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High Nature Value farmlands:

Recognising the importance of South East European landscapes

CASE STUDY REPORT
Strandzha (Bulgaria)

WWF-DCP/EFNCP, 2008

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This report is produced as part of collaboration between the European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism (EFNCP) and WWF Danube-Carpathian Programme (WWF-DCP). Both organisations recognise the importance of certain farming systems for nature conservation. Between 2006 and 2008 a project was executed aiming at finding out at a local scale where agriculture overlaps with areas of High Nature Value in order to understand better the relation between both. The project consisted of six local workshops, three each in Bulgaria (Strandzha, Rusenski Lom and Western Stara Planina) and Romania (Sibiu, Mehedinţi and Galaţi), and a reporting seminar in Brussels. After concentrating on the ecological aspects, the workshops analysed the socio-economical needs of local farmers and identified where policy can be improved. In this way the project linked the developing concept of High Nature Value farming to the reality of farming and considered the practicalities of implementing the EU commitments on identifying and supporting HNV farming in different local situations. All findings were reported to relevant bodies from local to European level.

This project has been made possible by a grant from the Government of The Netherlands, BBI-Matra programme

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Published in August 2008 by WWF Danube-Carpathian Programme and European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism (EFNCP)

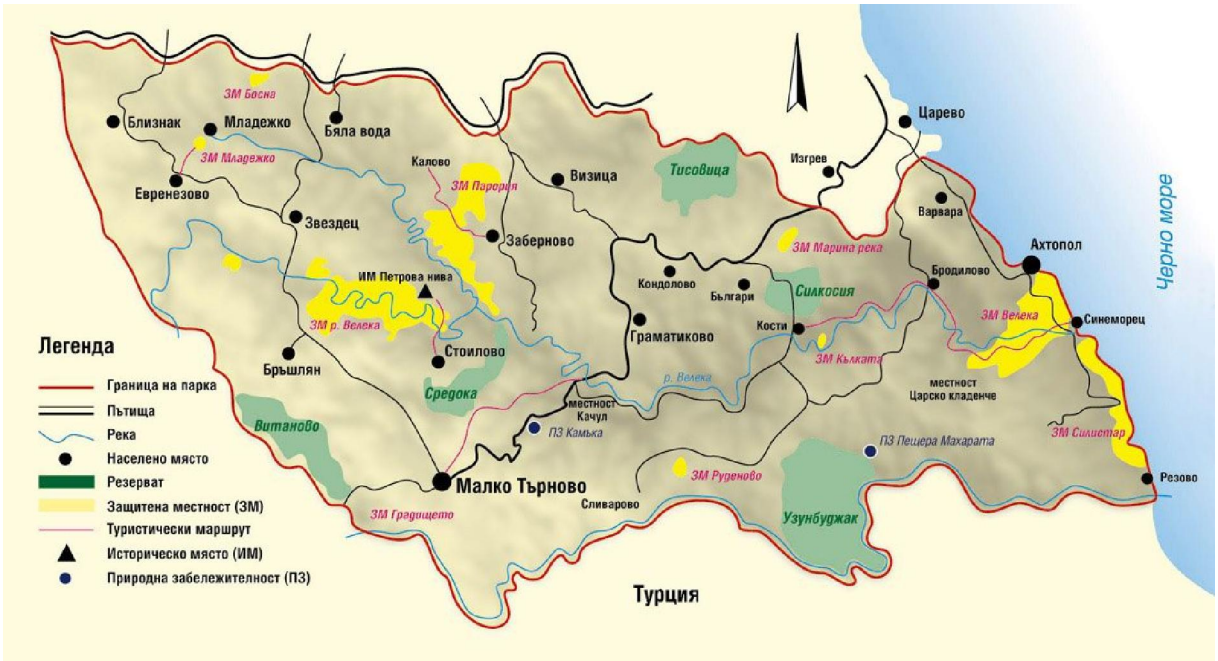
Available for downloading from http://www.panda.org/dcpo and http://www.efncp.org

I. INTRODUCTION

The Strandzha Mountains are located in the most south-eastern section of Bulgaria and border with the Black Sea and the Republic of Turkey. Most of the region falls within the administrative borders of Burgas district and the south-eastern planning region.

The case study focuses mostly on the Strandzha Natural Park – the largest in Bulgaria, with an area of 116068.5 ha - which covers the most forested part of the mountains as well as patches of grasslands of High Nature Value.

There are 2 municipalities within the park territory – Tsarevo and Malko Tarnovo. Overall there are 21 settlements totally contained within the park and 5 more settlements whose land fall partially within its boundaries. The coastal parts of the regions are heavily developed with holiday resorts, while the interior of the park faces serious problems of village and land abandonment.



Map 1: Strandzha Nature Park and other Protected Areas (e.g. reserves) in it

Strandzha Nature Park represents a special natural combination of preserved sea and coastal landscapes, as well as low mountains and hilly landscapes, river valleys and tributaries. The proximity of Strandzha Mountain to the Black and Marmara Sea determines its mild and humid maritime climate, unique compared to other mountain ranges in Bulgaria. Its geographic position at the border of Europe, Asia Minor and the Mediterranean is exceptional, resulting in unique values in terms of biodiversity, for example habitats of relict, endemic and threatened species of natural and semi-natural character.

