



**PAN Parks Verification Manual  
Standard Verification Report Form**

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# PAN Parks Verification

## **RILA NATIONAL PARK, Bulgaria**

### **DRAFT**

### VERIFICATION REPORT PRINCIPLES 4-5 AND MONITORING REPORT PRINCIPLES 1-3

Prepared by

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**September, 2007**

A hard copy signed by the lead verifier must be sent to the PAN Parks Conservation Manager.

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<b>18. 9. 2009</b> Date	<b>Date</b> Approved

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<sup>1</sup> The public summary is a half (max 1) page document, which summarises conditions for awarding the PAN Parks Certificate. The document is to be uploaded from the PAN Parks Foundation's website. It should include the 5 main findings of the report.

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### 1 Introduction

The following report summarises the trip and results of the verification visit to Rila National Park in relation to the PAN Parks Principles 4 and 5 and monitoring progress on Principles 1-3, from September 10 to 14, 2007. This verification visit is the follow-up of the verification of the Rila National Park in relation to principles 1, 2 and 3 in 2005, and verification and monitoring mission in 2006.

It is inherent in the process that the verification cannot study the park and its region in detail and address every issue related to park management and the tourism development in the surrounding region. Therefore this report does not cover those issues that the verification team was not informed about or did not come across during the desk study or the visit. The verifiers used the guidance provided by the PAN Parks foundation, the experience gained in the verification of other verified Parks, as well as the experience from other activities.

The verification team consisted of Jernej Stritih, Lead verifier, Gordon Miller, Verifier, and Katerina Rakovska, Local expert. The Verification Team wants to express its thanks for the great hospitality of the Rila National Park team under the leadership of the Director Todor Serezliyski, and in particular to Stefan Kirilov and Krasimir Andonov, who coordinated the visit and were the permanent hosts during the mission.

#### 1.1 Abbreviations and acronyms used in the report

CAR: Corrective Action Requirement

RNP: Rila National Park

RMNP: Rila Monastery Nature Park

EU: European Union

GIS: Geographic information system

LPPG: Local PAN Parks Group

NP: National Park

P&C: Principles and Criteria

STDS: Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy

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## 2 List of participants

### Text

### 2.1 Verification team

The Verification Team consisted of:

- Jernej Stritih, Lead Verifier,
- Gordon Miller, Verifier
- Katerina Rakovska, Local Expert

The verifiers were selected from among PAN Parks verifiers. The local expert was selected based on her knowledge of the area and extensive experience in Bulgarian Nature Conservation. The Curricula Vitae of the three experts are available at the PAN Parks office. The team co-operated excellently before, during and after the mission.

### 2.2 Host team

Permanent hosts persons during the visit was:

- Stefan Kirilov, Interpretation and Educational Programs Expert, Rila National park Directorate
- Krasimir Andonov, Fauna Expert, Rila National park Directorate

Other host persons from Rila National Park attending most of the visit or in special meetings and field visits were:

- Todor Serezliyski, Director of the Rila National Park
- Elitsa Vuchkova, Head of park section Belovo, Rila National park Directorate, member of the LPPG
- Strahil Giuviyski, Interpretation and Educational Programs Head Expert, Rila NP Visitors Centre
- Albena Kolibarska, Interpretation and Educational Programs Expert, Rila NP Visitors Centre
- Nikolina Georgieva, Flora Expert, Rila National park Directorate
- Tatiana Maleshevska, GIS Expert, Rila National park Directorate
- Irina Gininska, Administrative services and Human resources Expert, Rila NP Directorate

### 2.3 Local people met during the site visit

- Svetlana Aladjem, Consultant, Information and Nature Conservation Foundation, chairperson of the LPPG
- Dimitrina Boteva, Consultant, Information and Nature Conservation Foundation, member of the LPPG
- Michail Michailov, Head of Department for Protected Areas, Ministry of Environment and Waters
- Tzvetelina Ivanova, Expert in Protected areas Department, Ministry of Environment and Waters
- Desislava Mihalkova-Stanimirova, Expert in Tourism Policy Directorate, Bulgarian State Agency for Tourism
- Krum Krumov, European Integration Expert in Dupnitsa Municipality, member of the LPPG
- Malinka Yordanova, Cassiopeia Association – Dupnitsa, member of the LPPG
- Lubka Stankova, European Integration Expert in Kostenets Municipality, member of the LPPG
- Valentina Stoitsova, European Integration Expert in Dolna banya Municipality, member of the

