

Training for youths for monitoring and advocacy through utilization of spatial data – part 1

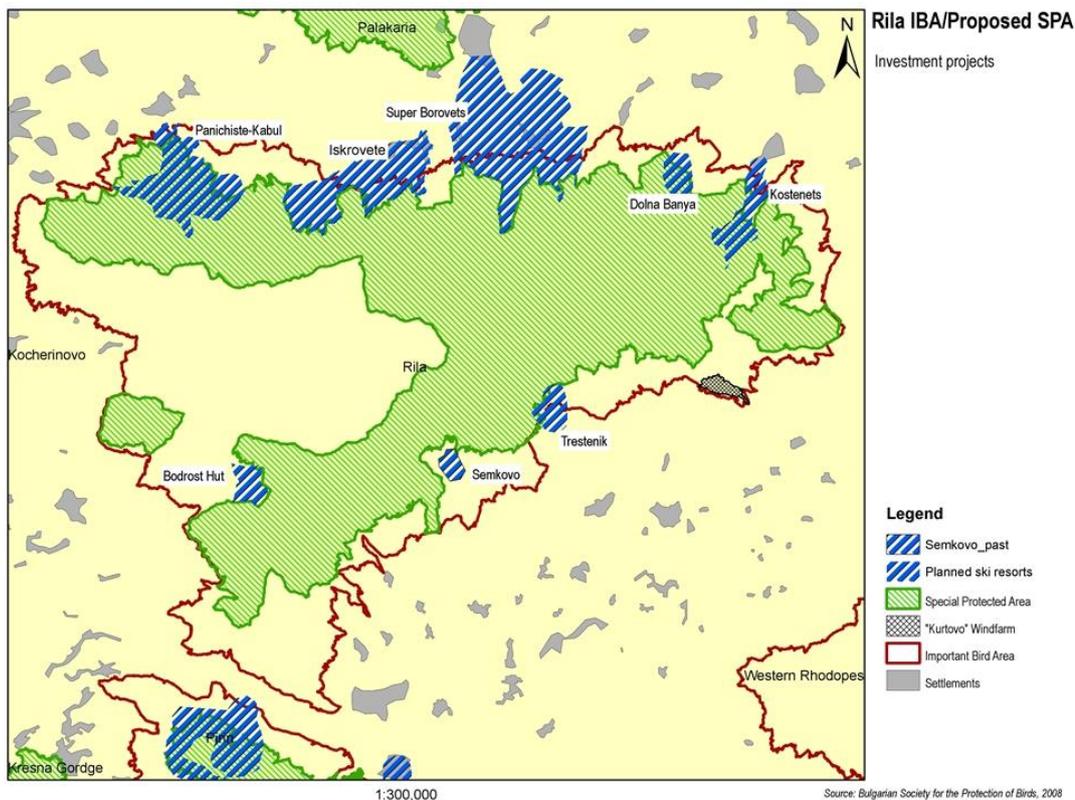
Practical exercise 1

Threats for biodiversity and causes – a case study from Bulgaria

Rila and ski resorts

Rila Mountain is a National park (IUCN I). National park "Rila" includes the high areas of the mountain above 1600 m and preserves the unique natural resources of centuries-old coniferous forests, *Pinus mugo*, rock complexes, lake circuses and adjacent lakes, wild animals and plants. Rila forests are key habitats for the *Ursus arctos*, wolves and a huge number of birds.

In addition, Rila National Park is a Natura 2000 area according to the Birds and Habitat Directives. The territory around the National park has been proposed to be included in Nature 2000 in 2006 (under the name Rila buffer), but it has not been accepted yet, because "there are many investment interests there". (Chavdar Georgiev's statement, former minister of environment and waters after the meeting in NSBR in October 2007, on which was decided to exclude Rila buffer from Natura 2000).



There are plans for building 8 ski resorts in Rila.

If they are to be finished this will be insurmountable migration barrier towards Pirin, Verila and Rodopi mountains.

Super Panitchishte

The project is situated on the territory of Rila National Park and the proposed area "Rila buffer" in Seven Rila Lakes area and Otovishki and Kabul peaks. It stipulates a high degree of urbanization and commercialization of the area, which will threaten with irrevocable damage one of the main Bulgarian water sources – Northwestern Rila. The Ministry of environment and waters discarded the project in 2006, because it encroached the territory of Rila National Park – two thirds out of its total area of 2400 ha are situated there.

