PAN Parks: quality destinations
Two years of Certified PAN Parks
In the footsteps of large carnivores

Model sustainable tourism development in Central Balkan
PAN News

De Volkskrant, the Netherlands
“In PAN Park Fulufjället PAN Parks Accommodation acts as a financial mechanism for the PAN Parks Foundation.”

National Geographic Traveller, the Netherlands
“In Certified PAN Park Fulufjället it is possible to enjoy a PAN Parks holiday at local partners, among them PAN Parks accommodation.”

Lapin Kansa, Finland
“PAN Parks certification could also bring stimulation of local economy and investment.”

Den, Bulgaria
“Central Balkan is a fully Certified PAN Park after its sustainable tourism development strategy has also been certified.”

PAN Parks Courier

PAN Parks Courier is the voice of the PAN (Protected Area Network) Parks Foundation. The Courier aims to inform all interested parties about PAN Parks. The project, as a joint initiative of WWF and Molecaten, is financed by WWF Netherlands.

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I have been with PAN Parks for more than 3 years and I am proud to have witnessed the development of the PAN Parks vision to the creation of an effective network of “model” protected areas. I am therefore happy to congratulate at this place Central Balkan National Park, which after verification against Principle 4 has become a fully certified PAN Park.

An essential effect of Central Balkan’s verification is that the visitor management plan developed during the verification process has been appreciated on a governmental level and thus will become a model for other Bulgarian protected areas. This is a good example of PAN Parks’ spin off effect - that is, how it could benefit areas that are not members.

As the example of Central Balkan shows, the agreement on a sustainable tourism development strategy - in line with Principle 4 - requires lots of effort and committed work. Two important steps have been taken that demonstrate the commitment of the local community to sustainable tourism: Central Balkan established the Local PAN Parks Group and business partners agreed on the standards for tourist services in the region of the national park (for more details see pages 4-5).

On my visit to this spectacular area I myself was captivated by the landscape, the awesome sight of the magnificent mountains and the many legends they narrate: stories of national heroes fighting in the mountains. However, for a protected area to become a destination more is needed. Another sustainable tourism related topic is discussed in this issue: how local businesses together with the national park can create a destination from a protected area (pages 8-9).

Tourism is in focus in the current issue. The role of large carnivores is also investigated from this aspect in an article on page 6. In our Travellers’ Stories section we invite you for a journey to the fabulous Oulanka (page 14).

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**Editorial**

**Attractive destinations**

Edit Borza

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Marine PAN Park?

WWF Sweden, PAN Parks, and the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency are working together to make the Koster area a national park - and a good candidate to become the first certified marine PAN Park. The proposed area would include the protection of a unique undersea canyon with an astonishing number of species (7000) representing marine life in this part of Sweden. The Koster area would be a good place to test the PAN Parks concept in a marine protected area because of its unique marine environment, and the fact that during the creation of the park the Management Plan and Visitor Management Plan would be developed concurrently.

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Toyota helps the Abruzzo

Toyota Motor Europe has agreed to give financial and technical support to a project which aims to improve tourism infrastructure and management in PAN Parks aspirant Abruzzo National Park, Italy. The goal of the project - co-ordinated by PAN Parks and WWF International - is to help provide a more even distribution of visitors among all 25 municipalities within the park’s territory in order to level visitor pressure in the area. Staff from Toyota Motor Europe and Toyota Motor Italia will be carrying out hands on work on the tourist trails as well as helping to improve the quality of park information and tourist guide training.

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Three parks apply for verification

Russian Paanajärvi, Bulgarian Rila and Italian Majella National Parks have recently applied for PAN Parks verification. For each park a verification road map has been developed at the end of which they will be subject to PAN Parks assessment carried out by international verifiers according to the PAN Parks standards this year.

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Central Balkan: model for sustainable tourism

After verification of its sustainable tourism development strategy, Central Balkan National Park has become a fully certified PAN Park - the third of our members. The visitor management plan prepared during the verification process will become a model for all Bulgarian protected areas.

Partners for sustainable tourism

Based on the documents reviewed and the sites visited in November 2004, the PAN Parks verification team concluded that Central Balkan National Park and its partners in the surrounding region are in general developing a sustainable model of tourism and thus can be certified according to Principle 4.