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### LPPG

- Silvia Yordanova, European Integration Specialist in Dupnitsa Municipality
- Sasho Ivanov, Mayor of Sapareva Banya Municipality
- Vencho Zlatanchev, Chairman of Sapareva Banya Municipal Council
- Evelina Nesheva, Head of Territorial, urban and rural development Department in Sapareva Banya Municipality
- Radka Georgieva, Head of European Integration Department in Sapareva Banya Municipality
- Gergana Kirilova, European Integration Expert in Sapareva Banya Municipality
- Milan Djorgov, Manager of BDZ Hotel, Panichishte resort
- Slaveiko Staikov, Manager of Rila Sport, Sofia
- Vasil Petrov, Former director of RNPd, member of LPPG, Rila NP
- Maya Padareva, Secretary of "G. Todorov" Community Centre, Belitsa, member of the LPPG
- Maria Georgieva, Museum activities Coordinator "G. Todorov" Community Centre, Belitsa
- Isidor Bankov, Tourism activities Coordinator "G. Todorov" Community Centre, Belitsa
- Nina Baykova, Chairwoman of "Dobarsko" Association, Blagoevgrad, member of the LPPG
- Branimir Kapisuski, Guide in "Dancing bear Park", Four paws Foundation, Belitsa
- Ivan Nakov, Owner of Horse riding station and outdoor activities "Peri Vallas", village of Bachevo, Razlog Municipality
- Nadka Kroteva, Owner of House "Deshka", village of Gorno Draglishte, Razlog Municipality
- Mijke Koole, PAN Parks Volunteer

### 3 Verification itinerary

#### Monday 10. 9.

- Morning
  - Arrival of the team at Sofia Airport
  - Meeting with park consultants Svetlana Aladjem and Dimitrina Boteva, discussion of the programme of the verification visit, key questions to be addressed during the mission
- Afternoon
  - Meeting with Michail Michailov and Tzvetelina Ivanova, discussion the Ministry policy towards the Rila National Park and the possibility of nomination of Rila as World Heritage Site

#### Tuesday 11. 9.

- Morning:
  - Meeting with park experts Stefan Kirilov and Krasimir Andonov
  - Meeting with LPPG members in Dupnitsa
- Afternoon:
  - Meeting with the municipality of Separeva Banya
- Evening
  - Visit to the Rila National park Visitor centre in Panichishte
  - Stay at the hotel Energoremont in Panichishte

#### Wednesday 12. 9.

- Morning:

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- Discussion of the Visitor management plan at the Visitor centre Panichishte
- Travel to chalet Rilskite Ezera
- Afternoon
- Site visit to Seven Rila Lakes
- Evening
- Discussion with the manager of Rila Sport
- Stay at chalet Rilskite Ezera

### Thursday 13. 9.

- Morning:
  - Travel to Blagoevgrad
  - Meeting with the LPPG members in Blagoevgrad
- Afternoon
- Visit to the potential local business partners Ivan Nakov and Nadka Kroteva
- Evening
  - Dinner with the director of the National Park
  - Stay at Blagoevgrad

### Friday 16. 9.

- Morning:
  - Closing meeting with the park administration
  - Departure to Sofia
- Afternoon:
  - Meeting with the park consultants Svetlana Aladjem and Dimitrina Boteva, Desislava Mihalkova – Stanimirova, State Agency for Tourism, Stefan Kirilov, Rila National park Directorate and Mijke Koole, PAN Parks Volunteer

## 4 Desk study results

In addition to the documents received for the previous verifications, the following documents were received by the Verifiers prior to the Visit:

- Self-assessment Questionnaire Principles 4 and 5,
- Progress report Principles 1-3
- Rules of procedure of the Local Pan Parks Group
- Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy – selected parts, required by the Verification team
- Visitor Management Plan

The documents received provided basic information on the progress of the Park in fulfilling P&C 4 and 5, and in implementing proposals, recommendations and Minor CARs from the 2005 and 2006 verifications.

The LPPG has been established and its rules of procedure adopted. The structure of the group reflects the size and the diversity of the Rila region with subgroups in different parts of the region. Together with the National Park the LPPG developed the Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy with the support of Information and Nature Conservation Foundation experts and co-funding from the PAN Parks Foundation. The STDS is based on a broad participative process. Based on the STDS, the LPPG

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started the process of verification of Local Business partners. The park administration also developed the draft visitor management plan.

News was also received that the Director of the National Park Vasil Petrov was dismissed abruptly by the Minister of Environment in early July. This fact put under question the commitment of the Park Administration and the Ministry of Environment to fulfilment of the PAN Parks principles and criteria. Based on the documents provided it was clear that the formal conditions for the verification of the Rila National Park according to principles 4 and 5 have been met. The main purpose of the mission would be to assess the commitment of the Ministry of Environment, park administration, LPPG and local stakeholders to the implementation of the PAN Parks Principles and Criteria. The main issues for the verification visit were:

- To verify the commitment of the ministry and the park management,
- To verify the involvement of relevant stakeholders in the process of STDS development and their attitude towards the Park,
- To discuss the functioning of the LPPG,
- To discuss the Visitor Management Plan with the Park management,
- To visit parts of the NP not visited in 2005 and 2006,
- To review progress of Proposals, Recommendations and Corrective Action Requirements from 2005 and 2006.

