

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

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## PAN Parks Verification

### RILA NATIONAL PARK, Bulgaria

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

Prepared by

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

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<b>12. 12. 2006</b>	<b>Date</b>
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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 October 2 to 6, 2006. 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.

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 mission was attended by Richard Tapper, assigned by the PAN Parks Foundation to assess the verification process and Žarko Vučinić from Montenegro as observers. Mr. Tapper and Mr. Vučinić contributed significantly to the verification process.

The Verification Team wants to express its thanks for the great hospitality of the Rila National Park team under the leadership of the Director Vasil Petrov and in particular to Lachezar Ivanov, who coordinated the visit and was the permanent host 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
- Richard Tapper, Observer
- Žarko Vučinić, Observer

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 during and after the mission.

### 2.2 Host team

Permanent host person during the visit was:

- Lachezar Ivanov, Expert, National Park Administration,

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

- Vasil Petrov, Director of Rila National Park
- Lazar Arangelov, Chief of Section Borovets
- Vladimir Chapkansky, Chief of Section Beli Iskar
- Andon Kiovtorov, Chief of Section Kostenets
- Elica Vuchkova, Chief of Section Belovo

### 2.3 Local people met during the site visit

- Natasha Zacharieva, Family hotel Elenite
- Ivan Andreev, Mayor of Raduil
- Rossen Milkov, Executive Director TTrust Engineering, BT Holding
- Peter Popangelov, Executive Sport Director, Borosport Jsc, Borovets
- Vasilia Konstantinova, Environmental Manager, Borosport Jsc, Borovets
- Emilia Borisova, Owner of "Zodiac" family hotel and restaurant, Rila Eco-tourism association Samokov
- Svetlana Stoyanova, Tourism Information Centre Kostenets
- Emil Sariyski, Rila Properties
- Sofia Yankulova, Kedar Hotel manager
- Stoyana Rakova, Kedar Hotel
- Yanka Sestrimska, Hotel complex "Nature"
- Ciril Kostadinov, Chairman NGO Ibar
- Anny Kirova, Public Relations Officer Municipality Kostenets
- Daniela Mandadjieva, Senoir Environmental Expert Municipality Kostenets

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- Svetlana Aladzhem, Consultant, Information and Nature Conservation Foundation
- Dimitrina Boteva, Consultant, Information and Nature Conservation Foundation

### 3 Verification itinerary

#### Monday 2. 10.

- Afternoon
  - Arrival of the team at Sofia Airport, transfer to Raduil
  - Opening meeting with Lachezar Ivanov, discussion of the programme of the verification visit, key questions to be addressed during the mission

#### Tuesday 3. 10.

- Day:
  - Meeting with Mayor of Raduil, Ivan Andreev
  - Site visit to the ski center Borovets and meeting with representatives of Boro sport and BT Holding, the operator of the ski slope
  - Meeting with Emilia Borisova, Owner of "Zodiac" family hotel and restaurant, Rila Eco-tourism association Samokov
- Evening
  - Stay at tourist village Kedar in Dolna Bania
  - Verification Team discussion

#### Wednesday 4. 10.

- Morning:
  - Meeting with tourism business representatives in village of Dolna Bania
  - Visit to the Tourism information center in Kostenets
  - Visit to the Municipality of Kostenets
- Afternoon
  - Site visit to Ibar Reserve
- Evening
  - Stay at Belmeken sport base

#### Thursday 5. 10.

- Morning:
  - Presentation of the sport base (assessment of the potentials in the region and possibilities for eco tourism development) Presentation of the development of specialized trail for horse riding and biking.
- Afternoon
  - Meeting with Vasil Petrov (Director of the Rila NP) and "Information and Nature Conservation" foundation team.
  - Verification Team discussion and preparation of conclusions

#### Friday 6. 10.

- Morning:
  - Closing meeting
- Afternoon:
  - Departure

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**4 Desk study results**

In addition to the documents received for the 2005 verification, the following documents were received by the Verifiers prior to the Visit:

- Self-assessment Questionnaire Principles 4 and 5,
- Progress report Principles 1-3
- Progress reports on development of STDS from July and September with annexes

The documents received were very limited in scope and level of explanation, but provided some 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 verification.