The Park region is relatively large, encompassing nine municipalities and some of the main tourist resorts in continental Bulgaria. The northern slopes of the Central Balkan range have a long tradition of tourism in the countryside, and have been one of the leading regions in Bulgaria regarding eco-tourism. The main tourism product is the stay in the countryside, combined with cultural and ethnographic contents.

Verification history

- In 2004, the park engaged in a wide participative process with all the relevant stakeholders (more than 100 participants) in the surrounding region with the purpose of developing the Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy (STDS).
- One of the results of this process is the Local PAN Parks Group that had its first meeting in November 2004 and has started developing the local standard for PAN Parks business partners. The stakeholders involved have expressed their support for the STDS and their readiness to take part in the implementation of the STDS. The main concern of the tourism business in developing the strategy seems to be the diversification of their services, increase of international guests and the extension of the tourist season in order to improve the economic performance and secure the development of the accommodations and services.
- The next step is the certification of business partners, which guarantee the provision of sustainable and high quality tourist services. The Local PAN Parks Group with the representatives of all of the stakeholders was officially designated during the closing stage of the development of the STDS in October 2004.
and with a gradual increase of demand for activities. Mountaineering is developed, and the number of people accessing the high mountain range is rising every year according to the socio-economic survey conducted through the process of developing the STDS. Domestic tourists are prevailing, but in recent years there is a visible increase of international guests.

The visitor infrastructure in the Park is managed by the Park Administration and partner organizations and enables quality experience without serious adverse impact on the conservation goals or nature itself. There are several park information centres and tourism offices providing information in the region, operated by the local partners of the park. The tourist accommodation is provided in numerous small hotels, mountain huts and a growing number of family bed and breakfast businesses. The number of service providers such as tourist agencies, mountain, wildlife and horseback guides has been growing. The park and the region have sufficient tourism potential and carrying capacity for sustainable tourism, especially with the development of visitor infrastructure inside and in the surrounding of the national park.

Model for Bulgarian protected areas

One of the verification conditions raised by independent verifiers for Central Balkan in 2003 was a requirement to develop a detailed visitor management plan. The Park Directorate developed a bright new process to prepare a visitor plan which has been very much appreciated by government officials in Sofia. The Visitor Management Plan of Central Balkan will become a model for Bulgarian National and Nature parks.

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Friendship as a further outcome

“In the process of the development of the Strategy not only business contacts and relations in the field of tourism have been established between the stakeholders but friendships on pure humane basis as well. Everybody has become more aware of sustainable tourism and has learned more about each other’s activities. The development process turned out to be an exchange of ideas and experiences. And this is as much valuable as developing the very document itself. The foundations of a new community have been laid down - a community of people who work in and for the field of tourism and demand its development in a sustainable way.”
(Nela Rachevitz, Director)
What’s New?

In the footsteps of large carnivores
Towards a change of perspective

There is a need for a comprehensive approach to guarantee the long-term protection of large carnivores as these species have become extinct in the larger part of our continent. In this issue our series on wilderness focuses on large carnivores: since the main conservation highlight of the PAN Parks concept is to protect ecosystems dynamic as a whole, its mission naturally includes the conservation of icon species.

Large carnivores have long been considered a “natural” enemy of humankind or simply beasts that meant a constant threat to domestic animals - the pledge of survival in a traditional society - and even to the lives of the people. The hunting of the “beast” was not only a desired but also a profitable enterprise. As a result today there are few countries left that are still home to large carnivores.

The main conservation highlight of the PAN Parks concept is to protect ecosystem dynamics as a whole. Part of this mission is naturally the conservation of icon species, which are the tokens of a complete and healthy ecosystem, animals being on the top of a food-chain - large carnivores. In Europe these animals are represented by brown bear, wolf, lynx and wolverine. After so many centuries of “civilized” life, these species have become extinct in the larger part of our continent. It was only in recent years that - after long and expensive restoration projects - some of them (e.g. wolf and lynx) re-occupied a small part of the home territory that they had lost.