II. NATURE VALUES

The mixture of land covers - forests, farmlands, wetlands, Black Sea coastline and rocks determines the high number (121) of natural and semi-natural habitats in the park:

- Forests: old forests (over 80 years old), old forests with a significant number of dead and dying trees, young and middle-aged forests, undergrowth forests and bushes and coniferous forests;
- Farmlands: semi-natural meadows and pastures, arable fields, fallow and bushes, and orchards;
- Wetlands: rivers and streams, coastal estuaries and marshy areas along them;
- Seaside: sand dunes and coastal cliffs;
- Rocks: rocky massifs and caves.

Forests, which occupy 80% of the park territory, are related to 29 forest and 18 bush habitats. Broad-leaf forests prevail. Typical for Strandzha are forests of Oriental Beech *(Fagus orientalis*) with underbrush of (native) Strandzha Periwinkle (*Rhododendron ponticum*) occurring in the lower parts of the slopes (Picture 1), while drier oak forests occur above them. There are also cultural landscapes and habitats of traditional orchards – 6 types, maintained pastures (2) as well as fallow and bush-dominated/abandoned lands (2).

Picture 1: Strandzha Periwinkle (*Rhododendron ponticum*) in a forest of Oriental Beech *(Fagus orientalis*) in the Silkosya reserve, Bulgaria's oldest protected area, near Kosti

Picture 2: Valley of Veleka river near Kosti, meandering through Strandzha's low mountain range

Farmlands in the park represent a mosaic of habitats which is mostly defined by the unfavourable relief for more intensive agriculture and as well as small land parcels ownership. Meadows and pastures are undoubtedly most important habitats of this mosaic: almost half of the conservation important invertebrates are found there, as well as priority vertebrate species such as White Stork (*Ciconina ciconia*), Common Quail (*Coturnix coturnix*), Grey Partridge (*Perdix perdix*) and European Ground Squirrel (*Spermophylus citellus*). Farmlands are nutrition base for predatory mammals such as Marbled Polecat (*Vormela peregusna*), owls such as Little Owl (*Athena noctua*), and birds of prey such as Lesser Spotted Eagle (*Aquila pomarina*), 12 of which are among the most important conservation species in the park. Characteristic for Strandzha are the river valleys with rich grasslands and narrow tree strips along the rivers (Picture 2).

Strandzha Nature Park is officially designated in 2001 but had been a protected area for some time previously. Currently almost the whole territory of the park is proposed as a Natura 2000 area. The management plan of the park has unfortunately still not been adopted by the Ministry of Environment. This poses significant problems to the management and protection of the park due to the interests from the mass tourism development especially along the coastal areas of the park. Furthermore, the areas under the biggest threat of extinctions due to construction are the coastal grasslands, which are seen by the local as wasteland.

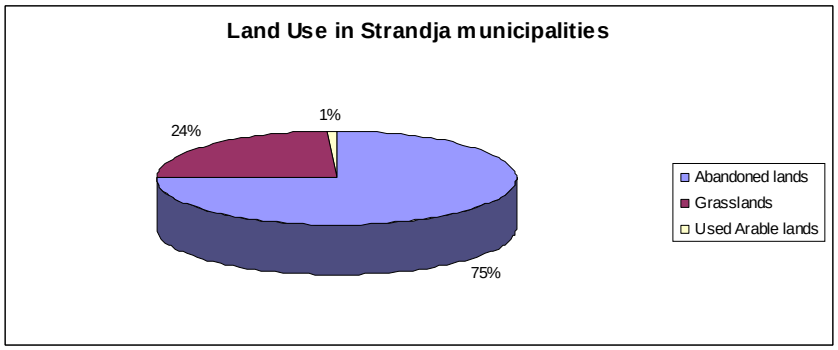
Picture 3-5: Three conservation important vertebrate species connect to grassland in Strandzha Mountains: Marbled Polecat (*Vormela peregusna*), Grey Partridge (*Perdix perdix*), White Stork (*Ciconia ciconia*)

The draft management plan foresees the following management related to the sustainable use of natural resources and the development of the local identity:

- Ensuring the sustainable use of the forest resources, including non-timber forests products (herbs, fruits) and the preservation of vegetation typical for the region;
- Maintenance of game populations numbers, according to the habitat potentials;
- Maintenance of the purpose and practices on the agricultural lands and their protection from deterioration and pollution;
- Permanent preservation and improvement of the soils fertility;
- Conservation of the biodiversity in the meadows and pastures;
- Preservation of the local breeds of livestock and cultural plants varieties and the production of ecological products.

III. LAND USE AND FARMING IN STRANDZHA

The main land use in the three municipalities of Strandzha Nature Park is forestry. It covers 80% of the park itself but is less preponderant on the non-designated areas. This is mostly due to the approach of delineating the boundaries of the nature park which aimed to exclude as much as possible arable fields. For the needs of our analysis we use the data for the whole territories of the municipalities as farmers may have lands within and outside the park boundaries. Data available from various sources varies a lot. The information used in the report was provided by the Burgas Agriculture Advisory Service as the unit in closest contact with farmers from the region.



