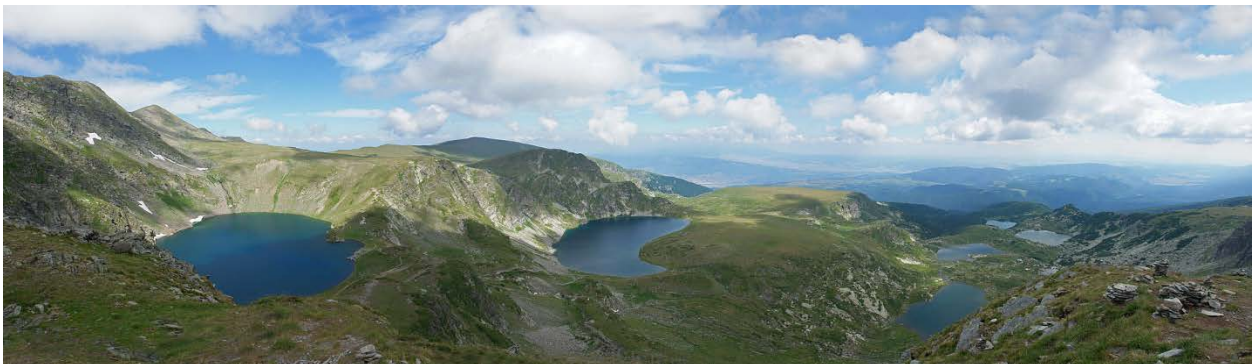


Sustainable Mountain Tourism in Bulgaria

Pilot Project: The Seven Rila Lakes

Project report



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1 INTRODUCTION

In a first step towards mitigating the globalization trend and mass tourism over the local and typical production and services, which pose serious irreversible impact on the natural heritage, a Swiss-Bulgarian project consortium launched a pilot project on sustainable tourism practices in the Rila Mountains, Bulgaria. Conducted in February and March 2019, the main idea of the pilot project is to raise awareness and to enable the local stakeholders to value and respect the wildlife and biodiversity.

In focus of the pilot project, winter sport activities in the area of the Seven Rila Lakes and Skakavitsa reserve were chosen. The area is located in the north-west part of Rila mountain and in the territory of the Rila National Park, as well as Natura 2000 site designated for the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora of Community interest. The Seven Rila Lakes is among the most famous glacial cirques in Bulgaria. It is notable for the particular seven lakes standing above each other, and the endemic Macedonian pine (*Pinus peuce Griseb.*) forests around. This pine is found only on the Balkan Peninsula and the region protects one of its habitats. In the lakes there are 130 species of seaweeds of which several are local endemics. The steep slopes are home to plant species found only in Rila and also to the wild goat (*Rupicapra rupicapra balcanica*), which is protected in Bulgaria. The old forests are important habitat for the western capercaillie (*Tetrao urogallus*).

However, the recent construction of chair lift with a capacity of 700 people/hour made the cirque easily accessible and the visitors increased several-fold. Only in the first year of operation, there was a 10 fold increase in the number of tourists (up to 15 000) and according to the Bulgarian Ministry of the Environment and Waters in 2011 they were above 120 000. The increased flow of tourists not only leads to littering and erosion of the paths and banks, but also increased eutrophication of the lakes water, appearance of blue-green and green algae, change in the water flow, the level of lakes, i.e. degradation and destruction of the habitat and disappearance of the characteristic species - for example, a small crustaceans (*Arctodiaptomus niethameri*). In addition, as a result of the increased demand, there is unregulated transport of tourists to the site by means of SUVs in summer and motor sledges in winter. The Rila National Park management is not capable to limit the pressure despite their desire. Many local people at the near city of Sapareva Banya, which is at the foot of the mountain enjoyed increase of tourism and are considering that nature could be used without limitation in order to support the local economy.