We need a comprehensive approach to guarantee long-term protection of these species. In addition to legislative protection, well-protected living habitats, adequate food resources and functioning bio-corridors, large carnivores require large areas of undisturbed land - extensive and well managed protected areas. These are vital not only because they offer shelter for the animals but also because they enable them a free and unconstrained life in their natural environment.

Unfortunately, the old biases against large carnivores persist even in parts of “eco-minded” countries in Scandinavia. Large carnivores are sometimes seen as a threat to human hunters either because they are believed to reduce the bag or simply because they are considered to “spoil” the atmosphere.

There are, nevertheless, many positive signs indicating a slow change of mentality. There are more and more people interested in discovering the “footsteps” of large carnivores and observing the “kings of wilderness” in their natural surroundings. Following the footsteps of lynx in the snow, listening to the howling of wolves or catching sight of a bear is a dream of many nature-loving people.

The PAN Parks concept includes all these items: large and well managed protected areas, the incentive for local stakeholders and business partners to see large carnivores as assets rather than threats and the opportunity for visitors to follow the footsteps into the wild.

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PAN Parks’ training needs assessed

In 2004 the Glion Institute of Higher Education (GIHE) agreed to sponsor research into the training needs of PAN Park’s staff and local partners. Contrary to the expectations, preliminary results suggest that there is a remarkable similarity in the training needs of target groups regardless of the different economic situations and cultural backgrounds of the people.

In the summer and autumn of 2004 small teams representing GIHE visited Oulanka, Central Balkan and Bieszczady National Parks - hopefully Fulufjället will be visited during the spring to complete the task.

The aim of the analysis is to derive a priority list of training needs developed from listening to the parks and their partners rather than something imposed from above as an external perception of needs. The discussions followed a variation on the Delphi method of decision-making and forecasting and involved talking to groups of interested parties as well as individual members of staff and small businesses. At this stage it is possible to give an impression of the needs, though this is not a final list. What was perhaps a little surprising to the team is the commonality of the needs expressed. The team had thought that given economic, social and political differences between Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, training needs would also differ.

The training needs that have so far been identified as clear priorities include:
- Language, mostly English but also German
- Customer care skills for dealing with foreign visitors/understanding the needs of foreign visitors
- Marketing - all aspects and including how to deal with the foreign travel trade
- Interpreting nature for tourists - this has been clearly expressed by both park staff and businesses around the parks
- Issues around sustainable tourism development

PAN Parks hopes to be able to acquire funding to implement a training program and part of the annual Network Meeting will be used to address training issues.

Full results of the Training Needs Analysis will be available this autumn.

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Beyond the words: perceptions of wilderness

“The values people attach to wilderness can vary according to their socio-economic background and the national and cultural context,” found a study, “Perception of wilderness in Finland and Estonia,” conducted by Carmela Bosangit, Jana Raadik and Ling Shi on the comparison of the definition and use of the term ‘wilderness’ in Estonia and Finland. The study is an interesting attempt to map similarities and differences in language use and people’s mentalities.

This paper is a contribution to the effort of WWF and PAN Parks to come up with a vision statement for Europe’s wilderness. By taking Estonia and Finland as case studies, the authors’ purpose was to analyze and compare the perception of wilderness in various national contexts. As the analysis of the national literatures shows, both Estonians and Finnish people associate ‘wilderness’ with forests where there is no human interference. Nevertheless, while Estonians believe in the co-existence of man and nature, for the Finns, eramaa, the Finnish word for wilderness, evokes also cultural meanings as it has inspired great art, including the work of the world-renowned architect, Alvar Aalto and the composer Jean Sibelius.

The survey of the attitudes of park managers and experts gave interesting insights into the perception of wilderness and tourism in the two countries. While Finnish respondents recognized that wilderness is an asset for tourism, Estonians thought that tourism devalues a “natural” area and therefore should be restricted. The Estonian bias against the commercial use of national parks can also be observed in the listing of acceptable activities: the three “top” activities were overnight camping trips, guided tours and education while Finns listed eating out, small group trips and handicraft.

From this, we can conclude that while there are similarities in defining wilderness, people recognize different values and benefits depending on their socio-economic background. It is to be hoped that these values will be communicated in a unifying Europe.

