

Nature For Protection, Nature For Profit: The Case Of Bolata Bay, Bulgaria

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Abstract: We proceed from the understanding that humans are part of ecosystems, therefore, nature provides people with ecosystem services. At the same time, however, different social actors can perceive and evaluate the same place in totally different ways. The focus of this text is the case of Bolata bay, Bulgaria. Until the middle of the 20th century, the bay had an essential role in locals' livelihoods (husbandry, fishing, etc.). The inclusion of the area within the Kaliakra reserve, the establishment of the socialist cooperative farms, and the construction of a military base in the vicinity changed access to, and the regime of use, of the bay. After the collapse of the socialist state (1989), and especially over the last two decades, the bay's sandy beach gradually gained popularity as a tourist site. Thus, we examine local perceptions of nature as a source of livelihoods, paying attention to different management ideas regarding both economic growth and natural preservation, and conflicts caused by opposing aspirations among various social actors (local residents and entrepreneurs, local and state administration, NGOs, tourists, etc.).

Keywords: eco-tourism, environmental policies, landscape transformation, livelihoods, local development, protected areas, southeastern Europe.

Conceptual introduction

Over the last several decades, the network of protected areas has often been expanded by including territories previously used for economic activity (especially in Europe, and thus in Bulgaria). A number of researchers show that the establishment of an institutional conservation regime over a given area is always accompanied by changes in land use rights and resource use patterns (Anderson & Berglund 2003; Ghimire & Pimbert 1997; Igoe 2004; Shoreman-Ouimet & Kopnina 2015; West et al. 2006). Local communities perceive their environment as a source of livelihoods, as well as an essential marker for their cultural identity. Therefore, many researchers urge national and international conservation organisations and institutions, which designate and manage protected areas, to consider the needs and interests of locals whose settlements fall within the limits of protected areas or are adjacent to them (Orlove & Brush 1996: 343–344; Tomićević 2005: 13–39; Dorondel et al. 2021: 107–108). In this respect, we proceed from the understanding that humans are part of ecosystems, which in turn provides them with “ecosystem services”, as natural resources have recently been called (Peterson et al. 2010: 7–8; Lawrence 2008: 179). Thus, we also consider the notion that protection of nature has not only ecological, but also social, economic and political dimensions (Simonić 2012: 138–139; Krauss 2013: 79–80).

In Eastern European countries, the transition from a centrally planned economy and one-party political system to market-oriented democratic societies, along with the implementation of the European Union integration practices, have been essential for the development of environmental policies. The hierarchically constructed and strictly state controlled designation and management of protected areas during the socialist period gave way to a more complex model after 1989, in which a variety of actors (local, national, international; governmental and non-governmental) have important roles (Tielkke & Clarke 2000: 213–216). However, in Bulgaria, similarly to other former socialist countries, the decision-making process related to protected areas often continues to be hierarchically subordinated and dominated by the central authorities. Frequently, local governments and institutions are suppressed and their propos-

als are neglected in public discussions. The democratisation process, however, has increased the interest of people residing in the vicinity of protected areas in having their voices heard by the state (Lawrence 2008; Petrova 2014: 90–101).

At the same time, the local population's attitudes towards and dynamic activities within a particular protected area are not homogeneous. Therefore, conflict situations often emerge (Escobar 1998). Farmers, entrepreneurs, tourists, environmental inspectors, local and national institutions, and NGOs may see the same place within a protected area in totally different ways, highlight different elements, give them different values, etc. And even within each of these social or occupational groups there can be differences depending on personal life views, goals and trajectories.

Focus and aim

The focus of our study is the case of Bolata bay in northeastern Bulgaria on the Black sea coast (the Coastal Dobrudzha region). The bay falls within land associated with the village of Balgarevo¹, in Kavarna Municipality, six kilometres from the settlement. Bolata consists of a swampy firth and a sandy beach, surrounded by limestone cliffs with numerous caves. It is a wetland with specific flora and fauna. A small river originates from a freshwater spring in the bay and creates a narrow gorge. The width of the riverbed changes over time, although it always divides the beach.

Between 1978 and 1984 two coastal fortifications were built, changing the landscape to this day. Before the construction of these fortifications the sea took up a larger area inland of the bay, reaching the cliffs on the sides, as is visible from aerial images.