2 PROJECT TEAM

The project team consists of three main partners – Co-Cycle, BEFSA and KNEB – and few sub-contractors. **Co-Cycle** (<http://co-cycle.com/>) is a Bulgarian non-for-profit organization operating in the area of sustainable development, circular economy and social entrepreneurship. BEFSA – the Bulgarian Extreme and FreeSkiing Association (<https://www.befsa.com/>) – is also a non-for-profit organization that aims at the popularize and development of winter sports in an inform and save manner. As a knowledge transfer partner in the project, the Swiss organisation Verein Kompetenznetzwerk «Nachhaltige Entwicklung für Berggebiete» (**KNEB**) (<https://www.solerworks.ch/index.php/kneb.html>) shares the collected over years applied knowledge on best practices from the Alps with interersted stakeholders from Asia and Europe.

These organizations were represented by the following experts that participated actively in the project:

Momchil Panayotov (BEFSA) is an expert of forest ecosystems and biodiversity, freeride, avalanche awareness and education. He is an associate professor in the University of Forestry (Bulgaria), president of BEFSA, member of the mountain rescue service of Bulgaria.

Reto Solèr (KNEB) is an expert in sustainable development of mountain regions and is specialized in the touristic valorisation of nature and culture, and sustainable mobility. References: Many years of experience as manager of CIPRA Switzerland 2001 - 2009, president of CIPRA Switzerland 2012-2015. www.cipra.org, project management of valorisation projects such as “Water world Göschenen” or „Soft mobility in Alpine destinations“, “Respect Wildlife”, etc.

Pavlina Pavlova (Co-Cycle) is an expert of sustainable development and climate change. Born and grown up in the capital of Bulgaria and graduated in University of Bern, she is inspired to bring the Swiss experience in sustainable mountain tourism to her home mountains.

Nikolay Minkov (Co-Cycle) is an environmental engineer and expert in Life Cycle Assessment and sustainability. Graduated in Sofia, Bulgaria, he has few years of experience as a consultant in the area of sustainability and environmental protection in Bulgaria. He is currently a research associate at the Technical University Berlin.

Zlatina Kolchakova (BEFSA, Co-Cycle) has graduated Masters in Sociology at the Humboldt University in Berlin and is passionate about introducing the topics of green economy, upcycling and sustainable development also among the Bulgarian public.

3 ACTIVITIES AND DELIVERABLES

The project team have implemented a series of activities to increase the information uptake regarding the nature value of the area and to active a variety of stakeholders, mostly locals and tourists. The following main outcomes were delivered:

- **Biodiversity capacity building lecture and guided tour with tourists and interested members from the sport community on topics related to biodiversity and nature conservation**

In the framework of the pilot project, interested tour guides and members of BEFSA, as well as representatives of the project team, were invited to an exploratory 1-day tour of the area. Lead by the biodiversity and avalanche prevention expert, Momchil Panayotov, the group was introduced to the particularly rich biodiversity of the area and also observed certain unsustainable tourism practices. As a result, the participants were enabled to transfer the knowledge through their communication with the wider community of practice.

A tour with the mountain guides, responsible for the tour program of BEFSA was initially planned. However, due to their limited availability in the peak season spring, the activity was postponed and planned to take place in the beginning of winter 2019/2020.

- **Guided tours for the local tourists and games with biodiversity focus for the younger audience**

The project team identified young local tourists as an important stakeholder group and, thus specific activities for children of age 6-16 years were conducted. In addition, there was much more interest and opportunity to engage locals through engagement with their children. Therefore, in the framework of the tours for the local population and in collaboration with the local ski school Adventure Net, a series of events (four days on weekends in March) were held to build up

knowledge on the importance of biodiversity conservation. In an attractive and playful way, the children were made aware about the borders of the protected area around the Seven Rila lakes and learnt to recognize particular tree species from the area. Puzzles and card games were at the disposal to the kids. As a result, not only the children, but also their parents were sensitized on the importance of sustainable tourism practices.