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Tourism Spotlight

PAN Parks: from protected areas to quality tourism destinations

“The PAN Parks concept is based on the creation of new opportunities for conservation management and local communities through sustainable tourism development. Parks will have to become the heart of successful and competitive (eco-) tourism destinations” - says Niek Beunders, tourism consultant, in his writing on PAN Parks as tourism destinations.

Can a protected area be a successful destination?

Not even the most famous national parks in the world are seen as “stand alone” destinations. They have become “must sees” that attract millions and millions of visitors but tourists still consider them as part and parcel of a “bigger” tourist package. Many people, for instance, who want to explore the USA, plan their tour based on several highlights: famous cities, attractions and... national parks. From a tourism point of view they are successful, but does this type of mass tourism bring benefits to conservation in the end?

For PAN Parks a different tourism model is needed. How can a protected area benefit from tourism without ending up with mass tourism? The carrying capacity of protected areas is limited by nature, yet expectations from tourism are high. Tourism can create local support for conservation through new economic opportunities. But in case tourism fails to meet the expectations, disappointment could easily lead to hostility.

Selective marketing is required in order to develop high quality tourism products and services that attract only clearly defined markets and target groups. This is the essence of eco-tourism. It is not an elitist concept: it is a matter of necessity. It does not imply that we target only high-end markets. What is important is that the expenses of tourists do not leak away but benefit both the local economy and the national park. Even in Europe many protected areas have to cope with millions of visitors. The PAN Parks concept can be equally valid here, focusing on sustainable development, visitor management and de-marketing.

How can we attract the eco-tourist to a protected area?

Tourism is a complicated industry with its own characteristics. If we want tourism to create real benefits for conservation, a professional systematic approach is needed. The eco-tourism market is highly competitive and high conservation values do not necessarily imply a high tourism potential.

Looking through the eyes of the tourist at the product that we are offering can be helpful. Decision-making for a holiday

Tourists look for a sense of place: unique landscape, atmosphere and...
is a responsible job. There are so many choices that we can afford ourselves to be demanding consumers. We seldom focus on one monument or a national park: we tend to think more in terms of countries and regions. Therefore the destination perspective is a key success factor in tourism development. The destination is the product with which tourists identify themselves when they organize a holiday. PAN Parks should therefore co-operate closely with the wider region and with stakeholders to become competitive destinations.

Only by clearly understanding the motivations of eco-tourists can our destinations become competitive. What are they looking for?
In the first place unique nature, breathtaking landscapes and a clean environment. It feels good to know that your presence does benefit conservation.
Distinctiveness is a crucial motive for tourists: we travel to places because we expect them to be unique, different from what we already know. We look for a sense of place: the sensation of indulging in unique landscapes and atmospheres, of sharing with communities their way of life and their cultural heritage, including local traditions, local food and local crafts. We would like to feel in harmony with the environment and search for true hospitality and nice encounters with local people.
Tourists are dreamers, looking for unique, memorable experiences. It is not just a site or a sight that we are looking for. On a holiday we want to feel good, safe and comfortable and to experience new sensations and adventures.
An essential part of an adventure is that it can be shared with our beloved ones at home. Coming home from a holiday means sharing memorable, unique and authentic experiences with others: we travel to tell stories at home… Freedom is another asset of the holiday: we want to feel free to choose and we require a coherent, complete and diversified supply of products and activities.
Last but not least: tourists want value for their money.

How can a protected area form the core of a competitive destination?
A destination is competitive if it competes successfully for clearly targeted markets that generate the expected benefits, making sustainable use of its unique natural, cultural, human and economic resources.
PAN Parks is a network of high quality eco-tourism destinations, of which the protected areas form the core. They offer:

- Variety in traditional landscapes and land use
- Unique natural and cultural heritage
- Unspoiled villages and (small) towns
- Variety in traditional life styles
- Local hospitality and local products and
- Experiences based on those resources

The next question is: how to develop competitive experiences?
- Establish links with local stakeholders and providers
- Create coherence in the destinations’ supply, based on the sense of place and on clear concepts
- Create quality tourism products based on co-ordination and co-operation of all suppliers that are involved in creation and marketing of that product (chain approach)

To conclude, parks should follow the following guidelines to become tourism destinations:
- A limited carrying capacity and high expectations of benefits form a threat… Make it a key challenge. Set a clear strategy first, then start promoting tourism
- Protected areas can only be competitive destinations in co-operation with a wider region. Assess tourism resources of wider area and integrate nature and culture in product development
- An effective stakeholder/management structure at destination level is crucial. Apply an integrated approach: Create stakeholder value and sustainability by involving other sectors
- Marketing is a must: Focus on distinctiveness/sense of place, select target groups carefully on their added value, quality instead of quantity - increase length of stay instead of numbers and finally coherence of supply and freedom of choice for guests.