The swamp, on the other hand, was significantly smaller in the early years and not as close to the seashore as it is today. Until the middle of the 20th century, the bay had an essential role in the locals' livelihoods. However, the establishment of

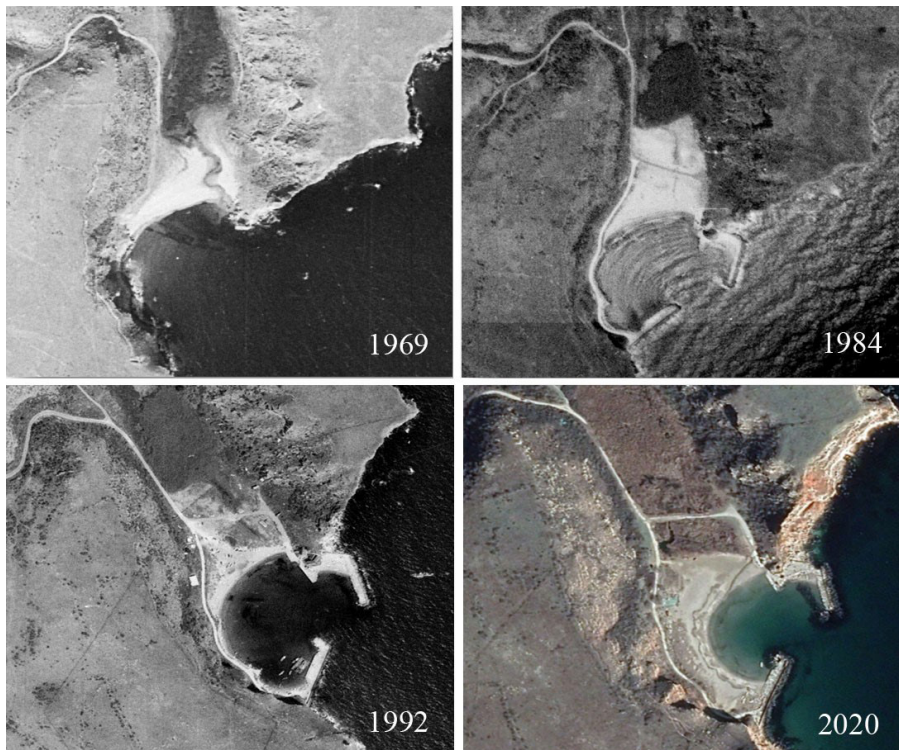


Figure 1. Aerial images of Bolata bay from 1969 (upper left), 1984 (upper right), 1992 (lower left), and 2020 (lower right). Images from 1969 to 1992 Military Geographical Service, Ministry of Defence, Republic of Bulgaria; Image from 2020 Google Earth.

socialist cooperative farms in the region in 1950, the building of a military base in the vicinity in the mid-1970s, and the inclusion of the area in the Kaliakra reserve in 1980², changed access to, and the regime of use of, the bay. Later on, after the collapse of the socialist state in 1989, and especially over the last two decades, the bay's sandy beach gradually gained popularity as a tourist site. After Bulgaria's accession to the European Union in 2007, Bolata bay also became part of two protected sites belonging to the European Natura 2000 network: the Kaliakra special protection area (SPA)³, under Directive 2009/147/EC (Birds Directive), and the Kompleks Kaliakra site of Community importance (SCI)⁴, under Directive 92/43/EEC (Habitats Directive).

Hence, our study aims to examine the transformations of the bay under human activity, as well as the tensions and conflicts between various social actors caused by conservation regimes. We consider the policies and actions of state institutions, local administration and non-governmental organisations in regulating the exploitation and protection of natural resources in the area. We also analyse the attitudes of locals towards the protected areas, and their strategies and actions to overcome the restrictions, since they perceive nature as a source of livelihood, particularly as a resource for local tourist development. We pay specific attention to tourists' actions and the ways they affect the environment.

Methodology

The study is based on a three-year ethnographic study in the village of Balgarevo and its surroundings. We analysed statements and some specific actions taken by the long-term mayor of the village (since 2007) and representatives of the NGO sector relating to the economic development of the region, natural resource management policies, and conflicts between interested parties. Several NGOs in Bulgaria are associated with a number of processes and conflicts between the management and the development of Bolata bay and protected areas in the region, such as the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds and For Nature in Bulgaria. However, in this text we pay specific attention to the For Kaliakra's Tourism initiative committee, since it was locally established and its activities are focused solely on local economic, cultural and ecological development. In 2020 the committee became an NGO.