### 5 Results of site visit

#### 5.1 Main findings

The verification team, together with the Park staff, visited several areas in the National Park and the surrounding areas including tourist resorts. Discussions were held with Park staff, LPPG members, municipality of Separeva banya, several tourist service providers, including Rila Sport, NGOs and other partners of the Park.

Based on the documents reviewed, the sites visited and discussions held during the verification, the verification team confirms that the Rila National Park is a protected area of European importance in terms of its size, quality of preserved nature, cultural resources of the region and effectiveness of management. Through preservation of its resources, the Park and the surrounding region provide a broad range of opportunities for high quality visitor experience and sustainable regional development.

In the past year the National Park together with the LPPG has made significant progress in implementing the recommendations made by the verification team in 2005 and 2006, including maintaining the core wilderness zone of the park. The progress in implementing of Proposals, Recommendations and Corrective Action Requirements from 2006 is presented in Table 2.

**Table 1: Status of Proposals, Recommendations and Corrective Action Requirements from the Verification and Monitoring Report from December 2006**

Proposals	Comment on Status
5.2.1.1 (P&C 2.5.5) Sanitary logging in the core zone	Policy in force and to be included in 2011 Management Plan

**Comment [s1]:** Where is table 2?

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5.2.1.2 (P&C 2.5.5) Fire Management in core zone	Fire management is the responsibility of the NP Directorate. No fire prevention activities in the core zone. Monitoring of the Malyovitsa fire area is continuing. This proposal is to remain active.
5.2.1.3 (P&C 3.2.5) Guiding services, endorsing guides	Some education of guides for local trails has taken place in 2007. This proposal is to remain active.
5.2.1.4 (P&C 3.2.7) Visitor preferences and satisfaction	Volunteer Sonia Georgieva conducted an analysis through asking local partners, providing input in the STDS. Guest book at the visitor centre, dialogue with the Tourist Association who run the chalets. This proposal is to remain active.
5.2.1.5 (P&C 3.3.4) Marketing Plan	Marketing component of the STDS is weak and there is no separate marketing plan for RNP. Proposal to be upgraded to a minor CAR.
Recommendations	Comment on Status
5.2.2.1 (P&C 1.3.2) Include of Rila Monastery Nature Park in future PAN Parks verification	RMNP are involved in the STDS process and the LPPG. There is a proposal to link the two parks in a World Heritage Site. Recommendation relevant for re-verification in 2010.
5.2.2.2 (P&C 2.3.9) Strategy regarding external threats to the park	A road and a chairlift is under construction between Panichishte and the Park. The chairlift is based on a permit from before the designation of the NP, but reaches into the territory of the Park. The municipality of Separeva banya is proposing a major ski infrastructure development above Panichishte on the slopes of Kabul peak. Permit for such a proposal would seriously threaten the integrity of the National Park. These two recommendations to be upgraded in a combined minor CAR.
5.2.3.3 (P&C 2.7) Address planned ski development in buffer zone	
5.2.2.4 (P&C 2.1) Research of impact of the water infrastructure	To date no action has been taken. Recommendation remains active.
5.2.2.5 (P&C 3.4.1) Improve signs at entrances and improve signage to information points.	The park is adopting more economical methods of boundary signage, particularly in more remote and little used areas. Improvements and standardisation of signs and information boards can be observed on the ground. Recommendation remains active.
5.2.2.6 (P&C 3.5) Ranger training – visitor management, interpretation, language	Language training some rangers is taking place as part of a local initiative. The Park administration conducts on the job training on visitor management and interpretation. Recommendation remains active.
5.2.2.7 (P&C 3.5) Ranger uniforms	A proposal from the 3 national parks sent to the Ministry, and action is expected in the next 12 months. Recommendation remains active.
Minor Corrective Action Requirements	Comment on Status
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5.2.3.1 (P&C 2.5) Formally designate PAN Parks wilderness core zone	A revised core zone map has been prepared and there are plans to produce a 'core zone' leaflet for visitors. Minor CAR remains active until the new management plan is in force.
5.2.3.2 (P&C 2.3.9) Action Plan for the removal and rehabilitation of buildings	Owners have been identified and proposals for the ultimate removal and rehabilitation were submitted to the Ministry. Ongoing work with owners and operators of chalets. Minor CAR remains active until implementation is under way.
5.2.3.3 (P&C 3.1) Develop a more detailed Visitor Management Plan	Draft Visitor Management Plan presented. It needs to be considered to be an essential part of the STDS process there is urgency required in addressing this issue. Local communities are already preparing trails to the park.
5.2.3.4 (P&C 3.2) Development of Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy (STDS)	Several initiatives for new trails under way in cooperation with municipalities and tourism service providers. <u>STDS is ready, developed by RNP and LPPG.</u>
5.2.3.5 (P&C 3.2.8) Establish Local Pan Parks Group	<u>Stakeholder dialogue is taking place. The LPPG is set up and operational.</u>
5.2.3.6 (P&C 5.1) Development of the local PAN Parks Standard in the framework of the STDS	<u>The local PAN Parks Standard is developed and tested with potentials partners.</u>