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Two years of Certified PAN Parks: Achievements and benefits

The creation of the first Certified PAN Parks marks a milestone in the history of our Foundation. After years of co-operation with the PAN Parks, we have asked our members what they see as the achievements and benefits of this work.

To meet the high PAN Parks standards is, of course, challenging but it is also rewarding for the member parks. Major achievements that are common to all of the PAN Parks include: the strict definition and protection of the core zone, the sustainable tourism development strategy, visitor management, an effective partnership with local stakeholders, better communication, the promotion of quality tourism, improved marketing, increased visibility and PAN Parks tourism packages. The selection below will give you a detailed picture of the park-specific developments with the PAN Parks.

Fulufjället National Park

Fulufjället has been the first Swedish park to adopt an official zoning system in order to reduce and redistribute human impact, e.g. hunting, fishing and snowmobiling, in the core zone. A snowmobile track was rerouted to comply with the PAN Parks requirement of a strictly preserved core zone. The park has 12 certified local business partners who were verified by the Local PAN Parks Group and are bearers of the PAN Parks logo for their commitment to PAN Parks’ goals and the improvement of tourism service standards in the region.

Staffan Ericsson, Visitor Centre Manager:

“As for benefits, the official opening and certification ceremony of Fulufjället National Park took place on September 2002 accompanied by a great ceremony with the attendance of his Majesty King Karl Gustav. The PAN Park membership gave a new impetus to our developmental work which was already in progress. When the sustainable tourist development strategy was accomplished and verified in 2003, we experienced great attention in both domestic and international markets.

Bieszczady had excellent conservation standards also prior the PAN Parks process but has improved a lot in the field of sustainable tourism.
Oulanka National Park

Oulanka National Park had maintained high standards of nature conservation even prior to joining PAN Parks. An area of model features and strategies, Oulanka hosts a strictly protected core area and a hunting and fishing-free zone as a result of the PAN Parks process. A further achievement is the identification of the need to reduce the pressure of reindeer grazing on the core zone and the development of a proposal for its monitoring as well as the accomplishment of an action plan.

Central Balkan National Park

In the Bulgarian park lots of effort and enthusiasm has been invested to meet the strict PAN Parks standard and there are tangible positive results of the work. The park is ready with a concept for expanding and increasing the homogeneity of its strictly protected core zone.

Bieszczady National Park

Bieszczady had important achievements in the field of nature conservation prior to starting co-operation with PAN Parks, the most important being the creation of a strictly protected core zone.

Matti Tapaninen, Director

“Benefits of PAN Parks membership for Oulanka include a stronger emphasis on conservation values and a more precise definition of principles and criteria. By joining an international organization, our park has also obtained a more global perspective and more sensitivity to multicultural issues and transboundary co-operation. The independent evaluation of management brought about an increased efficiency and improved communication with the local people strengthened stakeholder participation in the decision-making process.

In addition, PAN Parks membership improved our networking with benchmarking, the organization of international conferences and many new contacts with experts. These meetings provide us with a very good opportunity to get to know other parks’ management practices and use their experience.”

Grzegorz Sitko, PAN Parks Co-ordinator

“The most important benefits for the park are the improved co-operation between the park management and local stakeholders in solving some problems related to nature conservation, the realization of more direct profits because of some investments, the promotion of the park abroad and the attraction of more environmentally-minded tourists. For us it is important that developmental projects and increased tourism also mean job opportunities for local people as this helps strengthen the relationship between the community and the national park.”

Gencho Iliev, GIS Expert

“We hope that partnerships for sustainable tourism will have a lasting effect on the region and will create a new image of Central Balkan as a destination. Moreover, PAN Parks membership brings the possibility for networking and promotion on an international level.”