We discussed the impact of natural resource management policies on the local economy, as well as on natural resource management strategies, with rural entrepreneurs in the village. One major topic of conversation with regular visitors to the beach was the various transformations of Bolata bay over the past two decades. In addition, we discussed what attracts and repels these visitors, and what they miss. We discussed the historical development of the area, changes in the landscape, and the socioeconomic meaning of the bay over the past seven decades with local residents from different generations (between 16 and 83 years of age), as well as their visions for natural resource management in the region. Although the bay has always been of economic and personal importance

to many in the village of Balgarevo, our interlocutors were often not able to (correctly) date a given event related to the area. Therefore, the examination of various administrative acts and documents relating to changes in nature protection regimes in the area, as well as aerial photographs showing natural changes and human activity in the bay and its vicinity, were of particular importance. Media coverage of natural resource management and the various economic and recreational activities in the bay over the past decade demonstrates the expanding public and state interest in the area. Therefore, we also studied the dynamics of the development and the conflicts in the region through analysis of print material and electronic media. However, it is worth mentioning that our direct observation of activities and practices started a decade ago.

From a source of livelihood to a restricted area

The spring water, the many small caves and the wide fields on the plateau above the bay were a prerequisite for raising sheep in the region until the 1950s. Some local farmers took their herds from the village of Balgarevo to the bay in the summer months. There the animals grazed and took shelter from the hot weather in the caves. In the first half of the 20th century, buffaloes from the village were also taken to water at the river. Such practices were later continued by the cooperative farm. However, after the beginning of socialist rule in the country (in 1944), the bay began to change its appearance and functioned gradually under the influence of human activity, including through construction. In the 1950s, behind the swampy firth a water pumping station was built. It had an adjacent living space for the workers, who were locals and worked in four shifts. Each was able to bring family members to the pump.



Figure 2. One of the water pump workers with his wife, two sons, and mother in front of the residential house adjacent to the water pumping station in Bolata bay. Ca. 1975. Private archive of interlocutor Zh. K.

There also was a small warehouse nearby, and pigpens were settled on the ridge adjacent to the bay. Vines and other plantations were grown on the arable land in the immediate vicinity.

Meanwhile, locals were allowed to visit the bay for livelihood activities, such as launching fishing boats in the sea and washing wool in the river. “People [locals] used to go there to wash their rugs, quilts, wool, everything. Then the river went straight through the middle of the beach. My folks used to go there with the cart, I went there with them.” (A. M., female, b. 1954, entrepreneur)

However, in the 1970s, this changed significantly after the construction of the military base on the plateau south of the bay. It had an important role in the telecommunication network with the USSR. At the early stages of construction, locals were able to visit the bay and continue their livelihood activities. However, as the construction works progressed, only a select group of people were allowed into the area, among them the children of local workers on the base. One of our long-term interlocutors recalls:

My aunt used to work on the military base. I remember she used to take me with her often, while it was still under construction. The workers were allowed to bring relatives, children mainly. A child can do no harm... When they finished construction, however, we were not allowed to go there anymore. (A. M., female, b. 1954, entrepreneur)

After construction of the military base was finished in the mid-1970s, access to the bay was prohibited to civilians until 1990, leading to the cessation of private agriculture in the area, as well. Only the water pumping station staff, agricultural workers from the cooperative farm, base personnel, military and Ministry of Transportation employees, who visited the recreation station of the military base, as well as some of their family members, were allowed into the are. They visited the beach and launched vessels into the sea. North of the beach, at the foot of the cliffs, there used to be a one-story one-room building, used as a banquet hall⁵ for special occasions by high-ranking military and Ministry employees and their guests. “The base chefs were from Balgarevo and Kavarna. They brought food down to the banquet hall, using stairs carved into the cliff, from the station in big dishes covered with tall [cloches]”, recalls Zh. K. (female, b. 1971, resident), who witnessed some of the gatherings in her childhood and early adolescence. She was allowed to visit the bay occasionally in the 1970s and 1980s, since her mother was part of the military base staff and her father-in-law was one of the water pumping station workers.

The inclusion of Bolata bay in the Kaliakra reserve in 1980 also changed the status of land use and the permissible human activities in the bay. The purpose of the reserve was the conservation of monk seal habitats, coastal marine ecosystems, typical steppe vegetation and animal life, and the nests of rare and endangered species. Reserves are exclusive state property. All human activity is prohibited by law, except for: (1) providing security; (2) visits with a scientific purpose; (3) passage of people along marked paths, including for education; (4) collection of seeds, wild plants and animals for scientific purposes or for their restoration in other places in quantities, ways and time, excluding disturbances in the ecosystems; (5) extinguishing fires and sanitary measures in forests damaged as a result of natural disasters and calamities (Protected Areas Act, Art. 17(1)).