The National Park together with the LPPG has finished the process of developing the Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy (under PAN Parks Principle 4) for the area of the park and the 12 surrounding municipalities. In this process the park administration has engaged in dialogue with the small and large tourism businesses, municipalities, NGOs and national authorities in the tourism sector. In the discussions held during the mission all the stakeholders confirmed that they support sustainable tourism and many of them are interested to develop eco-tourism services. The tourism businesses also expressed their interest in the possibility of themselves becoming certified PAN Parks partners.

During the mission, the verifiers saw construction of a chairlift to the chalet Rilske ezera (Rila Lakes) in the RNP and a wide asphalt road between Panichishte and Pionerska chalet.

The construction of the chairlift is based on a permit granted in 1997, before the designation of the National Park and adoption of the management plan. Upper four pilons of the chairlift and the exit station are located in the multifunctional zone of the Park. Just above the chairlift there is an existing ski tow. In order to build the foundations for the pilons, an existing trail was widened to accommodate machinery and four-wheel drives and presents a significant disruption of the habitat. Both the Park Administration and the investor Rila Sport confirmed that this road would be rehabilitated to its previous condition at the end of construction and that it would be closed to vehicles. Access and supply of the chalet would then only be provided by the chairlift. The road between Panichishte and Pionerska is being constructed with funds from the central budget of Bulgaria for regional roads upon request of the municipality of Separeva Banya. It will serve the base station of the new chairlift and in several places it runs along the Rila National Park border.

In addition to this, a proposal to further develop ski infrastructure in the National Park above Panichishte is actively promoted by the municipality of Separeva Banya and Rila Sport. This plan is a

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part of an overall plan to develop high quality tourism in the municipality, including a spa resort in Separeva Banya, new hotels in Panichishte and possibly commercial use of a former military airport in the valley below Separeva Banya. The capacity of the resorts would be limited to 8 000 beds in the spa, 8 -9 000 beds in the space between Separeva Banya and Panichishte. The Municipality has some 4 000 inhabitants and currently there are approximately 1 000 beds in Panichishte. Only two companies (Rila Sport and a Russian company) are involved in these developments which should guarantee a coordinated and controlled tourism development of the whole municipality. The plans for the spa resort are very compatible with the sustainable tourism strategy, as is the rehabilitation of the Panichishte resort. On the other hand, construction of any additional ski infrastructure inside the Rila National Park would present a breach of the Management Plan and the Protected Areas Act.

In the period since the initial verification two proposed ski developments that would threaten the integrity of the National Park, including the first concept of the Panichishte ski resort, were rejected by the relevant Bulgarian authorities because they would encroach onto the territory of the National Park. According to the park administration, there is no legal basis for approval of such a project inside the park boundary, yet it is obvious that the development could threaten the integrity of the National Park. Since the rejection the developers have adjusted the plans to the comments received from the National Park and they may resubmit it for public debate and subsequent permitting procedure. They may also propose a change in the Management Plan to accommodate the ski development during its revision in 2010/2011.

At the time of the visit, a proposal to designate the so called "Rila buffer" as a Natura 2000 site was considered by the relevant Bulgarian authorities. The final decision whether to include it in the list of sites and in what exact boundaries is still pending. In addition to conservation of important species and habitats present in the vicinity of the Park, designation of this protected area in the surrounding zone would be very beneficial for the management of external threats to the National Park and would provide another possibility to assure sustainability of development in the surrounding region.

### 5.2 Main issues addressed in relation to the PAN Parks P&C

The purpose of the verification was to assess the compliance of the Rila National Park with the Principle 4 of the PAN Parks *Principles and Criteria*. The verification concludes the assessment with conclusions related to identified non-compliances and possible improvements. The conclusions are divided into following types:

- Proposals that may help the park management in the future,
- Recommendations on the need to improve NP management,
- Minor Corrective Action Requirement (CAR) in cases of a conflict with PAN Parks P&C, that can be solved in foreseeable time,

Major Corrective Action Requirements in cases of a conflict with PAN Parks P&C, that precludes the Park from registration as a PAN Park.

#### 5.2.1 Proposals

##### 5.2.1.1 (P&C 2.5.5) Sanitary logging in the core zone

The reserve zone of the RNP and the human impact limitation zone, that form the proposed PAN Parks wilderness core zone, are strictly protected by law and by the policies of the RNP. But the law allows

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for sanitary felling also in the reserve zone. It is our understanding that the National Park does not practice any felling in the reserve zones or in other parts of the proposed PAN Parks core zone. This policy has remained in force during 2007.