- **Brochure with relevant information on the initiative**

In order to extend the outreach of the activities and to transfer the collected knowledge after the pilot project, a brochure was elaborated and printed (a copy can be seen in the Annex). The brochure contains information about the biodiversity status of the area, as well as rules for behavior of the tourists when practicing their favorite sport activities in the mountain (e.g. ski, snowboarding, touring, hiking, ice climbing, etc.).

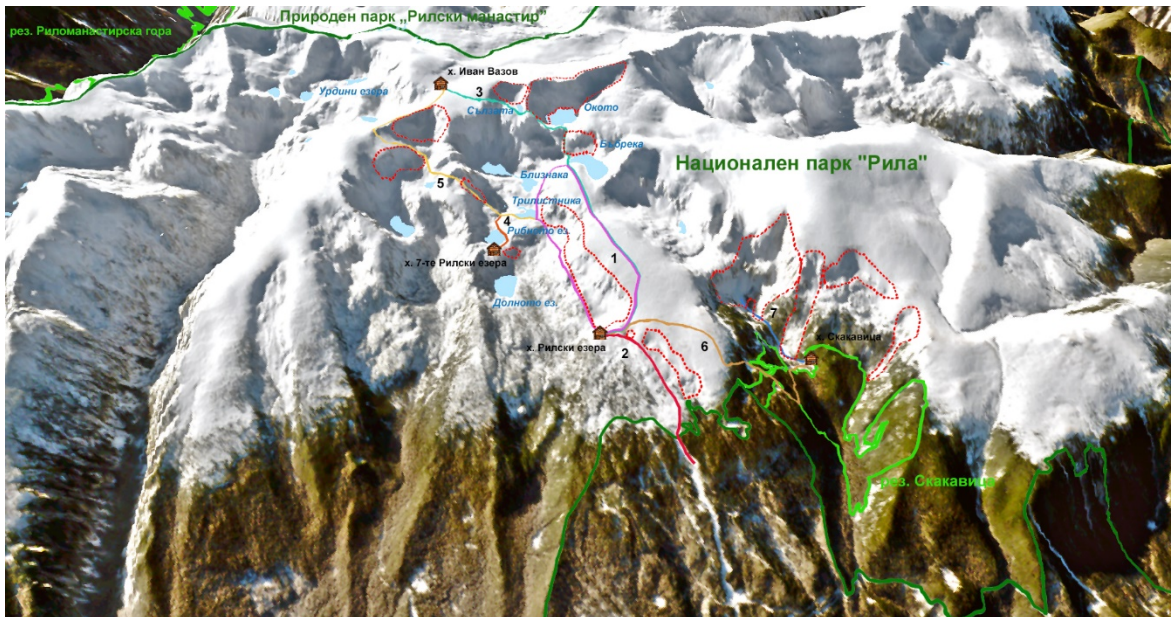
The brochure also contains a 3D map with ski touring and hiking routes of different difficulty level on the territory of the park, indicating also the potential avalanche areas to be avoided. A web address of the map is also provided for downloading and direct use on GPS and mobile devices by the tourists. During the activities of the pilot project the brochure was distributed in different locations in the area such as huts and hotels, as well as in the tourist and information centre of Rila nature park. Furthermore, the brochure was officially presented during the Free Spirit Week freeride festival, which took place in the region of the Rila lakes in February 2019 and was very well accepted by the freeride community. As a result, the knowledge on the good tourist practices, including concrete advices and tour suggestions are available for the wider public.

- **Digital maps with tours and nature conservation areas in Rila National Park**

The suggested tours from the brochure, as well as GPS tracks were uploaded on a specially developed webpage on the website of BEFSA and are available for download and use on mobile devices in .kml and .kmz formats. As a result, the collected information is available and used from a bigger audience, after the finalization of the pilot project.

Webpage of the project on BEFSA website is available here: <https://befsa.com/rilalakes/>

The following figure represents the 3D map with ski touring and hiking routes of different difficulty level on the territory of the park, available for download by users, indicating also the potential avalanche areas.