From a restricted area to a source of livelihood

In 1990, after the fall of the socialist regime in Bulgaria, the bay became accessible to citizens once more. Then, according to locals, first people from Balgarevo, and shortly afterwards from other nearby villages and the town of Kavarna, started to visit the sandy beach for recreational purposes. In the early 1990s, a bus line from Kavarna to Bolata was established for sunbathing visitors, as claimed by locals.⁶ However, what left the most vivid mark in the memory of the locals was the restoration of the practice of citizens launching fishing boats into the sea. After restrictions on access to the bay were imposed, local fishermen began launching boats only from the nearby beaches of Rusalka and Zelenka.⁷ “My husband is a fisherman [in his spare time]... we bought our boat in 1999, everyone got boats then... we kept the boat in Bolata under a shed” (Zh. K., female, b. 1971, resident). However, Zelenka continues to be a favourite spot for local fishermen, some of whom even built an unregulated fishing village on the small pebble beach.

In the following years, the natural features and preserved diverse flora and fauna, including rare and endangered species, in combination with dozens of monuments of cultural and historical importance,⁸ gradually started to attract an increasing flow of tourists to the region. In 2012, a number of internet sites⁹ claimed the bay was a member of “the club of the prettiest bays in the world”. Since then, this information has been repeatedly mentioned in travel guides, sites and forums for tourism, reports in print and electronic media, as well as on the website of the Municipality of Kavarna. Therefore, many tourists, water sports and fishing enthusiasts from all over the country and Europe began to visit the area in summer. Hence, a new niche for business development in Balgarevo emerged, that of tourism services.

In the late 2000s, there were no more than a dozen guest houses in the village. However, their number gradually increased in the following years, and today there are several dozen¹⁰, including two hotels. There also are two sheep farms, which offer dairy products to regular visitors of the village and passers-by. I. I. (male, b. ca. 1970), a hereditary sheep breeder, manages a family farm with the help of his wife and teenage son, and aside from the milk and meat he sells to resellers, he also sells dairy products straight from his home in Balgarevo on the road leading to Bolata.

We have no advertising. We count on regular visitors. We have a pretty regular clientele. People who come here [as tourists in the village or visitors to the bay] every year, they stop by and buy cheese from us. Some [clients] even call in advance to reserve the quantity they want, because they know it runs out quickly.... There are people from all over the country – Sofia, Plovdiv, Dobrich, etc.



Figure 3. Interlocuter I. I.'s sheep farm, Balgarevo. August 12, 2020. Photo D. Pileva

Ten restaurants and coffee bars in the village also benefit from vacationers. The most popular, however, is the restaurant at the snail farm.¹¹ In recent years, although the restaurant has gained regular visitors from Bulgaria and abroad, its initial success and the reason for establishing the farm in Balgarevo in the first place was the location of the village near the Kaliakra reserve and the growing popularity of Bolata bay. The restaurant's advertising campaign, and its farm produce, have been largely based on the natural features and the eco-friendly environment of the region.¹²



Figure 4. The snail farm and restaurant in Balgarevo. July 19, 2020. Photo D. Pileva

There are also several grocery shops and a couple of dozen farmers' roadside stalls for fruits and vegetables, and honey and jam. As the mayor of the village, G. G. (male, b. ca. 1965), repeatedly claimed during our conversations: "People in the village profit from the beach. Even if tourists stop for a bottle of water, it is of significance. On the way back from the beach, many stop to buy melons, watermelons, tomatoes, etc. [from local farmers]".

Therefore, maintaining open access to the bay, and particularly the beach, and appealing to tourists is essential for local entrepreneurs and small farmers. However, preserving the natural features of the area is also of great importance to many of them.

A source of livelihood, a source of conflict

Many of the local population and entrepreneurs, as well as the village administration, aim to protect their livelihoods and residential environment while also striving to preserve the bay's natural features with as little human influence as possible. However, as the number of visitors to the region and the bay increases, so does the number of activities considered illegal in a natural

reserve. At the height of the summer season (July and August), especially on weekends, cars can hardly pass each other on the narrow, poorly maintained road surrounded by thick thorny flora. One of the biggest problems, recognised by residents, entrepreneurs, tourists, environmental NGOs, and local and state administration, is vehicles (including campers and boat trailers) parking and people pitching tents on the sand dunes.