We propose that the Park maintains the policy of zero intervention in the core zone, and that at the next review of the Management Plan in 2011 this policy is included in the regime for the relevant zone(s).

### 5.2.1.2 (P&C 2.5.5) Fire management in the core zone

Regarding fire, the park has an active policy of fighting fires in order to protect the ecosystem from negative influence of this mostly man-made phenomenon. It is feared that a major fire in dwarf pine at the timberline could consume a large part of the National Park if it is not limited and extinguished as quickly as possible. After a fire, the process of regeneration of soil and plant community could take centuries at the high altitudes. In 2000 there has been a major fire in the area of Malyovitsa covering 400 ha of dwarf pine and grassland. A major fire fighting action including cutting of fire lines and involving helicopters was mounted and the fire was eventually put out, although it is not clear how much of this was due to the intervention or due to natural course of events.

Although scientific knowledge is very limited, fire is a natural factor in high mountain forests in Europe. The ecology of species such as *Pinus peuce*, that requires open space and mineral soil for rejuvenation, points to the possible importance of fire also in Rila. Today, many more fires seem to be started by man than by natural causes (lightning), so it is hard to assess what would be the natural frequency and pattern of fires.

There have been some minor fires in and around the park in 2007, but have been successfully contained and put out according to the Fire Fighting Action Plan. A Fire Prevention leaflet has been produced and rangers issue a form to visitors informing them of fire risks and they are expected to sign a declaration ensuring that they will abide by necessary precautions. Firebreaks have been established in the dwarf pine stands in the vicinity of the area burnt in 2000.

No fire prevention measures have been implemented in the Core Zone. We propose that the Park continue systematic study and monitoring of the ecology of fire including the causes of fire, impact of fire on ecosystems and species, as well as processes of ecosystem recovery. Based on the results, the Park should review its policies in relation to fire taking into account risks to ecosystems and species caused by fire, importance of fire for the ecosystem dynamics, collateral damage caused by fire fighting, and safety and security of people and property. This policy should be explained and justified to the visitors through adequate interpretation tools. The site of the fire on Malyovitsa presents a possibility for interpretation related to fire management.

### 5.2.1.3 (P&C 3.2.5) Guiding services, endorsing guides

The National Park Administration provides guiding and interpretation free of charge to those who request it. At the same time, numerous tourist and mountain guides are active in the Park area. The Park holds contact information about the guides in the region and makes it available to those interested. Some education of local tourism entrepreneurs and guides for local trails has taken place in 2006 and 2007.

Tourist and mountain guides are regulated and certified at the national level under legislation related to

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tourism. This means that any certified guide has an open license to operate in the National Park, regardless of how much he/she actually knows about the Park or is qualified for specific interpretation of the Park.

We propose that RNP initiates guide training and certification, possibly in conjunction with CBNP, in Sofia and continues with an ongoing programme of training locally in RNP and its surrounding areas. Consideration should be given to a PAN Parks initiative to develop guide training throughout the network and a joint Rila/Central Balkan programme could provide a pilot scheme. This programme could be integrated in the local PAN Parks Standards for service providers and the qualified guides could be invited to become certified Local Business Partners.

### 5.2.1.4 (P&C 3.2.7) Visitor preferences and satisfaction

At the moment, the Park has no practice of systematic monitoring of visitor preferences and satisfaction with the nature, infrastructure and services of the Park. Monitoring of visitor numbers is limited to visitors passing through manned checkpoints. Good information on visitors, their preferences and satisfaction is very important for the development of the Visitor Management Plan and the Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy.

In 2006/2007 a student conducted a survey of local businesses regarding their attitudes and potential inputs into the STDS. This survey also partly covers the issues of visitor expectations and preferences. Currently visitors can comment on the park through an interactive website and visitor books at the chalets.

We propose that RNP continues to develop an effective way of surveying and monitoring visitors through different media, including a well-structured questionnaire. The final objective should be a system of regular visitor surveys aiming at determining the number of visitors in different sections of the Park, the origin and structure of visitors, the reasons for visiting the Park, their preferences in relation to experience and services and their satisfaction. Even with small samples, such surveys can provide an important insight in the demand for services of the Park and provide a good basis for management decisions. They also provide good justification for the activities of the Park towards the public. Students could be used as volunteers to gather the data and use it for preparing their theses.

### 5.2.2 Recommendations

#### 5.2.2.1 (P&C 1.3.2) Include Rila Monastery Nature Park in the PAN Parks verification in the future

The Rila Monastery Nature Park hasn't taken part in the PAN Parks verification, although it represents an important part of the mountain range, cultural heritage and tourism destination of Rila. The two Parks complement each other and the current management of the RMNP upholds the management objectives and regimes of the RNP. Since verification there has been increased dialogue and joint actions between RNP and RMNP, including joint meetings, monitoring, education and progress towards common signage. Currently the RMNP are involved in the STDS process.