The situation with the agriculture land use in the region has been particularly worrying over the last decades. Arable land abandonment is significant going to as much as 99% in the municipality of Malko Tarnovo. While the other two municipalities have coastal areas which support tourism

development this is not the case in Malko Tarnovo. Contrary to other regions of the country where the lack of other alternatives redirects people to agriculture, Malko Tarnovo seems to be an exception. There are no statistics on the abandonment of the pastures and natural meadows however it is estimated to be very significant as well.

Pre-1990 arable cropping in the park was to a large extent a function of developments in the livestock sector. The main crops grown were cereals for fodder while in the current period arable production is mostly of a subsistence character. There is some increase in the vegetable and legumes production again for subsistence purposes.

Table 1: Land use in the municipalities of Strandzha Nature Park (ha)

Municipality	*Grasslands*	*Used arable*	*Abandoned arable*	*UAA*
Malko Tarnovo	4 691.37	18.89	11 345.79	16 056.05
Tsarevo	1 482.38	114.65	5 178.00	6 775.03
Primorsko	1 080.00	149.08	6 027.92	7 257.00
TOTAL	7 253.75	282.62	22 551.71	30 088.08

Source: Burgas Regional Agriculture Advisory Service, 2007

The ownership structure is represented by state, municipal and private owners. The state ownership is the highest in the forests, while private ownership is dominating the agriculture lands. However, the share of agriculture land temporarily managed by municipalities is as high as 35% in Malko Tarnovo revealing that owners never claimed this land back officially.

Livestock breeding

The stock-breeding sector traditionally predominated in the region. Pastoral sheep breeding practices were typical for Strandzha till the middle of last century. However, from the 1950s onwards, the borders were strictly controlled and shepherds were not allowed to move their herds to the pastures along the Aegean Sea in Turkey.

The socialist agriculture system introduced and promoted cattle breeding in large scale state farms in the region. After 1990 due to the liquidation of the state farms the number of cattle in the region halved and continued to decline. In 1999, there were only 758 cattle within the boundaries of Strandzha Nature Park. The number of sheep decreased significantly from 18 333 in 1990 to 4 395 in 1999. The only increase was in the number of goats from 3 300 (1990) to 4 669 (1999).

In the period 2000 – 2007, the number of sheep and goats has increased again while the number of cattle continues to decline.

Picture 6: Sheep grazing near the village of Brashlyan

Picture 7: East-Balkan pigs foraging in oak forests

The region is well known with its local breeds like East-Balkan pig (Picture 7), Local Strandzha sheep and Local grey cattle, which can be still found in their pure form. The last years saw a decrease in the number of pigs as well. They are mostly bred in the areas of Malko Tarnovo and the villages of Biala Voda, Zvezdets, Gramatikovo, Evrenozovo, Stoilovo and Mladezhko. This sub-sector in Strandzha has always been characterized with certain instability, caused by social, economical, environmental and organisation-technological reasons and lately veterinary issues.

Table 2. Number of animals in Strandzha Nature Park, 2007

Municipality	*Dairy cows*	*Suckler cows*	*Buffaloes*	*Sheep*	*Goats*
Malko Tarnovo	153	15	56	2825	1832
Tsarevo	167	64	9	3530	2850
Primorsko	254	0	120	6975	2000
TOTAL	574	79	185	13330	6682