Figure 5. The illegal car park on the sand dunes, Bolata beach. August 21, 2013. Photo I. Markov

At the beginning of the 2016 summer season, the Ministry of Environment and Water implemented access controls for vehicles, placing a concrete barrier at the entrance to the bay. Many of the local residents and entrepreneurs strongly disapproved of this, and they almost immediately organised the removal of the barrier.¹³

Sunbathing on the small secluded beach is often impeded by the large numbers of visitors.¹⁴ SUVs often drive on the sand as well, in order to launch vessels such as motor boats or jets into the sea. Once a regular visitor to the beach at the weekends S. T. (female, b. late 1960s) from the district centre

Dobrich, explains: “It used to be a very calm and uninhabited beach, no one knew about it. That is why we loved going there. We had visited for years. Now, it gets more and more crowded each year. Therefore, we stopped visiting [in ca. 2016–2017]”.

Other long-term interlocutors of ours, in their 20s and early 30s, also share similar experiences, followed by phasing out visits, or at least reducing them. The crowdedness of the small sandy beach and the difficulties in finding a parking spot are outlined as reasons for reconsidering the bay as a recreation place not only by tourists, but also locals. Statements such as: “locals don’t go there [anymore]” (G. G., male, b. ca. 1965, mayor of Balgarevo) and “I went [to the beach] once this summer, I will not go back again” (Zh. K., female, b. 1971, resident), could often be heard from Balgarevo residents.

Hence, in order to improve the conditions for tourism and to protect the natural features of the bay, some of the local population and entrepreneurs, the local administration, the local For Kaliakra’s Tourism initiative committee and some of the regular visitors to the bay, demanded a number of changes in the management of the beach. Among the main requests is complete prohibition of parking on the sand dunes, by providing access for vehicles near the bay. There are a few parking options more or less considered by different parties: (1) a pontoon car park above the swamp on municipal property which falls outside the reserve (but within areas protected under Natura 2000); (2) a car park on municipal property on the plateau adjacent to the bay; and (3) a car park in the village. In the last two options visitors are to be transported to and from the beach by tourist train. Some entrepreneurs consider the pontoon parking lot not only innovative, but the most convenient for visitors, providing the closest and most independent access to the beach. Although the Plan for Integrated Development of the Municipality of Kavarna 2021–2027 envisages an “ecological bus connection (with hybrid or electric vehicles) between the village of Balgarevo and Bolata beach during the active summer season” (Plan Kavarna 2021: 133), a parking lot on the plateau is preferred by the village administration, since it will keep hundreds of vehicles a day out of the village streets, which are narrow and need major reconstruction.

Another major conflict situation is the launch of vessels into the sea straight from the beach at any time of day. None of the entrepreneurs, but many of the locals, we spoke with, disagree with this situation, since SUVs with boat trailers harm dune flora and pollute the small river and the seawater.¹⁵ P. P.

(male, b. ca. 1970, entrepreneur), for example, who owns the snail farm and restaurant in Balgarevo, recognises the unregulated passing of vehicles as the biggest problem for tourists: “I’m firmly against SUVs, jets, boats, etc., on the beach. One lays down on the sand, and [someone else] drifts nearby, and then there is the smell of gasoline”. At the same time however, fishermen and water sports enthusiasts strive for the opportunity to launch vessels from the bay. It is the still water and the surrounding underwater area that appeals to them. Zh. K. (female, b. 1971, resident), whose husband is an avid and long-standing fisherman, marks the division between local fishermen and newcomers: “In the summer, non-local fishermen come because they don’t know there aren’t any fish at that time. Local fishermen launch boats in September and October. Then, just a few people – local pensioners, go to the beach.”

However, in an attempt to find a compromise for both sides – sunbathing visitors and water sports enthusiasts – some of the local fishermen, entrepreneurs and village residents offered to introduce quotas for launching vessels of any kind into the sea within a certain time range. The construction of a berth, however, is of essential importance for better utilisation of the natural resources, causing no, or less, harm to the environment and avoiding conflict and discomfort.

Unlike the need for a lifeguard, installation of mobile toilets and garbage containers, which are universally recognised as necessary, there is no consensus on establishments with a commercial purpose on the beach. Between the summer of 2008 and the summer of 2016 there was a fast food restaurant with a covered patio, established as a temporary and removable facility with the permission of the responsible authorities. In 2016 it was removed by court order, qualified as illegal because of the concrete foundation, which was not permitted as part of a temporary and removable establishment (Decision No. 195). In the following summers, however, its place has been taken by two food vans with power generators placed among the swamp flora.