A proposal is under preparation by the Ministry of Environment and Waters for designation of the Rila Monastery, Rila Monastery Forest Reserve and the Core Zone of the Rila National Park as a mixed Worlds Heritage Site. The rest of the Nature Park and the National Park would serve as the buffer zone

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of this site. This proposal presents another opportunity for coordination and joint PAN Parks verification of both parks in the future.

It is recommended that RNP continue their dialogue with RMNP with the aim of encouraging their ultimate inclusion in the PAN Parks verification process. Joint certification would make sense in terms of ecosystem integrity, synergies between PAN Parks and World Heritage designations and in terms of public – private partnership for conservation.

### 5.2.2.2 (P&C 2.1) Research of impact of the water infrastructure

The water management infrastructure in the Park has limited obvious impact on the ecosystems and species of the Park. But there is little understanding of more subtle impacts and influences (including visual disturbance) that may be important for the future planning and management of the water infrastructure and the various zones of the Park. It would be of particular importance to make sure that the streams and catchments from which water is abstracted only to a limited extent, preserve the natural character also below the abstraction.

It was recommended that the Park initiates a research programme related to the impact of the water infrastructure and management regimes on the ecosystems and species of the RNP and its buffer zone. To date no action has been taken. However, subject to funding a proposal for action is to be included in the 2007 Action Plan budget (See 5.2.1.2).

It is recommended that urgent consideration is given to carrying out the proposed research with one of the main objectives being to develop and initiate measures to mitigate negative impacts on the ecosystems and species while reducing visual disturbance, particularly in the core zone.

### 5.2.2.3 (P&C 3.4.1) Improve signs at entrances, invite people to information points

Significant efforts have been made in the last decade to develop and install signs and interpretation boards at the entrances and points of interest in the Park. There is a defined system of signposting Park entrances. Not all entrance point signs have been constructed yet, and at the same time some signs have been damaged due to poor quality of materials or by vandalism. At each manned checkpoint a room has been arranged as a visitor information point, but there are no signs inviting visitors to enter them. There are currently 8 main entrance signs, 26 secondary and 60 minor (an increase of 25 signs). The park is adopting more economical methods of boundary signage, particularly in more remote and little used areas. The original signage was funded by USAID and further enhancements are subject to improvements in the park budget. Consideration is being given to improvements in standardisation of signs. Several new information boards have been installed during 2006 and 2007.

It is Recommended that the park continue to improve the quality and distribution of signs, particularly at those points that give visitors their first impression of the park. Based on the experience with the current structures and materials, more UV light and vandalism resistant materials and structure should be used. Existing signs and interpretation boards should be maintained regularly by the Park staff. It is also recommended that all the information points at the checkpoint buildings are clearly marked with welcoming signs for the visitors and that the rangers are encouraged to invite visitors inside and offer information.

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### 5.2.2.4 (P&C 3.5) Ranger training – visitor management, interpretation, language

The Protected Areas Act mainly gives rangers guarding and monitoring duties and authorities and provides less for duties related to interpretation and visitor management. This is why they are actually called guards and not rangers in Bulgarian. During the site visits it became clear that the classic threats against which park guard duties were defined, such as poaching, illegal logging, uncontrolled grazing or berry picking, represent less and less of an important threat to the Park. At the same time, the demand for visitor management and interpretation services is set to increase with the economic development in Bulgaria and international recognition of the importance of Rila. In the future it can be expected that the main job of rangers will become communication with visitors.

Rangers of the RNP are well qualified and motivated for their existing job. But for the future challenges they will need new knowledge and skills. A process of on the job training in interpretation and visitor management is under way, conducted by the Park Administration. Courses of English for the rangers have started in 2007.

It is recommended that, with a predicted increase in foreign visitors, a high priority is continued to be placed on developing the visitor management and language skills of the rangers and guides.

### 5.2.2.5 (P&C 3.5) Ranger uniforms

For the best communication between Park staff and visitors it is important that the visitors can easily recognise Park staff in the field. Presence of uniformed staff sends a message that there is adequate care for the National Park. The park staff uniforms have to be consistent with the communication objectives towards the visitors. In case of a PAN Park it is important that the park uniforms do not intimidate visitors but rather help establish communication. During the site visits, some of the Park staff wore jackets with National Park sign, but they would be difficult to recognise as park staff by an untrained eye.

It was recommended that a standard park staff uniform is gradually introduced, with clothes and symbols that are easily recognised in the changing circumstances of the mountain environment. A submission to the Ministry has been made by all three National Parks and a decision is expected. This recommendation is to remain in place until uniforms issued.