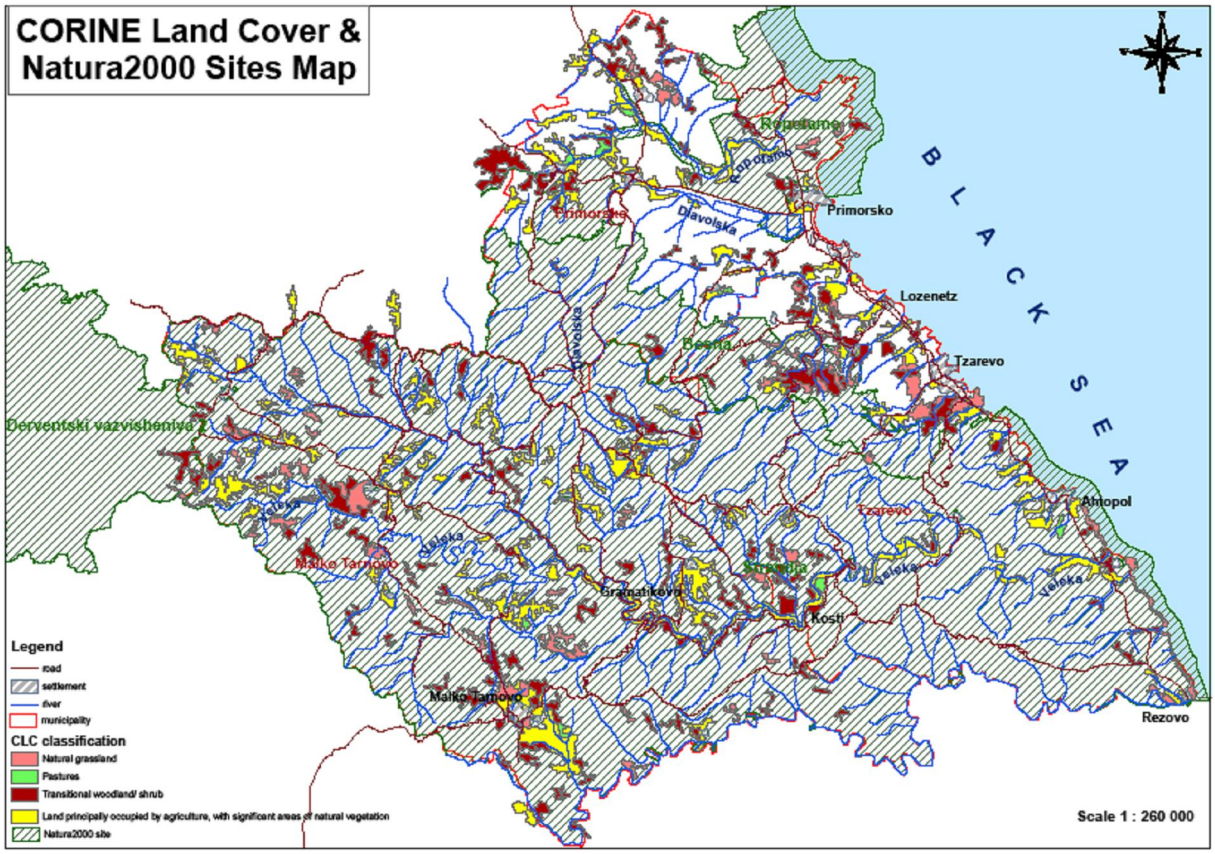
Other land uses in Strandzha

Clearly, forestry is the main land use in Strandzha. The state forest (the so-called forestry fund) comprises 95% of forested areas and the rest are open areas (grasslands), rocks and ridges. Forest land use is regulated by local forestry units in the region. Forests are particularly important for High Nature Value farming systems since forest pastures that could be grazed amount to 40 000 ha, almost half of the forest area. The capacity of these pastures as defined by the standard quota can sustain 30800 cattle or 180 000 small farm animals. Compared to the current number of animals it is clear that the pastures both in the agriculture and forest areas are seriously undergrazed.

The main non-timber forest use comes from the collection of herbs, mushrooms, and forest fruits both for personal use and for trade. Local population traditionally gathers herbs, wild fruits, flavourings, and mushrooms for the needs of household. Quantities gathered for this kind of needs are difficult to be analyzed, due to lack of official data. Among the preferred herbs and wild fruits are tutsan (*Hypericum perforatum*), thyme (*Thymus sp. div.*), wild brier (*Rosa sp. div.*), hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), nettle (*Urtica dioica*), crab apple (*Malus sylvestris*), blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), cornel-tree (*Cornus mas*) and etc. Most popular edible mushrooms are parasol mushroom (*Macrolepiota procera*), edible boletus (*Boletus sp.*), bride agaric (*Amanita caesarea*) and etc. These plant resources are traditional part of culinary customs in Strandzha.

Tourism is the most controversial sector in the Strandzha region. Pre-1990 border area regulations were severe and very few developments were allowed there, preserving the natural environment of the region. Unfortunately, the last two decades witnessed uncontrolled development of the coastal tourism which destroys more and more natural areas (mostly grasslands) in the coastline. On the other hand in the interior of Strandzha, there are some positive efforts to develop rural and eco-tourism initiatives which can build positively on the nature values of the area and provide income for the people from the villages.

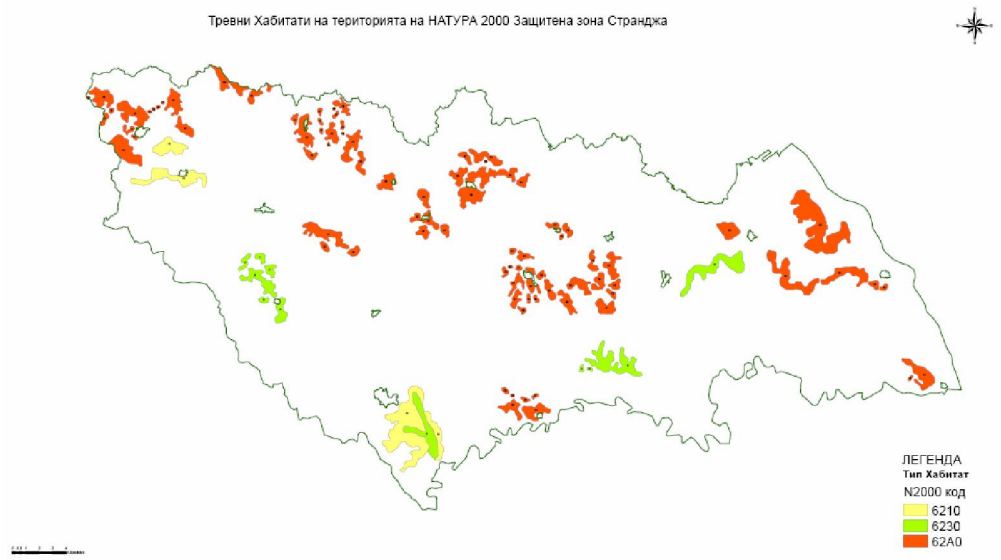
Tourism is also the main competitor for the area's small remaining labour force. More and more people get involved in tourism activities whether by establishing their own businesses or as seasonal workers on the coast.