The National Park is in the middle of the process of developing the Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy with the support of external consultants and co-funding from the PAN Parks Foundation. The project is scheduled to finish in 2007, when the LPPG is to start its operation and STDS is to be finished and adopted. During 2006 the project team had made significant progress in dialogue with the relevant stakeholders, especially large tourism businesses and the Rila Monastery.

Based on the documents provided it was clear at the start of the mission that verification of the Rila National Park according to principles 4 and 5 would not be possible this year. The main purpose of the mission would be to assess the progress made and provide support to the Park in the process of implementing PAN Parks Principles and Criteria. The main issues for the verification visit were:

- To verify the involvement of relevant stakeholders in the process of STDS development and their attitude towards the Park,
- To discuss the progress in development of the STDS with the Park management and project team,
- To visit parts of the NP not visited in 2005,
- To review progress of Proposals, Recommendations and Corrective Action Requirements from 2005.

**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, several tourist service providers, including Boro Sport in Borovets, municipalities, 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.

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In the past year the National Park has made significant progress in implementing the recommendations made by the verification team in 2005, including maintaining the core wilderness zone of the park and the park is to produce a leaflet for public use indicating the boundaries and notes about the significance of the core zone. Cooperation with the Rila Monastery and the Rila Monastery Nature park has been further developed. There has been progress in identifying owners of derelict buildings within the park boundary with the purpose of their ultimate removal or rehabilitation. The progress in implementing of Proposals, Recommendations and Corrective Action Requirements from 2005 is presented in Table 2.

**Table 1: Status of Proposals, Recommendations and Corrective Action Requirements from the Verification Report of Principles 1 to 3 from November 2005**

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
5.2.1.2 (P&C 2.5.5) Fire Management in core zone	As research and monitoring is continuing this proposal is to remain active.
5.2.1.3 (P&C 3.2.5) Guiding Services	Some education of guides provided for local trails has taken place and plans are in place for trainees in 2007 to receive instruction.
5.2.1.4 (P&C 3.2.7) Visitor preferences and satisfaction	To date no action has been taken on this proposal although the park has considered ways in which this can take place. Currently visitors can comment on the park through an interactive website.
5.2.1.5 (P&C 3.3.4) Marketing Plan	Using comparisons with CBNP, a marketing plan is being prepared in parallel with the STDS. RNP does not consider a separate plan to be possible.
Recommendations	Comment on Status
5.2.2.1 (P&C 1.3.2) Inclusion of Rila Monastery Nature Park in future PAN Parks verification	Since verification there has been increased dialogue and joint actions between RNP and RMNP, including joint meetings, monitoring, education and progress towards common signage. Changes to Forest Law within 6 months will increase RMNP responsibilities to more aspects of the park, including a unit of rangers. RMNP are involved in the STDS process
5.2.1.2 (P&C 2.3.9) Strategy regarding external threats to the park	Water extraction has been identified as the most serious threat to the integrity of the park while it is considered that the Borovets Ski Development threat has receded. The park have studied past threats and are working on different strategies for differing present and future threats.
5.2.1.3 (P&C 2.7) Address planned ski development in buffer zone	Government authorities rejected two proposals for ski developments inside the park boundaries. Encouraging dialogue has taken place with the main developer at Borovets.
5.2.1.4 (P&C 2.1) Research of impact of the water infrastructure	To date no action has been taken. However, subject to funding a proposal for action is to be included in
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	the 2007 Action Plan budget (See 5.2.1.2).
5.2.1.5 (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. Consideration is being given to improvements in standardisation of signs.
5.2.1.6 (P&C 3.5) Ranger training – visitor management, interpretation and language	A proposal has been developed with CBNP for joint training to take place. A local initiative for language training is including some rangers.
5.2.1.7 (P&C 3.5) Ranger uniforms	A submission has been made in the Annual Plan sent to the Ministry and action is expected in the next 12 months.
Minor Corrective Action Requirements	Comment on Status
5.2.3.1 (P&C 2.5) Formal designation of 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.
5.2.3.2 (P&C 2.3.9) Action Plan for the removal and rehabilitation of buildings	Owner have been identified and proposals for the ultimate removal and rehabilitation are to be prepared by the end of 2006 and submitted to the Ministry
5.2.3.3 (P&C 3.1) Develop a more detailed Visitor Management Plan	No action taken. However, as an effective Visitor Management Plan is 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.
5.2.3.1 (P&C 3.2) Development of activities and services for visitors in cooperation with local partners (STDS)	Several initiatives for new trails under way in cooperation with municipalities and tourism service providers.
5.2.3.1 (P&C 3.2.8) Establish Local Pan Parks Group	Stakeholder dialogue is taking place.