### 5.2.3 Minor Corrective Action Requirements

#### 5.2.3.1 (P&C 2.5) Formally designate the PAN Parks wilderness core zone

The proposed PAN Parks core zone consists of three zones of the National Park according to the current management plan. Although this zone has been verified as wilderness in terms of PAN Parks and is effectively protected by the RNP, it should be formalised in the future. The best opportunity for this will be at the review of the Management Plan that is due in 2011, but some steps in this direction could be made at the mid term review due next year. A revised core zone map has been prepared and there are plans to produce a 'core zone' leaflet for visitors.

Because anthropogenic pressures for grazing and logging are decreasing, the Park Administration could

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consider redefining zones in general at the time of review of the Management Plan. In doing this, the Park could establish zones based on management objectives consistent with IUCN Categories for protected areas. The reserves may be considered Category I and most of the area above the derivation channels could be considered Category II. Both areas together could qualify as PAN Parks wilderness. At the same time, preservation of the cultural landscape should become an objective in itself. Without active involvement of the Park, pastures will disappear in the next decades and with them the biodiversity of high mountain meadows as well as the traditional culture linked to grazing. Certain sections of the Park should be designated for preservation of pasture landscape (IUCN Category V).

This Minor CAR is to remain active until the new core zone is included in the 2011 Management Plan.

### 5.2.3.1 (P&C 2.3.9) Action plan for the removal and rehabilitation of the buildings

The abandoned and derelict buildings, power lines and other structures with associated waste represent a serious problem for the quality of visitor experience in the National Park. Regardless of the legal problems with ownership and responsibility, the present time presents a good opportunity for demolition, removal and rehabilitation while the labour costs in the region are relatively low and there may even be opportunities to pay for part of the removal from the scrap metal value of some structures. With time and EU membership of Bulgaria the solution of this problem will become more and more expensive and complicated.

The Park, in cooperation with responsible authorities under the Ministry of Environment, has started with identification of owners and proposals for the ultimate removal and rehabilitation that was submitted to the Ministry. Rehabilitation and reconstruction is being planned or is under way by the operators of several chalets in the Park. This Minor CAR to remain active until further action takes place on remaining derelict buildings.

### 5.2.3.2 (P&C 3.1) Develop a more detailed visitor management plan

A draft visitor management plan was developed in 2007. It provides an overview of the current situation and the measures being undertaken at present.

A revised Visitor Management Plan should be prepared specifying:

- More concise long and short term objectives,
- Target groups of visitors,
- Their visiting patterns,
- Possible conflicts and separation of routes for different target groups (hikers, cyclists and horse riders)
- Prediction of visitor numbers by groups and sections of the Park
- Indication of the carrying capacity of the Park and/or limits of acceptable change,
- Methods of monitoring and mitigating visitor impact,
- A prioritised programme of trail restoration and maintenance,
- Zoning system specifying visitor access, allowed activities and time period of allowed access,
- Plan of road access and parking facilities around and in the park linked with the trail network,
- Communication strategy towards different groups of visitors and partners of the Park
- Resources available for the implementation of the plan including staff and range of skills, equipment, organizational structure, budget and financial resources,

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- Training for park staff on trail maintenance
- Volunteer programmes on trail restoration and maintenance

Particular attention should be given to the existing trails and forest roads accessible by motorised vehicles (e.g. 4x4, motorcycles, quads, snowmobiles). Legally, access to these roads is limited to the public, but the enforcement of these restrictions seems not very effective, in part because different users (e.g. water management agency) are allowed to use them. The Park should define the future use of these roads (e.g. walking, cross country skiing, cycling, horse riding, cars) in order to avoid conflicts between different users by separating them in space and/or time. Effective means of enforcing the designated regimes, such as re-cultivation and physical barriers should be considered. Motorised use of roads designated for other uses by park rangers and other agencies should be minimised.

The new version of the visitor management plan should be prepared by 2008.

In order to support the implementation of the STDS the revised visitor management plan should present existing ideas of the Park Directorate in various areas of visitor management (such as the 80 km cycling trail in the South Rila already included in the Action plan of the STDS), as a basis for work with partners on the STDS. It is anticipated that the concept might consider the following areas:

- Which are the strategic points where visitors should go in the park? How will they get there, how can access be improved? Visitor movements are strongly influenced by accessibility.
- Which activities should be offered to the visitor and how? By actively encouraging and advertising certain activities in certain areas of the park (e.g. particular trails for horse-riding, for mountain-biking, for experiencing cultural history...), the Park can help determine where these happen – and where they do not! The emphasis should be on encouragement rather than control.
- Tourist chalets: these are considered of strategic importance for PAN Parks, both as centres where future PAN Parks visitors might stay and as potential PAN Parks partners. How should ownership of the chalets be regulated, how should the chalets be managed and by whom? Could it be useful to define a framework for local quality standards for chalets? This might set out basic standards to be respected if/when reconstruction or renovation takes place.
- Visibility and profile of the RNP. What measures can be taken to improve the „visibility“ of the RNP in the region and towards visitors? This might include the increased use of the national park logo on its buildings / centres, the use of signs on roads leading up to the park, rangers wearing the logo – and thus being easily identifiable to the visitor, etc.