Map 2: Important grassland areas according CORINE land cover study (based on satellite images). The categories 'Transitional woodland/scrub' (dark red) and 'Land principally occupied by agriculture with significant areas of natural vegetation' (yellow) are often abandoned or undergrazed grasslands with scrub encroachment.

IV. HIGH NATURE VALUE FARMLANDS IN STRANDZHA

Farmlands as a habitat of conservation importance are located on the coast, along the rivers as well as in patches in the forests over the entire Strandzha Mountains.



Map 3: Map of grassland habitats in Natura 2000 site Strandzha

The farmland habitat represents a mosaic of biotopes in which the role played by the grasslands – meadows, communal pastures, private pastures and abandoned arable lands, even those partially invaded by shrubs – is very important. Their conservation importance is represented by:

- The number of vertebrate species directly connected to farmlands is 25 (13 mammal species, 8 birds and 4 reptiles)
- In general the habitat represents the breeding niche of 9 priority mammal species, birds and reptiles and of over 100 invertebrate species of conservation significance, and provides food for more than 20 species of priority mammals and birds including Lesser Spotted Eagle (*Aquila pomarina*);
- The nesting of 8 bird species is linked to the agricultural lands and several of them are of a great conservation importance, such as Grey Partridge (*Perdix perdix*), Common Quail (*Coturnix coturnix*), Corncrake (*Crex crex*), Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*), Tawny Pipit (*Anthus campestris*) and Black-headed Bunting (*Emberiza melanocephala*);
- Mammals of the farmlands are Marbled Polecat (*Vormela peregusna*), Souslik (*Spermophylus citellus*) and rodent species such as Mole Rats, Moles, Shrews (*Sorex* spp.) and Mice;
- Snakes inhabiting farmlands are among others Dione Ratsnake *(Elaphe dione)* and Green Whip Snake *(Hierophis viridiflavus*);
- Great floristic diversity of approximately 200 higher plant species. The abundance of annual species is particularly represented by clover (*Trifolium – T. subterraneum, T. nigrescens., T. purpureum, T. campestre, T. glomeratum, T. resupinatum, T. spadiceumm*).

Due to the low stocking densities and general extensive character of livestock farming, the low use of inputs (except labour in many cases) and the high proportion of semi-natural vegetation on the farmlands, all grassland-based farming in Strandzha can be classified as High Nature Value farming (Type 1). Grazing takes place in three distinct zones:

- River terraces in inland mountain valley landscapes, mainly along Veleka river and its tributaries: rich, wet to temporarily humid pastures and meadows in the floodplain of the river, falling into the Habitats Directive Lowland Hay Meadows biotope.
- Semi-natural grasslands on rolling hills, typically with remaining single trees and tree lines, in a large-scale mosaic with oak forests. In the northwestern section of the Park, vast semi-natural grasslands are followed by both cultivated and fallow arable lands. Most of the semi-natural pastures are permanent pastures on poor soils with a high presence of low scrubs. Another type of semi-natural grasslands has developed over time after the post-1989 abandonment of arable land. If cultivated, they are free of scrubs and are under a mowing regime with aftermath grazing.
- Dry, semi-natural grasslands and scrubland on low-mountain slopes and ridges, on often calcareous or rocky substrates. This type of bushy, small-scale grasslands is the least present but is an important orchid biotope with steppe characteristics.

Table 3: Classification of Strandzha grasslands according to Natura 2000 inventory

6110	Open calciphilic or basiphilic grassy communities of *Alysso-Sedion albi*
6210	Semi-natural dry grassy and scrubland communities on calcareous substrates (*Festuco-Brometalia*)
6220	Pseudosteppes with grasses and annuals of the *Thero-Brachypodietea*
6230	Species rich Nardus grasslands on silicious substrates in mountain areas
62A0	Eastern sub-Mediterranean dry grasslands

6510	Lowland hay meadows
4030	European dry ericoid communities

Arable lands, gardens and permanent cropland (most commonly vineyards) in Strandzha can be classified as HNV farmlands if the agricultural practices are low-intensive and semi-natural vegetation and features are present. They often can be found in the proximity of settlements in a mosaic of vegetable gardens, meadows, vineyards, cropland and abandoned arable lands (Type 2). From nature conservation point of view, the importance of these mosaics is somewhat less than the grasslands type; however they are very significant for species like Shrike *(Lanius* spp.*)*. Vast arable lands in the north of the Nature Park are often not of conservation value. However their value increases when part of a larger mosaic of grasslands and other semi-natural vegetation. When little external inputs are applied or when left abandoned, interesting arable weeds develop (Picture 9).

Picture 8: Scrub encroachment in a grassland along Veleka river

Picture 9: Uncultivated arable land near the village of Brodilovo

Threats

With the dramatic drop of livestock numbers in the nineties, the abandonment of grazing practices is the number one threat to the conservation of HNV farmland in Strandzha. With the cessation of farming, succession to scrubland and forest takes on farmland (Picture 8). This trend is registered everywhere and in particular in the inner sections of the Park. Farmlands are not stable ecosystems and upon abandonment from man, they are gradually transformed to scrubland and forests. The phenomenon influences directly the inhabitants of meadows, pastures and arable lands such as the invertebrate species of conservation importance (104). The phenomenon influences negatively almost 60 species of vertebrate animals, including all bird, mammal and reptile species mentioned above. The succession to scrubland and forest reduces the biotope of hundreds of plants.

