourism product (Directorate of Strandzha Nature Park) mainly on a project basis with funding from national and international donors. Some of the major activities in the period 1997 - 2012 are presented in Table 4.

### **1.7. Problems of management and territorial development, related to sustainability**

#### **1.7.1. Governance responsibilities of many bodies at local, regional and national level**

As demonstrated on Figure 1 the management responsibilities for the territory of the park are divided among 13 institutions at national, regional and local level, which provokes problems in the coordination of the activities undertaken. Besides these institutions, certain competences are attributed also to the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, the Ministry of Culture and a number of national and regional agencies. Other stakeholders like concessionaires, users and NGOs operating in the park should also be considered. The preparation for the nomination for biosphere reserve makes the problem even acuter, because the management structure of this new category that is not covered with the Law on Protected Areas in Bulgaria requires integrated management approach. It should be pointed out, once again that within the territory of the park, there are simultaneously different types of protected areas, which often even overlap – the park, reserves, NATURA 2000 sites, etc., differing in the degree of protection and the restriction for other activities.

The most dramatic till recently was the conflict between the municipal administrations of Malko Tarnovo and Tsarevo and the Directorate of the park, which have not reached agreement on any issue for a decade, except the common position against the demand for oil and natural gas drilling in the sea off shore.

Conflicts between the two municipal administrations are also quite often. There was rivalry on the inclusion of fire dancing in UNESCO's list of intangible cultural heritage, done by the Municipality of Tsarevo, participation in joint projects is not welcome, etc. But in exceptional situations of common interest, joint actions have been undertaken (e.g. against the management plan of the park when exclusion of territories was suggested).

### **1.7.2. Spatial planning**

The main aim of the new development plans of local administration is the intention to exclude territories from the park. The draft of the new master plan of Tsarevo Municipality elaborated in 2007 envisages a change in the park's boundaries and urbanization of protected areas, implying new ratio between housing, hotels and holiday resorts and tourist infrastructure areas. The master plan discussed was approved by the Ministry of Regional Development in 2008, but environmental organizations appealed the final spatial plan approval granted. Although there is a decision of the court on another case related to the plan that the Ministry of Environment and Water should review its favorable opinion about the environmental impact assessment of the plan that led to the final approval in 2008, the respective Ministry still has no decision on how to proceed with the master plan. It is likely the environmental assessment to be reviewed and the plan - corrected.

### **1.7.3. Strandzha Nature Park management plan**

Over the past two decades, the park became a scene of constant conflicts between environmentalists and locals. The management plan was elaborated by a large team of experts and contains guidelines for tourism development in its territorial scope. The plan was first developed in 2003 and submitted to the Ministry of Environment and Water in 2005, but it is still waiting for approval and meanwhile underwent two corrections (due to economic interests and political lobbying). Nowadays, 18 years after the creation of Strandzha Nature Park, it has no management plan to regulate the protection of the territory and the sustainable use of local resources. Tsarevo and Malko Tarnovo municipal administrations are against the adoption of the plan with the argument that by protecting nature, the plan hinders the economic development of the area. In a proposal to the Minister of Environment and Water, the two municipal administrations insist that all municipal and private land located near the resorts along the coastline, as well as the neighborhoods of some larger Strandzha villages should be excluded from Strandzha Natural Park.

As already mentioned, in communist time the area was underdeveloped and depopulated, allowing nature to recover from centuries of human impact. But, with the rise of the tourist industry in the last 10 years, many people are eager to make earnings by returning to the settlements they have left in the past or by seeking for investors for inherited properties in the area. Private land and real estates, abandoned in the past are recently sold, and on them villas and hotels start to appear. The restrictive regime for construction and other activities in certain areas creates conflicts of interest in the utilization of the territory in relation to the business constraints imposed by the statute of Strandzha Nature Park. Nevertheless, new holiday villages appear along the Veleka River, and its tributaries - some of them are on private land, others - on former

municipal land. The problem is particularly acute in the area close to the Black Sea coast, where local people refuse to identify themselves with the park.

Currently indigenous population lives mainly on tourism and the sale of timber, both in conflict with the existing bans, which causes dissatisfaction of landowners and municipal administrations. Moreover, because of the pending status of the management plan logging in the park is often perfectly legal. For that reason, the total area of woods had fallen by nearly a third since the announcement of the park, when it was over 27,000 hectares. (Zlatarov, 2009).

#### **1.7.4. Intensive construction and urbanization**

Intensive construction (including illegal) is observed in the last 10 years all over the park but especially at the shore. There is a significant risk of destruction of the last undeveloped bays in an attempt to catch up with other seaside municipalities and of deterioration of some inland area, as well. The intensive development of Tsarevo Municipality as evidenced by the large number of building permits issued by the municipal administration - a total of 1165 for the period 2003 - 2007 and a substantial number of exploitation permits during the same period - 273. Many changes in the land use status were registered and agricultural regulated lands were transformed into lands for construction with the aim to built hotels, villas, holiday villages and other facilities. Since 2007, the process described above subsides and there is a clear trend of decreasing the undertakings (Assenova, 2012).

Showcasing the urbanization process of attractive areas in recent years is the official establishment of new holiday villages, resorts and villa zones<sup>4</sup>, decided by the local municipal councils. In Tsarevo Municipality 6 new local entities of that type were created in 2010.

Increased investor interest in the period 2003 - 2008, led to the realization of many projects, but high profit margins (especially in the construction and sale of holiday apartments) and widespread construction in many cases raise justified doubts about the good faith of acquisitions of ownership of land for construction, changes in land status and compliance with building codes. One of the serious problems local governments will face in the coming years is to find a solution to the issue of unfinished construction sites, some of which are just next to the coast.

The huge construction at the coast not only did not lead to more balanced development of the territory of the park, but even deepened the uneven distribution of the accommodation facilities and tourism infrastructure. It was clearly demonstrated by

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<sup>4</sup> Under the Law on Administrative and Territorial Division of Bulgaria the described formations are areas outside the construction boundaries of settlements, established to carry out specific functions with exact borders, but without permanent population.

tourism data analysis that there is super high concentration of facilities and tourist flow at the coast, along with the depopulation of some villages from the interior of the park and generally slower development of the inland part of the park.

## 2. Conclusions

Strandzha Nature Park was established in 1995 with the aim to protect the unique natural and cultural heritage on its territory. The Directorate of the park undertook a lot of initiatives for sustainable tourism development in the region, but due to the great number of institutions having responsibilities in the area, the lack of common understanding on the future territorial development and diverse economic and political interests, currently there are many evident conflicts that hinder the sustainable development of tourism within the territory of the park. The identified conflicts include those between:

- the administrations of the two municipalities, whose territory falls within the park;
- the municipal administrations and the Nature Park Directorate;
- the municipal authorities and NGOs (especially environmental);
- the businesses and the Directorate of the park.

Maybe the problem is that environmental protection and tourism development are very often seen as opposed development strategies. Finding a compromise and a mutually acceptable solution for all parties regarding future economic and tourism development in the park would reduce the passion and lead to more rational use of resources for the benefit of local people and raising life standard.

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