Figure 6. An ice cream van parked on the beach near the small river and swamp. August 11, 2022. Photo I. Markov

Some of the local residents we spoke with firmly believe that the daily maintenance of the beach in the summer should be carried out precisely by such an establishment, as it was before, “when there was the restaurant the beach was maintained, now it is a dumping ground” (Zh. K., female, b. 1971, resident). As of today, “there is a guy who sells ice cream on the beach [from a food van], he voluntarily picks up the trash from the beach in the mornings and in the evenings” (G. G., male, b. ca. 1965, mayor of Balgarevo). At the end of the season, however, volunteers from the village, including the mayor, clean the beach thoroughly. On the other hand, other local residents and entrepreneurs recognise the role of the local and municipal authorities as fundamental to the maintenance of the beach. “The municipality should build a parking lot, put up a few dressing rooms and eco toilets” (P. P., male, b. ca. 1970, entrepreneur). Supporters of keeping the environment less urbanised, including the For Kaliakra’s Tourism initiative committee, are also against the concessions on the beach¹⁶, hence, against a restaurant or food vans on the beach.

The coastal fortifications, which have been dangerously eroded by the elements for the past four decades with no particular maintenance, draw another dividing line between different local and state actors.



Figure 7a. The two coastal fortifications. August 10, 2020. Photo I. Markov



Figure 7b. One of the coastal fortifications. “Attention! Dangerous Zone! Passing Prohibited!”. “The Access of People and the Mooring of Vessels is Prohibited”. August 11, 2022. Photo I. Markov

Some of the older generation from Balgarevo would prefer it if the fortifications were demolished. In their memories, the bay looked different, better, prettier, and more “natural” before their construction. However, according to biologists and ecological NGOs, after their construction, specific underwater flora and fauna have moved in, becoming part of the protected area, therefore, they also should be preserved. At the same time, the fortifications protect the coast from stormy seas, as well as the fresh water supply area of Balgarevo. In addition, they allow recreation activities and vessels to be launched into the bay. Therefore, their reconstruction is among the greatest demands of most of the local population, entrepreneurs, fishermen, the village administration, NGOs and eco-activists.

Meanwhile, in January 2016, the European Court of Justice condemned Bulgaria (1) for failing to include all territories of important bird areas (IBAs) within the Kaliakra SPA; (2) for permitting the construction of hundreds of wind-power turbines within the Kaliakra SPA, within the area of the IBA not included in the SPA, and within the Kompleks Kaliakra SCI; and (3) for allowing the construction of a resort with a golf course which obliterated most of the habitats used by breeding and migrating birds in the neighbouring Belite Skali SPA.¹⁷ Furthermore, the implementation of some of the projects connected with wind generators and the golf course led to the irrevocable destruction of $\frac{1}{4}$ of the land hosting the Ponto-Sarmatic Steppes priority habitat. According to the court, Bulgaria has failed to fulfil its obligations under Article 4(4) of the Birds Directive, “to avoid pollution or deterioration of habitats or any disturbances affecting the birds”, and the Article 6(2) of the Habitats Directive, “to avoid deterioration of natural habitats and the habitats of species as well as disturbance of the species for which the areas have been designed”. As a result, in July 2017, the Ministry of Environment and Water issued an order prohibiting new construction, as well as the planting of orchards and vegetable gardens in the Kompleks Kaliakra SCI (Order No. ПД-526/21.07.2017). However, most of the local population of Balgarevo largely misinterpreted the order as prohibiting all kinds of human economic activity (including agriculture and fishing). As a result, protests were organised, and, in a few days, public discussion of the Integrated Management Plan for the Kompleks Kaliakra SCI, Kaliakra SPA and Belite skali SPA failed. Therefore, the plan was not officially approved. However, the order actually refers only to land that is part of the Ponto-Sarmatic Steppes priority habitat.