A second threat is the change of HNV grasslands to non-agricultural use. This takes place along the Black Sea coast where coastal grasslands are threatened by tourist and infrastructure development.

Locally, overgrazing of grasslands near settlements by sheep and cattle or unsustainable foraging by goats and pigs in forests can change the character of the habitats and lead to loss of biodiversity.

V. CASE STUDY FARMS

Three farms were visited during the workshop in Strandzha in July 2007.

A. Farm of Plamen Gradev, Malko Tarnovo Municipality

The land managed by Plamen Gradev is located in two villages Zvezdetz and Evrenozovo. He has no land of his own and rents 130 ha of common land and pastures from the municipality.

Cattle are grazing on the pastures until mid-summer when the grass becomes too dry. In dry years it is especially difficult since they need more lands for their animals. During the discussions it was mentioned by a number of farmers that more lands are used for grazing. Given the huge abandonment problems there is no conflict of use. The only issue is that the lack of documents will prevent them from applying for payments for the 'unofficially' used lands.

There are approximately 70 cattle in the farm which are bred for meat only. Thus far the meat is sold privately. However, with the increasingly strict hygiene rules, including for slaughtering, this is going to be more and more difficult given the small scale of production.

Picture 10: Beef cattle grazing on dry, semi-natural grasslands with bushes and patches of woodland

Picture 11: Beef cattle looking for shadow and cooling in a woodland

Furthermore, most of the rented land is at some stage of abandonment with bushes encroaching. The Good Agriculture and Environmental Conditions require a maximum of 20% coverage which on some parcels is very difficult to reach. On the other hand the contracts with the municipality for the pastures renting are annual. There is no security that after clearing the bushes they will be able to use the same parcels the year after.

B. Farm of Hristo Nikolov, Malko Tarnovo municipality

The lands managed by Hristo Nikolov are situated in several villages Zvezdets, Evrenozovo, Stoilovo, Biala Voda and Zabernovo. He owns 30 ha of which 27.5ha are arable land (mostly abandoned and thus used for pasture) as well as 2.5 ha forests. Hristo Nikolov also rents 196.5 ha of communal pasture from the municipality.

The farm has 600 sheep and 200 goats as well as 60 buffalos and 40 horses. Most of the milk is sold to a dairy under a contract. Some of it is used to produce yoghurt on the farm which is mostly sold in the village: mostly buffalo cheese and yoghurt as well as buffalo meat and a

special sausage called the “Strandzha dyado”. The animals for meat are sold directly to a slaughterhouse but there are also some private sales in the village. The farmer also diversifies in rural tourism.

Some of the main issues on the farm are related to finding good shepherds in the long-term. It was often the case that people/shepherds were leaving the farm without even informing the farmer as the work was considered to be too difficult.

The other significant issue was related to meeting the hygiene requirements on the farm. The farm facilities were considered to be well below European hygiene requirements and the farmer representative was reluctant to show it to the participants. Thus, we were not able to judge what the actual situation was.

Picture 12: Sheep grazing on abandoned arable land, functioning as pasture. Notice the absence of scrubs

Picture 13: Sheep and shepherd resting in a woodland

C. Farm of Nedelcho Nedelchev, Malko Tarnovo municipality

The farm of Nedelcho Nedelchev specializes in honey production. This was a rather unexpected form of production on high nature value farmland, not least because the ‘livestock’, while they depend on open HNV landscapes, are of course not capable of maintaining that status. The farm was visited due to the importance of the open landscapes for the production of honey; the farmer was therefore acutely interested in all policies which affected the foraging resources of his bees, though most of them acted indirectly through other livestock farmers.

The association of Strandzha honey producers is one of the most active organizations in keeping the grasslands in the region open. The high number of aromatic plants in Strandzha grasslands plays a significant role for the production of honey.

Nedelcho Nedelchev rents 14 ha of common lands, pastures and regenerating forests. He has 48 beehives. The honey is marketed mainly through direct sales during the summer season and forms approximately 15% of the family income.

The main issue which was discussed at the farm was related to the need to remove some flowering bushes, notably Dog Rose (*Rosa canina*), which were deemed important for the production of honey. This is a requirement of the GAEC specifying bushes to be cleared.

VI. POLICY ISSUES

The two main issues for the management of the High Nature Value farmlands in Strandzha are strongly interrelated and interdependent:

- Serious land abandonment going on for more than a decade already. This leads to closing of some landscapes and complete disappearance of grasslands both for conservation and for agriculture production;
- Significant shortage of human resources and overall interest to engage in farming. Agriculture and livestock breeding is seen as a historical activity. The interests of the few people left in Strandzha are targeted at tourism development – whether mass tourism at the seaside or rural tourism in the interior. The labour-intensive HNV farming systems in Strandzha are threatened by extinction even only by this factor.