The National Park has started 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, the Rila Monastery, 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.

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. This demonstrates the commitment of the Government to protect the park in its current boundaries and support development of sustainable tourism in the region surrounding the Rila National Park. But the question of longer-term tourism development in the region is not closed yet. During the discussion in Borovets, Boro Sport, the operator of the ski lifts made a commitment to sustainable tourism. For them this includes environmentally sound management of the facilities within their current boundaries, development of the summer season to improve the economy and to limit the increase of beds in the

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tourism resort itself, thus maintaining the quality of experience and limiting pressure on the nature and environment. They are especially concerned with the apparent lack of control on new construction within the resort. But at the same time, the representatives of Boro Sport also pointed out the fact that there is significant potential for more ski runs inside the Park and that this should be discussed in the future. Another idea for ski runs inside the Park was identified in the municipality of Kostenets.

### 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 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 2006.

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 2002 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

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started by man than by natural causes (lightning), so it is hard to assess what would be the natural frequency and pattern of fires.

No fires have occurred in the last 2 years but a Fire Fighting Action Plan is in place and staff training has taken place. 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.

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 guides provided for local trails has taken place and plans are in place for trainees in 2007 to receive instruction

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

To date no action has been taken on this proposal although the park has considered ways in which this can take place. Currently visitors can comment on the park through an interactive website.

We propose that RNP continues to develop an effective way of surveying and monitoring visitors

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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.

**5.2.1.5 (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. Using comparisons with CBNP, a marketing plan is being prepared in parallel with the STDS. RNP does not consider a separate plan to be possible.

We propose that RNP clearly defines a marketing plan that ensures that external forces do not compromise the park. This plan should reflect the position and priorities of the park and influence 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 in the STDS process and may provide important arguments in relation to the proposed mass ski tourism developments.

**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. Changes to Forest Law within 6 months will increase RMNP responsibilities to more aspects of the park, including a unit of rangers. Currently the RMNP are involved in the STDS

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process.

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 and in terms of a model of public – private partnership for conservation.

### 5.2.2.2 (P&C 2.3.9) Strategy regarding 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 while it is considered that the Borovets Ski Development threat has receded. The park have studied past threats and are working on different strategies for differing present and future threats e.g. provision of new waste water treatment plants for huts with prescriptive action where waste is discharged. Where threats include legal infringements RNP will take direct action. The park considers many other threats to be outside of their control e.g. water extraction is under state control. Environment Ministry support along with other agencies would be sought. RNP state that support from PAN Parks over perceived threats could be more beneficial through 'support letters' direct to the government rather than the park. Meanwhile the park has identified a need for more research on water extraction and, subject to available funding, they plan to include it in the 2007 Action Plan budget. Subject to EU approval RNP is to become a Natura 2000 site by the end of 2006.

It is recommended that RNP produce a short written strategy, carry out the proposed research and continue to closely monitor threats.

### 5.2.2.3 (P&C 2.7) Address planned ski developments in the buffer zone

The main external threats to the Park are the planned tourism resort developments in the buffer zone. So far the Park with the support of the Ministry of Environment has been able to prevent any new development inside the Park boundaries, but outside the boundaries the Park administration has no legal base to control the permitting process. In order to secure the ecological integrity of the buffer zone and not to lose the opportunity for sustainable tourism development in the region, the Park must work with key stakeholders in the buffer zone on a different basis than inside the Park. These stakeholders include national authorities responsible for tourism, regional development, rural development, agriculture and environment, the destination managers of the tourist centres, investors, municipalities and local businesses and NGOs.