Eventually, a group of local residents and owners of properties within the protected area began to investigate the reasons behind the failure to approve the integrated plan, establishing the For Kaliakra's Tourism initiative committee. The committee claims that the protest against the minister's order was provoked by a group of landowners whose properties are within steppe territory, consequently, their lands became unusable (for construction) and unsellable. In this respect, by distributing false information these landowners aimed to postpone the approval in order to gain time and find ways to build seaside resorts and golf courses, plans they had had for years. At the same time however, the founders of the committee, whose properties are adjacent to the steppe and are arable land, consider this postponement an obstacle to finding legal ways to convert arable land to urbanised land. This is essential to them, since they would like to build guesthouses and small family hotels that would, as they claim, not significantly interfere with the environment while developing ecotourism¹⁸ and protecting the biodiversity in the region by paying specific attention to Bolata bay. Thus, in recent years, the committee quickly gained a central place in the dialogue (and in the conflict) on the management of the bay, greatly shaping visions for local development.¹⁹

Among the most significant and recognisable activities of the initiative committee are those related to the removal of Bolata beach, along with the road leading to it and the coastal fortifications, from the Kaliakra reserve and including them in the Steppe protected site. In this initiative, among many others, they had the support of the mayor of Balgarevo, as well as many of the residents and entrepreneurs in the village. Thus, in 2017, Kavarna Municipality also supported this request and initiated a change of status of the territories in question before state institutions. In 2018, the long and difficult dialogue with the Ministry of Environment and Water, the Regional Environment and Water Inspection – Varna, and eco-NGOs resulted in the then minister Neno Dimov's order approving the change of status.²⁰ The decision was welcomed by many locals and entrepreneurs, and the village administration. The order raised hopes that the above-mentioned problems relating to the use and management of the beach could be solved. The lighter protection regime of the Steppe protected area would legalise recreation and fishing activities in the bay, which would gradually ease the development of tourism in Balgarevo. On the other hand, the bay being within the protected area would hinder potential large investment projects in the bay.²¹

The reconstruction of the coastal fortifications is another important reason for the requested removal of Bolata bay from Kaliakra reserve. Over the span of five years, the For Kaliakra's Tourism initiative committee had sent dozens of letters to various state institutions – the Regional Administration Dobrich, the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, the Ministry of Environment and Water, and the Council of Ministers – requesting reconstruction of the fortifications. However, the responses were unanimous: according to the Protected Areas Act, Article 17(1), reconstruction activities are considered forbidden, as far as officially the bay is still within the reserve. Generally, the National Assembly of Bulgaria has to make some additions to the final decree of the Protected Areas Act, so that Minister Dimov's order can be put in motion.

These changes were made in June 2022, and thus Bolata bay was finally taken out of the Kaliakra reserve and included in the Steppe protected site. At the same time, the regime of conservation activities in the protected site was changed so that “any type of construction, *excluding repair and reconstruction of existing technical infrastructure and fortifications*” is prohibited (Order No. РД-551/27.06.2022, italics added). Local residents and administration consider this development a great success for the people over the state administration, leading to even greater expectations for possible economic development in the region because of the likelihood of better management of the bay's natural resources.

However, according to the mayor of Balgarevo, some of the changes in the management of the bay are hindered by other administrative or financial issues. The village administration is no longer considering a pontoon car park above the swamp as it would be too expensive and difficult from an engineering point of view. At the same time, the idea of a car park on the plateau is on hold, since the Ministry of Transport and Communications would not allow the movement of a tourist train on the road leading to the bay. The reconstruction of the coastal fortifications has also been repeatedly denied by the regional administration. As a reason they state that these fortifications were built for the needs of the military base and are not related to coastal defence, and neither do they affect the protection of biodiversity in the area.

As of today, even though the bay has finally been taken out of the reserve, the locals are less hopeful that the management will change for the better, since there still are many administrative obstacles to improving the use of resources and more effective environmental protection. At the same time, although the bay is part of Steppe protected site, fears are growing that the area will be pri-

vatised and developed by large investors, destroying valuable flora and fauna species and limiting visitor access.

Conclusion

The ethnographic approach we used allowed us to understand better the complex interweaving of sociocultural, economic and political factors that determine the development of protected natural sites at macro- and micro-level, beyond conservation practices. As shown in the text, many parties are interested in the development of Bolata bay, as well as directly involved in the process of transforming the area. Thus, their visions of sustainable local development differ – sometimes they contradict, at other times they complement, one another (cf. Dorondel et al. 2021: 87–88). Even those of the locals who have a common desire to take the bay out of the reserve do not always share a common vision for the bay's management. The perceptions, evaluations and use of the natural resources of the area for tourism development, also often differ among local residents, eco-NGOs and responsible national and local institutions, causing various conflicts, which have surrounded Bolata bay for years.