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Network News

Northern Region

PAN Parks meets local businesses

In December 2004 Oulanka brought together representatives of local businesses and presented PAN Parks Accommodation to the public at a conference organized in Kuusamo. Local communities and the media got to know the sustainable tourism development strategy of Oulanka and the benefits of co-operation between protected areas on the example of the Oulanka-Paanajärvi twinpark.

It was a good idea to combine the introduction of PAN Parks Accommodation with that of the experience of a true partnership that can set an example to other protected areas. The timing was also fortunate since the PAN Parks process in Oulanka came to a phase where certification possibility opened up to businesses and Paanajärvi had started its own PAN Parks process.

With more than 50 participants, and a nationwide press release in Helsinki, the meeting was a very successful media and public event. An important outcome of the conference was the promotion of a strategic land-use plan in tourism services. According to Zoltán Kun, the conference indicates the development from a Certified PAN Park to a tourist destination of ecologically minded people - which is what the PAN Parks concept is about.

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Eastern Region

Conservation with the public

At the end of 2004 Slovensky raj celebrated the 40th anniversary of Nature and Landscape Conservation of the area of Slovensky raj. The celebration gave the participants a good opportunity to evaluate conservation efforts in light of past experiences as well as to outline future tasks to gain public support for the management plan of the park for the next two years.

Though many relevant politicians expressed their concern only in letters, with more than 150 participants and a generally optimistic atmosphere, the conference can be considered a positive acknowledgment of the teamwork of the park administration. The presentations nicely illustrated the two historical messages the name Slovensky raj holds for the local people: that this area was giving and still gives the surrounding community a sense of security and that its protection started on the demand of a wide public - tourists and nature lovers asked for it 80 years ago.

Future tasks include the critical demand of the approval of the zoning system of the national park with at least 10,000 ha of non-fragmented core zone and the incorporation of the visitor management plan in the basic park documents. These tasks, nevertheless, require a clear definition of the universal functions of the forests in national parks both in state and private ownership. Just like in the past, it is only with the support of the public that Slovensky raj can become a safe haven for untouched wilderness.

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“National parks Tejo and Douro are the best candidates to become PAN Parks in the near future,” stated Conservation Manager Vladivoj Vancura in his assessment of Portuguese national parks after visiting the areas. The Portuguese Nature Conservation Institute signed a Letter of Intent declaring that at least one of the Portuguese parks will be ready for certification in the next few years.

Located in a diverse landscape, Douro in particular has a great potential to become a PAN Park. The extensive protected area of 85,150 hectares covers not only the upper reaches of the Douro and its tributary, River Agueda, but also a huge adjacent area offering great diversity in landscape. The largest attraction of the area is undoubtedly the steep escarpments of the Douro valley, which support many exotic plant species and a highly diverse wildlife e.g. many rock-dwelling bird species such as the black stork, the Egyptian vulture, the griffon vulture and the golden eagle.

The Letter of Intent commits PAN Parks to provide the necessary technical support to both parks, and offer the support services of the Conservation Manager. Tejo and Douro agree to prepare and follow individual timetables for meeting PAN Parks standards with respect to zoning, management, and sustainable tourism goals. The neighbouring Spanish protected areas offer a great opportunity for a transboundary certification, which is strongly encouraged by PAN Parks to “open” to the Mediterranean.

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In 2004 PAN Parks contacted the Hungarian Aggtelek National Park Directorate with the perspective to establish a partnership. A delegation of two representatives of the national park was invited to the first Certified PAN Park, the Swedish Fulufjället, to get acquainted with the activity of the national park and its nature conservation practices.

Impressed by the comprehensive approach and opportunities of PAN Parks, the Directorate decided to apply for PAN Parks membership. The chances of Aggtelek becoming a member of the organization were assessed. The park almost covers 20,000 ha. The karst landscape which is dominated by extensive karst plateaus whose average altitude of 600 m is unique in Europe. Around 262 caves are registered in the national park. While the park is rich in natural values, there is still much work needed to satisfy the strict PAN Parks criteria.