Encouraging dialogue has taken place with the main developer at Borovets and interviews with local authority representatives indicated opposition to further developments. The main developer at Borovets, Balkan Development Services, trading locally as Boro Sports has joined the STDS process as a potential PAN Parks Business Partner. A proposed development at Kostenets close to and within the parks Limited Impact Zone, outlined by the local authority during the monitoring visit, appears unlikely

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to gain the necessary support.

With the advent of Bulgarian membership of the EU in January 2007 and continuing pressure for ski developments in particular, it is recommended that continuing vigilance is required in combating developments that threaten the integrity of RNP. A proposed ski development at Panichishte still constitutes a potential threat to RNP and needs to be monitored and where necessary action taken to combat identified threats.

### 5.2.2.4 (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.

### 5.2.2.5 (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.

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

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information.

### 5.2.2.6 (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 proposal has been developed with CBNP for joint training to take place. A local initiative for language training is including some rangers.

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

### 5.2.2.7 (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 the National Park is taken care off. 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 has been made in the Annual Plan sent to the Ministry and action is expected in the next 12 months. This recommendation is to remain in place until uniforms issued.

### 5.2.3 Minor Corrective Action Requirements

*Формирање на одозвучава PAN парк јула соопштурување зона*

#### 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

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there are plans to produce a 'core zone' leaflet for visitors.

Because anthropogenic pressures for grazing and logging are decreasing, the Park Administration could 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 to be prepared by the end of 2006 and submitted to the Ministry. making progress in removal and/or rehabilitation of these structures and their sites. This Minor CAR to remain active until subsequent action takes place.

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

The Management Plan includes a general chapter regarding visitor management that does not include all the elements of a visitor management plan. The park will be more successful in its visitor management if it is able to steer and influence developments rather than having to react to new developments as they occur. In order to do this, it needs to formulate its own visions with regard to visitor movements and activities. This is particularly important as a basis for working with other partners in the next stage of the PAN Parks process – the development of a sustainable tourism development strategy (STDS) for the area.

A Visitor Management Plan should be prepared based on experience from other PAN Parks and other partners. The Plan should specify:

- Long and short term objectives,
- Target groups of visitors,
- Their visiting patterns
- Prediction of visitor numbers by groups and sections of the Park
- Indication of the carrying capacity of the Park
- Methods of monitoring and mitigating visitor impact

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- Zoning system specifying visitor access, allowed activities and time period of allowed access,
- 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.

In the framework of the visitor management plan particular attention should be given to the existing forest roads accessible by cars. 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 physical barriers should be considered. Motorised use of roads designated for other uses by park rangers and other agencies should be minimised.

The plan should be based on improved visitor monitoring at the checkpoints and the visitor centre (see proposal 5.2.1.4). The results of the first year (2006) should be used as a basis for the Visitor Management Plan. The visitor management plan should be prepared in two years (by 2007).

In order to support the STDS process, the park needs to produce a draft outline of a Visitor Management Plan by the end of 2006. The plan should be completed prior to the next monitoring visit. The draft visitor management plan should compile existing ideas of the Park Directorate in various areas of visitor management, 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. The Park can benefit by defining its own wishes for the future of the chalets before the STDS process starts. 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.

### 5.2.3.1 (P&C 3.2 and 4.2) Development of the Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy (STDS)

According to the current plan, the Park is supposed to prepare the Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy within the next year and it should be formally approved within 2007. The work and especially the dialogue with stakeholders is already under way. Based on the discussions during the verification mission, the stakeholders are motivated to take part in the development and implementation of the

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STDS and it is now up to the Park and the project team to fulfil the expectations.

As a significant number of tourist facilities and a stream of tourist and visitors already exist, the STDS process should focus on the development of activities and services for the visitors, aiming at attracting tourists in all seasons and keeping tourists in the region for a longer period. If possible, the Strategy should also include longer term decisions about large tourism developments such as ski slopes and spas in the park region.