- **A short documentary movie with relevant information on the initiative**

The ultimate deliverable of the pilot project was the elaboration of a short documentary movie with focus on disseminating the activities conducted during the project. Short interviews with the representatives of the project team are conducted, discussing the importance of implementing sustainable tourist practices in the mountains and on the biodiversity richness of the area in focus of the project. In parallel, the movie captures the nature beauties of the location in focus. A teaser is available at the following web address: <https://youtu.be/uuq2aoBtJ3w> .

The movie is ready and can be provided. It is foreseen to be distributed via variety of channels, i.e. web pages of project partners, YouTube and relevant social media. We note that the website and Facebook and YouTube channels of BEFSA have high popularity among the Bulgarian freeride community and thus published video files have several thousand views even without using the specific tools for promotion.

The official launch of the movie is planned for the beginning of the season 2019/2020, because members are more interested in content about the winter in the beginning of the season rather at the end, but also to remind of the available materials and the lessons learnt throughout the project. In addition, based on the long-term contacts of the project partners, it is assured that the movie will be shown at the traditional mountain festival “The Challenge days” (<http://predizvikelstva.com/>) that takes place traditionally every autumn. This festival enjoys high popularity among the Bulgarian mountaineering community.

4 IMPRESSIONS

Biodiversity capacity building lecture and guided tour with tourists and interested members from the sport community:





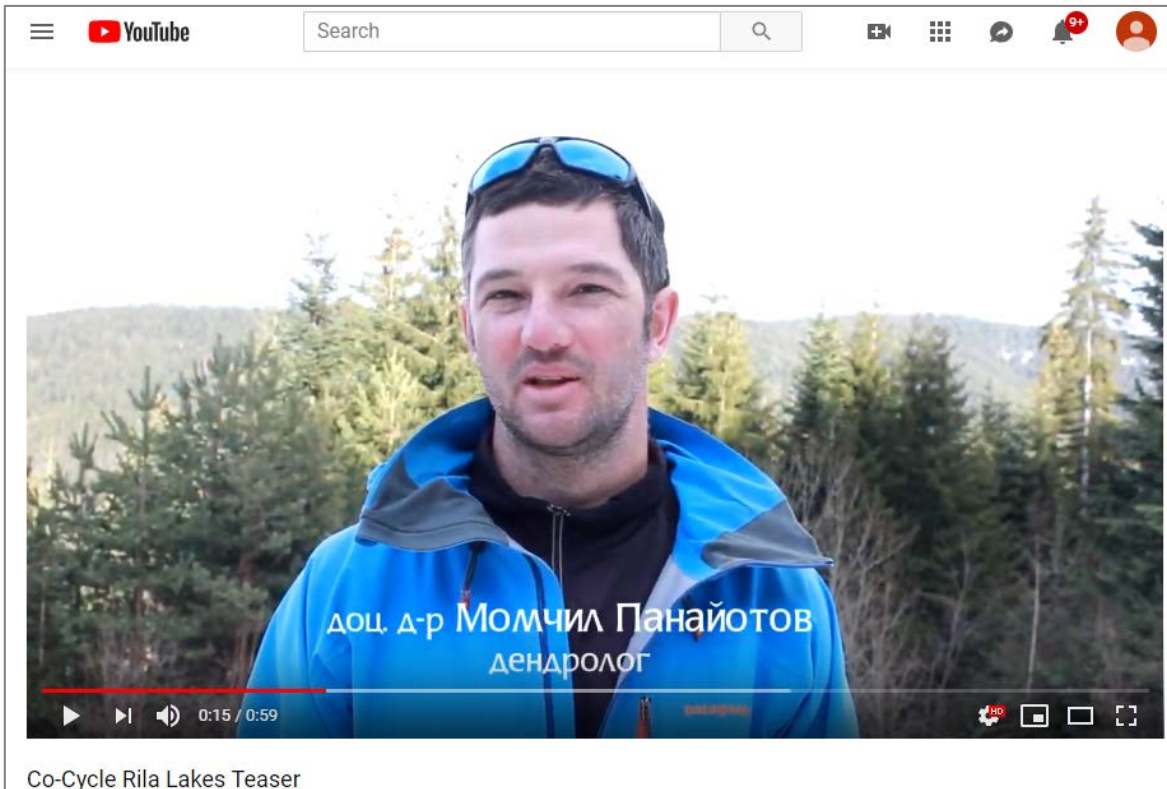
Discussion between the project experts and interested stakeholders:



Games with biodiversity focus for the younger audience:



Screenshot from the documentary movie: Interview with the biodiversity and avalanche prevention expert, Momchil Panayotov



5 OUTLOOK

At a next stage, the project partners expect to continue the work by expanding the activities, activating a larger circle of stakeholders like the local communities and nature park management, and mediating the dialogue between them. The lessons learnt, as well as the produced materials will enable the project partners to present the concept and engage further implementing organizations and interested stakeholders. This shall ensure improved preservation of the ecosystem services in the area for future generations and in parallel – improved conditions for tourists.

6 ANNEX

Deliverable: brochure (see next pages)

ПРАВИЛА!

Независимо какъв е любимият Ви начин да се насладите на тази крехка екосистема и как прекарвате времето си в планината, необходимо е строгото спазване на някои основни правила, свързани с вашата безопасност и недопускането на негативно въздействие върху природата:

❗ Не напускайте установените маршрути за движение по време на пешеходни преходи и спусканията със ски и сноуборд. При определени условия някои от зоните са лавиноопасни, което изисква внимателна преценка на снежната обстановка и съобразяване с нея. Навлизането в резерват „Скакавица“ може да става само по регламентирани пътеки. Отклоняването от тях крие и сериозен риск от попадане на високи скални масиви и тежки инциденти.

❗ По време на преходи и почивки не замърсявайте по никакъв начин снежната повърхност. Помнете, че е възможно да се намирате върху езерата или потоци, които се вливат в тях!

❗ Не се движете с моторни шейни и други моторни превозни средства. Изключение са случаите на спасителни операции на Планинска спасителна служба (ПСС). Силният шум от този вид дейност предизвиква сериозно безпокойство за дивите обитатели, а в случай на авария – крие много сериозен риск от замърсяване.

❗ Пазете и не увреждайте растителността и ландшафта по време на практикуването на любимите Ви спортове. Тези биотопи са дом на дивата природа както през зимата, така и през лятото и са много крехки и чувствителни. Особено важно е да не се допуска нараняване на кората на малки дървета, например от опиране на кантове на ски и сноуборд в тях.

❗ С оглед на безопасността Ви, опознайте предварително района и подгответе маршрута си по добри туристически карти (препоръчително в мащаб 1:25 000) и подготовка със сваляне на GPS маршрути. Препоръчително е ползване на приложението за мобилни телефони НП „Рила“. Движете се с добре зареден телефон и необходимата зимна екипировка – лавинен комплект от лавинен уред, лавинна лопата и сонда; термоизолираща фолио; добри дрехи и обувки; топли течности;



Моля запазете и не изхвърляйте тази брошура! Ако не Ви е необходима, оставете я на мястото, откъдето я взехте!