### 5.2.3.3 (P&C 3.2 and 4.2) Further develop the Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy (STDS)

Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy was agreed by the LPPG in June 2007 and presented to the public at several hearings. The STDS was developed in a wide participatory process lead by the Local PAN Parks Group and its subgroups. Several municipal and all 4 district authorities have endorsed or commented on the Strategy. Only the municipality of Separeva Banya has expressed a negative opinion of the STDS because the proposed ski development above Panichishte was not considered.

The STDS is a working document and its current version presents a sound basis for further development of sustainable tourism in the region. The next version of the STDS should include:

- A marketing strategy for the sustainable development of the region,

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- A strategic approach towards the development of large scale tourism products, in particular spa resorts and skiing.
- A better prioritised and more realistic action plan taking into account also the ongoing private investments

### 5.2.3.4 (P&C 3.3.4) Marketing plan

At the moment the Park has no marketing plan. It is not clear who are the target groups for the various services of the Park, how the services are provided to them and how the revenue streams for these services are generated. We propose that RNP clearly defines its own marketing plan that ensures that external forces do not compromise the park. This plan should reflect the position and priorities of the park and be part of the marketing strategy of the STDS.

The marketing plan should include:

- Main existing and potential services of the RNP (hiking, picnics, berry and mushroom picking, culture, interpretation, cross country skiing)
- Target groups for these services and market potential (local, domestic and international visitors, social groups – young, families, business...)
- Existing revenues from these services for the Park and for the region (overnight stays, restaurants...)
- Unique Selling Proposition of Rila
- Objectives based on the carrying capacity of the Park and the region
- Strategies for achieving the objectives and capturing the revenues.

Such marketing plan (even in its most rudimentary form) will be an important element for discussion with stakeholders and may provide important arguments in relation to the proposed mass ski tourism developments.

### 5.2.3.5 (P&C 2.3.9) Address planned ski developments as external threats to the park

The Management Plan includes a list of natural and anthropogenic threats with short descriptions. These threats that mainly originate from outside, but have an impact on the inside of the Park, are taken into account implicitly in the objectives and management of the Park. During the verification, a number of imminent external threats to the park and its buffer zone have been identified, including development of mass tourism, unsustainable forest operations, additional water use and infrastructure, urbanisation for the purpose of tourism and holiday homes etc. Since verification, water extraction has been identified as the most serious threat to the integrity of the park.

In the period since the initial verification two proposed ski developments that would threaten the integrity of the National Park were rejected by the relevant Bulgarian authorities because they would encroach onto the territory of the National Park. However, during the mission, the verifiers saw construction of a chairlift to the chalet Rila Lakes based on a permit granted in 1997, before the designation of the National Park and adoption of the management plan. In addition to this, a proposal to further develop ski infrastructure in the National Park above Panichishte is actively promoted by the municipality of Separeva Banya (who are currently constructing a new access road to the chairlift base station). According to the park administration, there is no legal basis for approval of such a project

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inside the park boundary, yet it is obvious that the development could threaten the integrity of the National Park. Continuing vigilance is required in combating developments that threaten the integrity of RNP.

In order to secure the ecological integrity of the park and not to lose the opportunity for sustainable tourism development in the region, the Park must work with key stakeholders to provide a sustainable alternative to large scale ski developments. These stakeholders include municipalities, local population, investors, national authorities responsible for tourism, regional development, rural development, agriculture and environment, the destination managers of the tourist centres, and local businesses and NGOs.

Failure to comply with this requirement may lead to loss of PAN Parks certificate for the Park and the Local Business Partners.

### 5.2.4 Major Corrective Action Requirements

There are no major corrective action requirements by the verification team.

### 5.3 Other observations

## 6 Conclusion

Taking into account the main issues addressed in relation to the PAN Parks P&C proposals, recommendations and corrective action requirements; with the understanding that the Rila National Park intends to implement them; and with the concern that the ability of the Rila National Park to meet PAN Parks principles could be adversely affected by decisions of the local and regional authorities in relation to proposed tourist resort developments; the Verification Team recommends

**to certify the Rila National Park as a PAN Park according to Principle 4.**

## 7 Monitoring plan

2008: Next version of STDS, marketing plan, visitor management plan, planned ski developments, ranger uniforms

2009: Ranger training, impact of water infrastructure, removal and rehabilitation of buildings, cooperation with the Rila Monastery Nature Park, planned ski developments

2010: Renewal verification

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**Public summary**

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