### 5.2.3.2 (P&C 3.2.8 and 4.1) Establish Local Pan Parks Group

In the next year also the Local PAN Parks Group needs to be established to implement the STDS once it is adopted and to manage the Local Business Partner certification. Because of the size of the region, number of stakeholders and diversity of local communities, the structure of the LPPG will have to be complex. Majority of local communities and different stakeholders will have to be represented in the group. The LPPG needs to have a clear mandate and rules of procedure. One possibility for the organisation of the LPPG would be to establish local groups (e.g. Razlog Association) in different communities around the Park and a regional group with representatives of the local groups.

### 5.2.3.3 (P&C 5.1) Development of the local PAN Parks Standard in the framework of the STDS

The local PAN Parks Standard for verification of Business Partners should be developed along with the STDS in dialogue within the LPPG. It is recommended that the standard is developed and finalised in such a way that it will be practical and realistic. This can be achieved by two methods:

- Conducting a pilot trial of the standard, and
- Requiring action plans for gradual achievement of principles in defined time with transparent benchmarks.

There are a number of tourism accommodations and service providers in the Park region, who already today represent leadership in terms of sustainable tourism and partnership with the Park. The LPPG could agree on a set of these potential partners, who in their view would be certified in the first phase, and conduct pilot verification with them to test and adjust as necessary the local standard before its finalisation. This should serve the dual purpose of calibrating the standard to the capacity of local businesses and to identifying the key local elements of the standard.

As it would be very demanding for the local partners to achieve international standards in terms of environmental and other standards, the local standard should involve an action plan of improvement of performance agreed by the local partner before certification and later checked periodically by the LPPG. It is important that the definition of the action plan and the time schedule should be the responsibility of the business itself, not of the LPPG. The LPPG should just check if the action plan secures long term compliance with the standards and if it is realistic. Partners who don't comply with their plans should be verified again and if necessary their certificate revoked. The action plans can also serve as a basis for cooperation between the business partners in identifying and solving common problems.

### 5.2.4 Major Corrective Action Requirements

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

### 5.3 Other observations

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In the preparation of the visit and the verification mission itself, the team noticed that very limited human and other resources have been dedicated to the PAN Parks Process within the Park Directorate. The consequences that we noticed were that the documentation received prior to the visit was sent late and contained very limited information and that the participation of the National Park staff in the mission itself was also limited.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that the STDS is being prepared by external consultants. They are some of the best Bulgarian experts in this field, but they need to be actively supported by the National Park experts and other staff for them to benefit from the process and to develop a full ownership of the Strategy once finished. If the consultants are left to themselves, the risk is that the document they produce will not be properly understood and implemented.

We feel that the National Park Directorate could benefit more from the PAN Parks exercise if the expert and field staff were involved in larger number than now and more deeply.

For the next mission no travel arrangements will be made before receiving full documentation as required by the verification manual.

**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 principle 4 could be adversely affected by decisions of the local and regional authorities in relation to proposed tourist resort developments; the Verification Team recommends

**to continue the process of verification of the Rila National Park as a PAN Park according to Principle 4.**

**7 Monitoring plan**

2007: Functioning of the LPPG, STDS, Visitor management plan, planned ski developments, Ranger uniforms

2008: Signposting, information points, Cooperation with the Rila Monastery Nature Park

2009: Ranger training, impact of water infrastructure, removal and rehabilitation of buildings, strategy regarding external threats

2010: Renewal verification

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#### Public summary

The verification visit to Rila National Park in relation to the PAN Parks Principles 4 and 5 and monitoring of Principles 1,2 and 3 took place from October 2 to 6, 2006 following the successful certification of Rila as a PAN Park in 2005. The verification team consisted of Jernej Stritih, Lead verifier, Gordon Miller, Verifier, and Katerina Rakovska, Local expert. The verification mission was attended by Richard Tapper, PAN Parks auditor, and Žarko Vučinić from Montenegro as observers. The Verification Team wants to express its thanks for the great hospitality of the Rila National Park team under the leadership of the Director Vasil Petrov and in particular to Lachezar Ivanov, who coordinated the visit and was the permanent host during the mission.

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, several tourist service providers, including Boro Sport in Borovets, municipalities, 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.