First of all, the core zone does not reach the required size (only 6-7,000 ha), and there is no buffer zone around the national park. Another obstacle to PAN Parks verification is the lack of a valid management and visitor management plan. The Directorate continues its devoted work to overcome the difficulties and improve management practices in the national park. In April 2005 Aggtelek will host the PAN Parks Network Meeting, which will give an opportunity for the representatives of Certified PAN Parks and aspirant parks to meet and exchange experience.

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This issue’s “Traveller Story” by Bart Braafhart invites you on a fabulous journey to the land of a thousand lakes, midnight sun and splendid waterfalls: Oulanka National Park.

In the land of Aurora Borealis, directly on the Arctic Circle in the Finnish Lapland, you can set out for the Bear’s Ring, the famous hiking trail, which leads you through PAN Park Oulanka.

The Bear’s Ring offers an 80 km long tour, but you can also choose to hike shorter and easier trails. After a nice cup of coffee with traditional pulla, a Finnish cake, we decided to try a route which seemed to be easily manageable: we set out for a visit to the Kiutaköngäs waterfall. At the beginning of the path to Kiutaköngäs there is a visitor center with an impressive nature exhibition. Nice detail: the Bear’s Ring trail goes through the visitor center!

From the parking place it is around 1.5 km to walk up to the waterfall. There is a very convenient path with wooden stairs making the walk upwards easier for visitors. After a couple of hundred meters we stop for a short rest, and our gaze is captivated by the peace and beauty of the sight. Foaming rapids find their way around a small island and even an otter swims in the river. So far from the familiar noises of civilized life, we can hear the roaring of the waters below us. Coming around the corner we can see red dolomite rocks where the water seems to disappear in a narrow corridor.

Crossing a tiny wooden bridge we are coming closer to the canyon where the water is flushing through with enormous power. The canyon with a high and red rocky wall blinking in the sunshine, green spruces on the edge, the sound of the powerful water stream; the power and intactness of nature fill us with awe. For several minutes we are just standing and listening - beautiful! The wild and fierce motion of the waters is rapidly breaking and when reaching the end of the canyon, the river again seems to give the impression of a peaceful lake... marvellous contrast, as if it were nature’s magic in this fabulous natural setting!

Our next destination is the Small Bear’s Ring, which takes a total of 12 km hiking. Even though the path is well prepared, good hiking shoes are a must. Soon we face the first ‘hanging bridge’ and, what luck, we take a glimpse of a rafting group taking the first barrier successfully.

We continue our journey to the Myllykoski, a renovated water mill from which there is a splendid view to the rapids. From then on we decide to pull ourselves together and walk a few more hundreds of stairs upwards - which we soon regret but it’s too late to turn back now. Fortunately, we discover a new base camp where it is also possible to drink and eat a small snack. At the rear side of this building there is even a terrace with a beautiful view over the forest.

Tired but happy we promise to come back and try the whole of the Big Bear’s Ring.

by Bart Braafhart
Our Partners

PAN Parks

Our Partners

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Other co-operating national parks

These areas are working for PAN Parks verification. In brackets are the expected dates of verification.

- Fulufjället National Park, Sweden - Gerben Weening, weening@molecaten.nl, www.panparksaccommodation.com
- Oulanka National Park, Finland - Gert Nieuwboer, Gert.Nieuwboer@snp.nl, www.snp.nl
- Central Balkan National Park, Bulgaria - James van Leuven, james@jamesvanleuven.nl, www.jamesvanleuven.nl
- Fulufjället National Park, Sweden - Gerben Weening, weening@molecaten.nl, www.panparksaccommodation.com
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International business partners

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PAN Parks

Abruzzo National Park, Italy (2007)
Maëlla National Park, Italy (2005)
Paanajärvi National Park, Russia (2005)
Rila National Park, Bulgaria (2005)
Slovensky raj National Park, Slovakia (2007)
Triglav National Park, Slovenia (2006)
Beautiful Demoiselle

This 30-40 mm long demoiselle has a 60 mm wingspan. The male has a spectacular iridescent blue body, their wings are tinted deep blue and become more blue with age. Demoiselles flutter rather than fly. Several males will attempt to court a female in elaborate chases with the winner eventually displaying to her by energetically fluttering his wings in front of her.

Hannu Hautala

Oulanka National Park