Other issues stated during the workshop were quite common for Bulgaria and not specific to Strandzha:

- Changes in the ownership structure (for the last 2 decades), resulting in entrance of new owners with lack of experience in agriculture and livestock breeding and unclear investment intentions.
- Different owners and users with conflicting interests (cattle breeders – foresters/ owners of forests; owners of lands- nature conservation organizations; tourists – nature conservation organizations, factories of the extraction industry – tourist companies, nature conservation organizations, etc.
- Inadequate organization and competencies of the institution responsible for the direct management of the park territory.
- Lack of adequate awareness among the large public on the conservation significance of the park territory and lack of support for the development as opposed to the mass tourism development.

It is absolutely sure that the agriculture policy alone will not be able to solve these burning issues in Strandzha. However, it is important that the current agriculture and rural development policy is adequately supporting the few farmers still managing the grasslands and keeping animals. A next step will be to attract new farmers. One important aspect in this discussion are the farmers who are currently operating in a ‘grey zone’ of the agriculture production. These are mostly farmers who are actively involved in farming both full-time and part-time. However, given the high number of new requirements introduced in the process of accession to the EU as well as the high costs and awareness needed to respond to them have left them outside the official ‘legal’ framework.

On the other hand many of these farmers are willing to ‘legalize’ their activities and do so for the requirements which are easier to meet and require less investment. This is the case of land registration. In the pre-accession process there was no motivation for them to register the land managed as no payments were provided.

The introduction of the SAPS scheme led to more and more farmers registering their agricultural lands. The lack of sufficient and good information caused a lot of frustration to the farmers. However, the increased number of registered farmers shows that there is a positive tendency.

Table 4: Farmers registered in LPIS (post 2007) and Ordinance No.3 (pre-2007)

Municipality	*LPIS registered*		*Ordinance No.3 registered*	
	Plant-growers	*Livestock breeders*	*Plant- growers*	*Livestock breeders*
Malko Tarnovo	3	41	5	40
Tsarevo	11	47	22	46
Primorsko	29	12	7	22
TOTAL	43	100	34	108

The farmlands registered in LPIS represent a high share of the used lands in Strandzha: on average 81% of the grasslands and 100% of the arable lands. This is an interesting indication revealing that the farmers that are still practicing farming are quite active and willing to develop. However, the small share of the registered land in comparison to the total agriculture land is still overwhelming. The share of LPIS registered grasslands in Tsarevo and Primorsko municipalities is exceeding 100 %. This may be due to the fact that some farmers are renting pastures from the forest land fund which statistically is accounted separately or that abandoned agriculture land is declared as pastures.

Table 5: Farmlands registered in LPIS in Strandzha

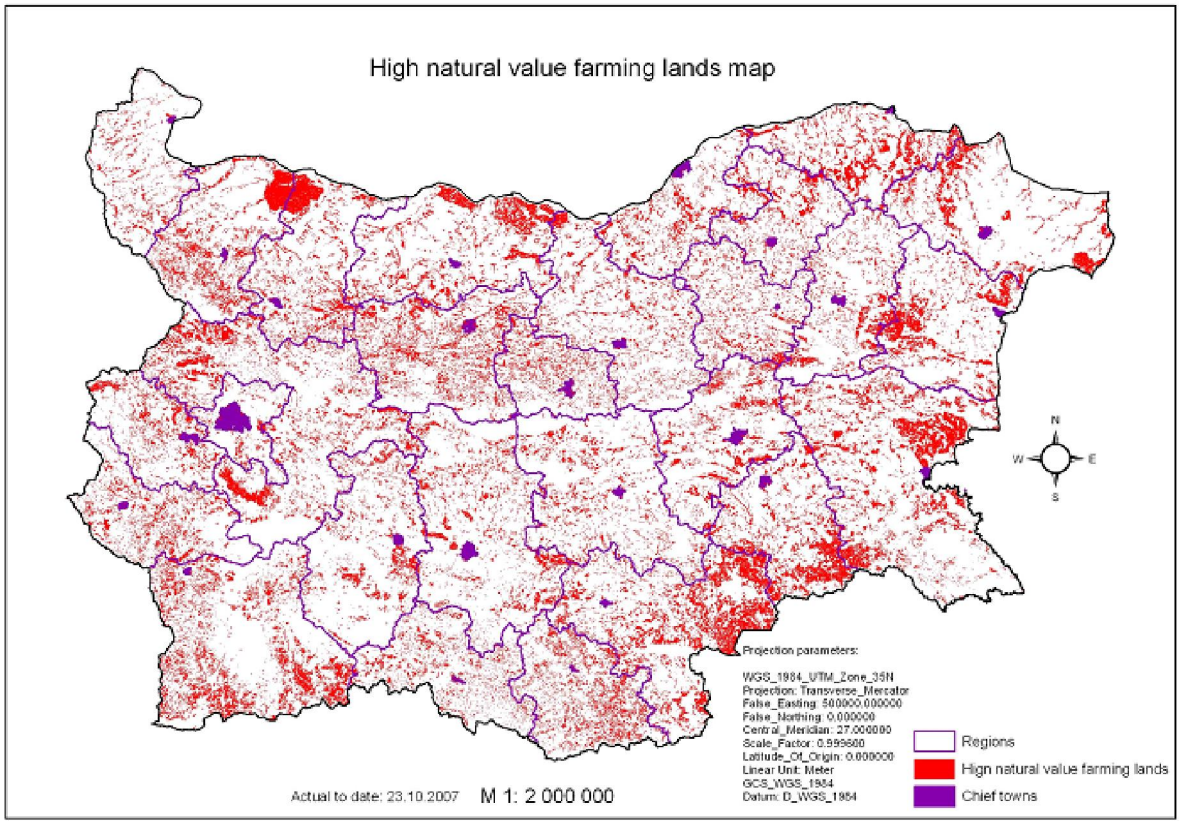
Municipality	*Grasslands*		*Arable lands*	
	ha	*%*	*ha*	*%*
Malko Tarnovo	2859.13	61	18.89	100
Tsarevo	1720.85	116	114.65	100
Primorsko	1270.13	118	149.08	100
TOTAL	5850.11	81	282.62	100

