



WWF® for a living planet®

Problems with the protection of Natura 2000 sites in Bulgaria

August 2008 update

Since Bulgaria's accession to the EU in January 2007, there have been significant problems with the prevention of destruction of Natura 2000 sites in the country.

The EU's Habitats and Birds Directives, which establish the Natura 2000 network of specially protected sites, present a modern, flexible and targeted approach to preserving our greatest natural heritage while permitting, and in some cases even promoting, economic development.

However, this approach is only as effective as the quality of the assessments of projects that are undertaken and the consequent implementation of decisions. Unfortunately, the record in Bulgaria to date in this respect has been quite dismal, with numerous development projects affecting Natura 2000 sites where assessments have either been completely avoided or are of very poor quality.

The result is the ongoing destruction of many of Bulgaria's and Europe's most valuable natural areas.

1. Problems at national level

A major issue is the avoidance of carrying out Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) and Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA) related to projects affecting Natura 2000 sites (Article 6.2 of the Habitats Directive):

- Impact assessments are disregarded for projects for the construction of hotels, ski runs and ski facilities and roads. Examples include "Riverside village" in Irakli on the Black Sea Coast; the Golden Pearl resort in Strandzha Nature Park; a ski lift and a road in Rila National Park; as well as new ski runs in Bansko ski zone in Pirin National Park. Aside from environmental impacts, there are administrative consequences of as well, including attempts to legalize already started construction by carrying out an EIA procedure after the fact.
- A popular tool is the division of project sites into smaller plots in order to avoid full EIAs (legally no assessment is required for construction sites under 10 dka). Thus, after screening projects are adopted in pieces with a following decision that due to their small size the projects do not require a full EIA. Example: over the course of a year following Bulgaria's EU accession, the Regional Inspectorate of Environment and Waters in Varna (RIEW – Varna) has approved 83 projects (new hotels, building complexes, wind turbines) with 297 screening permissions.

The second major issue is the quality of assessments:

- The cumulative impacts of a number of small projects are simply disregarded and projects are permitted without EIAs. For the period of June 2007-March 2008, out of the 485 decisions issued by RIEW-Varna for agreement of construction plans, 472 have found that there is "no need for a full assessment", and none of the decisions considers the problem of cumulative impacts. The situation elsewhere is similar, especially in the other Regional Inspectorate of Environment and Waters on the Black Sea coast located in Burgas.
- In rare cases where full assessments are made, real impacts are disregarded in the EIA reports, which are commissioned and paid for by the investor. The latest example is with the Strandzha SCI, also a Nature Park. In July 2008, the High Expert Ecological Council at the Ministry of the Environment in Bulgaria decided

to approve the impact assessment reports of the Master Spatial Plan of Tsarevo Municipality, which encompasses the whole Black Sea Coast of Strandzha Nature Park. The Spatial Plan allows for massive urbanization of the coast. The report on the specific assessments on the impact of the plan on species and habitats has significant gaps, including species omitted as well as wrong conclusions. However, the expert on fauna has clearly shown that significant impacts on such species will occur and that areas planned for urbanization should be limited in order to avoid these impacts. However, this alternative was not even considered and the report was approved after many procedural violations.

2. Official complaints to the European Commission

Two complaints have been sent by Bulgarian NGOs on the insufficiencies of the Natura 2000 network (pSCI's and SPAs). The European Commission has been quick to respond. Behind the scenes pressure of the European Commission has resulted in the Bulgarian Government adopting an almost complete list of proposed Sites of Community Importance (pSCI's) for Bulgaria; in addition, the European Commission has launched an infringement procedure for the insufficiency of the Natura 2000 network related to bird areas (SPA's).

Complaints have also been submitted by Bulgarian NGOs related to five cases regarding problems with the protection of sites – Kaliakra (wind farms and golf course); Irakli (development of seaside resorts on the Black Sea coast), Rila National Park (construction of ski resorts); Pirin National Park (construction of ski resorts); and Rodopa (construction of Perelik ski resort). Unfortunately, there has been no progress to date on these cases.

Contact: Katerina Rakovska, WWF-DCP/Bulgaria; rakovska@wwfdcp.bg