[The project](#) envisages over 20 ski-lifts, over 20 ski runs, and over 100 000 beds in Panitchishte and Sapareva Banya. Despite of the rejection by the Ministry construction of the objects of the resort began apiece in 2007 with multiple illegal actions, including on the territory of the Rila National Park following the dismissal of the park's director, eng. Vasil Petrov in July. In every single case the institutions have not done anything. Several things have been done so far: a reconstruction of the road from Panitchisthe to Pionerska hut; construction and commissioning of a cable lift to the Seven Lake circus; repair of Rilski ezera hut and turning it to an expensive high-mountain hotel; extending the road Sapareva Banya-Panitchisthe; hewing illegal clearings for three ski runs, masked as fire clearings one of which is regularly used during the last ski season; a procedure was open for re-designation of terrains for an enormous parking around Pionerska hut.

The investors vaunted that they would not allow constructions exceeding 60% of the territory in Panitchishte (they would leave 40% greenery, imagine that!) and the hotels would not be higher than the surrounding trees. The surrounding trees however are predominantly 50–60 m high spruces. This means almost unlimited height of the hotels (at least 15 floors), which will turn Panitchishte in a new Ljulin or Mladost.

The investor is Rila Sport AD, a company 99% of which is owned by a offshore company, registered in Virgin Islands (GB). The company refuses to reveal the source of its assets. According to the media it is linked with Russian weapon capitals, Galevi brothers and Bulgarian politics, close to the previously governed Triple Coalition – Milen Velchev and his brother. Using force the company leased three huts in the area – Pionerska, Skakavitsa and Rila Lakes. It acquires by land swaps many properties of the state forest fund in Panitchiste and around Pionerska hut at a knock out price, intending to turn them into construction sites for its hotel estates. The municipality of Sapareva Banya has denied public access to the copy of the project's Master plan multiple times and representatives of the non-governmental organizations had to be photographed it secretly.

The project started with the construction of an illegal cable lift from Pionerska hut to Rilski ezera hut. At that moment over 3000 persons per day climb the circus of the Seven Rila Lakes (which is Limited human impact area according to the Management plan of the Park), without an expert assessment of the maximum number of people the ecosystem could endure. The ideal goals of the Rila National Park have been compromised in favour of the offshore investors' purposes. The nature heritage of national and world significance is being destroyed.

The negative ecological effects of functioning of the lift can be already observed:

Swamping of the Lakes: the process visibly fastened over the last years. More and more people are swimming in the Lakes, and the vegetation there thrives.

- *Significant increase of the organic litter*: the urine and feces of the thousands of tourists which remain in the unauthorized toilets in the circus of the Lakes are no less than 1 ton per day.
- *Erosion and trampling*: erosion processes and directly destroyed habitats as a result of trampling have recently increased significantly.
- *Pollution with municipal waste*
- *Uncontrollable human pressure*: The Park's management plan recommends the Seven Rila Lakes area to be visited in organized groups no bigger than 20 people. This recommendation clearly has not been observed with a cable lift with 700 people per hour capacity.
- *Absence of adequate monitoring and management of the area*: upon the present moment a management plan for the managing the tourist flow in the Seven Rila Lake area does not exist. Moreover, [MoEW refuses to fund](#) the project of the Directorate of the Park for research of the Seven Rila Lakes condition, related to their anthropogenic pollution, eutrophication and measures to minimize their contamination. Such a project would help the development of the management plan for the circus of the Lakes.
- *Sending off and disturbing wild animals*: especially by skiers during their breeding season from March till June (using the illegal clearing around the cable lift) will be fatal for the following species, living in the [areas around the lift and ski run](#): Eurasian pygmy owl, Western capercaillie, Black woodpecker, Eurasian three-toed woodpecker and so on.
- *Lack of good will for an adequate funding of the area management*: the influx of tourists has increased multiple times, but the owner of the cable lift have not paid any part of his concession fee so far and no additional funding has not entered the Park. Despite the fact that the cable lift is within a territory, which is exclusive state property and the concession is obligatory, [MoEW has not demonstrated a will to collect a concession fee](#).

The project has the support of Sapareva Banya municipality. As a reaction to the organized in 2008–2009 multiple demonstrations of tourists, environmentalists, civic organizations and so on, municipal representatives have organized the citizens of Sapareva Banya and neighboring municipalities in contra-demonstrations in defense of the interest of the offshore company, which openly refuses to unveil who is its real owner and what is the source of its funding, but manages to cleverly mislead the local people and the municipal administration that the catastrophic management of the Pirin mountain and once unique town of Bansko won't reach Sapareva Banya.

In its arguments to the local people the municipality and the investors argue that construction of the resort is going to create new job positions and will stop depopulation of the area. According to the economic analysis (Sekulova, MA thesis) the completion of the project is not rentable.

Exercise:

What are the threats to biological diversity?

What are the causes for their emerging?