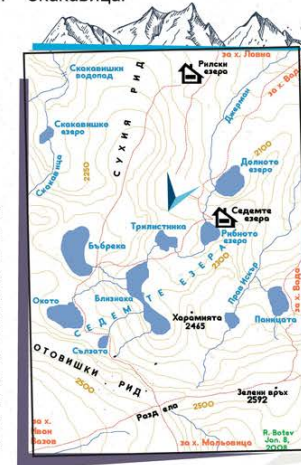
BASSEC
БЪЛГАРСКА АСОЦИАЦИЯ ПО СКИ
СВОБОДЕН И ЕКСТРЕМЕН СТИЛ




Районът на Седемте рилски езера се отличава с няколко специфични природни компоненти, които будят възхищение и привличат много туристи. На първо място това са езерата в циркуса на Седемте рилски езера, които безспорно са най-известната езерна група в България. Красотата им очарова туристите, а Бялото братство ги счита за специално духовно място. Друго известно с природните си дадености място в района е **Скакавишката долина** – част от резерват „Скакавица“. Тя се отличава със стръмните скалисти склонове, вековните гори от бяла мура и с големия **Скакавишки водопад**, който е и **най-високият в Рила (70 m)**. Долината е очарователна и почти винаги изключително тиха и спокойна. През зимните месеци е притегателно място и за любителите за леденото катерене. В долината е разположена и първата хижа в България – Скакавица.




Природата в района на **Седемте рилски езера**, освен с красотата, се отличава и със своята крехкост. Езерата са остатък от разтопяването на съществувалите преди хиляди години ледници. Водата им е изключително чиста и осигуряваща среда за обитаване на уникални организми, много от които са невидими за неспециалисти. Дори и най-малката на пръв поглед външна намеса и последващо замърсяване на водите е реална заплаха за съществуването на екосистемите на езерата.






За опазването на крехките екосистеми районът на Седемте рилски езера е включен в територията на Национален парк „Рила“, а Скаквичката долина е с още по-строга защита, тъй като е част от природен резерват „Скакавица“.

Това налага редица ограничения за посетителите. Атрактивността на езерата, заедно с улеснения в последните години достъп, води до много голямо туристическо натоварване предимно през летния сезон. В следствие на това се наблюдават проблеми, свързани с почвена ерозия и замърсяване в следствие на неправилното поведение на някои туристи.







Високите части на Рила са местообитание на редица застрашени растителни видове, като 125 от тях се срещат само на Балканския полуостров, в България или конкретно само в Рила (Проект за План за управление на НП „Рила“, 2015 г.)

За опазването им е много важно да не бъде нарушавана обстановката на находищата чрез огазване, бране, отпъкване, паша или замърсяване.

Високите алпийски зони са дом на символа на Рила – **дивата коза**, а в горите укритие намират **кафявата мечка**, **глухарът**, **планинският кеклик**, които имат нужда от изключително спокойствие за своето съществуване.

В резерват „Скакавица“ и околните гори се опазват и вековни дървета от **бяла мура (Pinus peuce Griseb)**. Този планински вид е отлично приспособен към суровите условия на субалпийската зона, но се среща само и единствено на Балканския полуостров, като най-големите находища са в Рила и Пирин. В миналото горите в района са били сериозно засегнати от дърводобив и запазените мурови гори, като тези в резерват „Скакавица“ и отделни участъци под хижа Рилски езера е от голямо значение.





През зимата районът се посещава от пешеходни туристи и любители на зимните спортове, които предприемат походи в планината. Районът на ски влека срещу **хижа Рилски езера** е популярен сред скиори и сноубордисти, а алпинистите, посещават обектите за ледено катерене „**езерния лед**“ и **замръзналите водопади в Скаквичката долина**.

Снежната покрива през зимата защитава намиращите се под нея езера и растителни съобщества. Въпреки това, зимните посетители също могат да окажат негативно влияние, макар и не толкова сериозно, колкото през лятото.

●●● Изключително важно е да запазим природното разнообразие в този планински резерват, поради което трябва да пазим чистота и да подаваме сигнали ако някой друг не го прави.

При забелязани нередности: моля, сигнализирайте на Паркова дирекция на НП „Рила“ на тел. +359 884 111 400 или на телефон 112.

В случай на инцидент: моля, алармирайте веднага ПСС чрез обаждане на телефон 112 и 1470 (за мобилни оператори). Подайте информация какво се е случило и изпратете координатите си чрез мобилното приложение „ПСС“ (моля свалете си го предварително). Предприемете животоспасяващи действия, ако е необходимо. Вземете мерки за затопляне и изолиране от студ до пристигане на екип на ПСС.