The main incentives for this registration are the area-based payments provided by pillar I – SAPS scheme and to a lesser extent the payments under the rural development programme from Axis 2 – Less favoured areas (LFAs) scheme and the HNV farmlands schemes.

In order to receive the payments from the SAPS scheme farmers have to meet the GAEC requirements. The most significant issue is the requirement of less than 30% bushy and tree vegetation on the farmlands. In a region of almost 99% abandoned fields this is especially difficult, labour and resource consuming in advance of receiving the payments.

During the workshop it was not clear both to the farmers and to the local agriculture administrators whether this requirement should be met in advance of the application or at the end of the year. Later on during the project implementation it became clear that this requirement was effective as of the application date and thus many farmers were penalized for not meeting it!

There were fewer issues discussed regarding the payments under Axis 2 Environment and Land management of the Bulgarian rural development plan. The schemes were not in implementation in the period when the workshop was held and thus there was no practical experience.
It became clear that farmers from the region will also be eligible for the LFAs and HNV farmlands payments. The procedures and the requirements were presented to the farmers at the workshop.



Map 4: Map of High Nature Value farmlands in Bulgaria

The unofficial use of communal land both pastures and abandoned agriculture lands by farmers was one issue raised during the workshop. Farmers are using the land in practice but have no documents for them and therefore cannot claim payments on them.

On the officially-used communal lands, on the other hand, there is no security when the parcels are leased out from year to year. Therefore, there was little incentive for the farmers to clear the unwanted vegetation in advance.

These issues basically affect all active farmers in the region as all of them are using communal lands both officially and unofficially for grazing.

The other critical issue not directly related to the area-based payments is the hygiene requirement for the milk and meat production on the farms. The following aspects were specifically outlined:

- Limited transitional period for implementations
- Poorly presented to farmers and limited transparency relating to specific requirements
- Diverse interpretation on local level
- Improperly trained officials for the control of hygienic requirements
- Lack of clarity with respect to direct sale practices

It was unofficially stated that none of the active farms in the region is actually meeting the hygiene requirements. All participating farmers were stating that they will continue operations as long as they could. However, investments to meet the requirements were considered too high to be realistic for them in the short term. This remained an open issue as to what will happen to the HNV farmlands in the region from 2010 onwards when there will be no transition period any longer.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

The future of Strandzha High Nature Value farmlands was agreed in the following directions:

- Development of modern pasture sheep, goat, cattle and bull breeding through use of the available pasture resources of Strandzha and observance of GAEC;
- Improvement of the race structure of stock-breeding through introduction of meat-yielding sheep and cattle races
- Development of bee-keeping through improvement of technological equipment
- Development of organic stock-breeding and plant-growing
- Production and promotion of specific products made in the region of Strandzha in the more intensively developing coastal region
- Development of agro-, rural and ecotourism
- Establishment of producer organisations and registration of trade marks.

However, in order to achieve these it is necessary to review of number of critical policy instruments:

1) **Implementation of GAEC requirements in areas of huge abandonment problems.** Penalizing the few farmers still daring to operate in the region is not stimulating them to continue too much. Furthermore, the costs, labour and time needed to clear overgrown pastures should not be underestimated.

It is recommended that a phased in requirement for the significantly abandoned regions be considered.

2) Use of common land and other land rented from municipalities and the state.

The contracts should be longer term – at least for the 5 year periods of the Axis 2 scheme. Otherwise, there is no incentive for farmers to clear unwanted vegetation.

3) Revise the hygiene legislation in the following aspects:

The main issue is related to the introduction of amendments in the Bulgarian legislation correcting 2 things:

- Milk processing on “farm” level
- Practicing “direct sales”

The other problems outlined related to the fact that:

- the regulation should only apply to large animal-breeding complexes
- the regulation provides no requirements related to the pastures and meadows needed for ruminant animals (cattle and sheep)
- the regulation does not apply to traditional animal-breeding practices, e.g. breeding sheep herds in movable pens (sheepfolds) on harvested fields
- the requirements related to summer mountain animal camps are not addressed
- mountainous breeding of calves and weaned lambs are not addressed
- the regulation describes “bookish” norms for animal-breeding but it has been forgotten that norms depend on the applied breeding technology
- the regulation should provide conditions for the development of not only “large” but “small” farms, as well.

EFNCP is a Europe-wide network which raises awareness of the importance of low-intensity farming for nature conservation and aims to improve the way public policies respond to the needs of these farming systems.

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