The Rila mountains, located close to the capital of Sofia, have an important role in the supply of drinking water and providing tourism and recreation opportunities. During the economic and social transition of the last 15 years, the number of visitors has decreased and tourism and visitor infrastructure have deteriorated. With the forthcoming EU membership of Bulgaria in 2007, a new cycle of investment has started, providing an opportunity for local communities to develop sustainable tourism but also threatening with unsustainable development of mass tourism, especially in winter. Membership of the PAN Parks network comes at a good time to help Rila National Park and its surroundings find a model of regional development that preserves nature while offering economic opportunities to the local people and greater enjoyment of wild nature for visitors.

In the past year the National Park has made significant progress in implementing the recommendations made by the verification team in 2005, including maintaining the core wilderness zone of the park and the park is to produce a leaflet for public use indicating the boundaries and notes about the significance of the core zone. Cooperation with the Rila Monastery and the Rila Monastery Nature park has been further developed. There has been progress in identifying owners of derelict buildings within the park boundary with the purpose of their ultimate removal or rehabilitation. Some of the proposed ski resort developments that would threaten the integrity of the National Park were rejected by the relevant Bulgarian authorities, demonstrating the commitment of the Government to support sustainable tourism development in the region surrounding the Rila National Park.

The National Park has also started 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, the Rila Monastery, NGOs and national authorities in the tourism sector. In the discussions held during the mission all the stakeholders confirmed that they support sustainable

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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.

Based on the current progress, it is expected that the Rila National Park will be fully certified according to all five principles of PAN Parks in 2007 after completion of the following planned activities

- Development of a more detailed visitor management plan,
- Development and approval of the Sustainable tourism development strategy (STDS) in cooperation with local partners,
- Establishment of the Local Pan Parks Group representing the relevant stakeholders that will coordinate the implementation of the STDS,
- Establishment of the local PAN Parks Standard in the framework of the STDS that will enable certification of local business partners as PAN Parks partners.

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*Report + VMP*

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This document is required. It contains general information needed in order for the PAN Parks Foundation to conduct proper monitoring verification process for Principles 1-3. Please complete this form electronically and e-mail it to the PAN Parks Conservation Manager.

### Park information

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### Annual report P&C 1-3

#### 1. Actions after PAN Parks verification P&C 1-3:

##### Minor CAR's:

According to the "verification report principal and criteria 1-3" prepared by the verification team (December, 2006), and plan for monitoring 2007 (September), we give up the following information:

#### **5.2.3.1 (P&C 2.5) formal designation of PAN Parks wilderness core zone**

- The borders and territory of PAN Parks wilderness core zone of Rila National Park are defined. There are no management activities - such as grazing, sanitary logging, and cutting of fire protection lines in the Core Zone at the moment. No management activities are planned also for the next years. The Core Zone will be formalised at the review and update of the Management Plan that is due in 2011.

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

- Rila National Park Directorate prepared Report for status of the infrastructure in the park territory and has sent it to the Minister of Environment and Waters. The Report consists of description of all buildings and facilities, analysis of their status and proposal for removal and rehabilitation of the infrastructure. This process is expected to be finalized in the next two years.

#### **5.2.3.2 (P&C 3.1) Develop a more detailed Visitor Management Plan**

- Rila National Park Directorate prepared detailed Visitor management plan (VMP) and include all elements and recommendations from the Verification team. The VMP is translated in English (31 pages) and attached to this Report.

Recommendations:

Proposals:

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Authorized: by the Executive Director



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Practical education for interpretation of the park staff (rangers and experts). Exchange of good experience within the PAN Parks network.

RNPD and the LPPG have included several projects for training of the park staff (including rangers) in the STDS Action Plan. See Action Plan.

One of these Projects is: *Training of the Park's staff in interpretation and nature conservation education.*

In addition a Project: *Walking with a Ranger in the park (pilot project)* has been included to be piloted in 3 municipalities. It will give the park rangers opportunities for practicing the knowledge and skills for interpretation and they will build experience in carrying out educational programs and guided walks, as well as will help to ease their communication with visitors.

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