According to local entrepreneurs, the “wild” pristine nature of the area is the most attractive to the tourists that visit Balgarevo, therefore, the activities they are able to experience are related to the area's natural features. In this respect, the entrepreneurs are deeply concerned by the current situation surrounding Bolata bay: an overcrowded, noisy and polluted beach with illegal parking and trading activities, contrary to the expectations one might have for a peaceful and nature-friendly vacation. On the other hand, however, some local entrepreneurs, such as restaurant and shop owners, as well as retailers from the village, aim for larger tourist numbers.

Common to all interested parties is the understanding that the essence of Coastal Dobrudzha identity is the natural features of the region. Therefore, the environmental specifics should also be important to local and regional development. Finding the right way to achieve this is a dynamic process. Our research clearly shows that the voices of local residents and institutions, their civic engagement, activities and practices, including in the sphere of ecotourism, are not unheard; on the contrary, they are an important factor in the development of the region.

Can, and if so in what way, ecotourism could not only be a source of financial benefit for residents of Balgarevo, but also a basis for raising awareness, and for various education initiatives in the field of environmental conservation of inhabited regions, is an important questions in this context. To what extent could ecotourism fund and support the preservation of biodiversity and the specific nature-based identity of the area? These are questions the answers to which largely depend on state and regional policies, on the one hand, and on the endeavours of local residents and entrepreneurs, on the other. Solving these issues will be essential in deciding the direction of further local development.

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Notes

¹ The village of Balgarevo is on the seaside of the historical and geographical region of south Dobrudzha, about 2 km from the Black Sea and about 50 km from the border with Romania. The village has one of the longest coastlines of all settlements on the Bulgarian Black Sea. Its territory is the largest within the Municipality of Kavarna (the municipal centre is at 8 km). It is also the most populated settlement in the municipality, with a population of 1,052 according to the Bulgarian National Census results of 2021. The terrain is completely flat, the soils are mainly black, and there is shallow groundwater. The climate is temperate-continental (Integrated Plan 2017: 30). Like all settlements in the area, population growth is negative. However, in the last decade, an increasing number of working age urban migrants from all over the country have settled in the village permanently or seasonally.

² The reserve was created in 1941. It currently occupies an area of 866,2 hectares, covering parts of the lands of the villages of Balgarevo and Sveti Nikola. Extensive steppe ecosystems, which in Bulgaria are found only in the seaside region of the Dobrudzhan plateau, are preserved there. The reserve also includes coastal cliffs, often up to 70 m high. Caves of various sizes can be found in the limestone cliffs, which are a former refuge of the monk seal, now extinct on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast. The flora consists of over 450 species, 45 of which are considered rare or endangered. Kaliakra is the only

Bulgarian reserve covering marine area, a strip of sea 500 m wide and 8 km long (Plan Kavarna 2013: 75).

³ Special protection areas are those classified by a Member State of the European Union as a special protection area for the conservation of bird species which are considered rare, in danger of extinction, vulnerable to specific changes in their habitat or requiring particular attention for reasons of the specific nature of their habitat (Birds Directive, Art. 4(1)).

⁴ A Site of Community Importance (SCI) is defined as “a site which, in the biogeographical region or regions to which it belongs, contributes significantly to the maintenance or restoration at a favourable conservation status of a natural habitat type... or of a species... and may also contribute significantly to the coherence of Natura 2000..., and/or contributes significantly to the maintenance of biological diversity within the biogeographic region or regions concerned” (Habitats Directive, Art. 1(k)).

⁵ Remnants of the building stood until 2018, when they were taken down because they presented a danger to beach visitors.

⁶ The bus line exists today. According to information on the official website of the Municipality of Kavarna, from May 1 to September 30, the regular bus line between Kavarna and Balgarevo goes to Bolata (the main road, not down to the beach) twice a day (<http://dev.kavarna.idnc.eu/transport>, last accessed on 2 January 2023).

⁷ Eleven and three kilometres from Balgarevo, respectively.

⁸ The most popular are Cape Kaliakra (archaeological and natural site with a historical museum); the Yailata protected site (a plateau with many caves overlooking the sea, with archaeological excavations); Cape Chirakman; and Lake-Lagoon Taukliman.

⁹ Among them is the official site of BTV, a Bulgarian national television station, https://bntnews.bg/bg/a/85751-bolata_sred_naj_krasivite_zalivi_v_sveta, last accessed on 2 January 2023. However, such information is not present in the list on the official website that categorises these bays (<https://world-bays.com>, last accessed on 2 January 2023).

¹⁰ According to the National Tourist Register of Categorised Accommodation and Dining Places there are 25 registered guest houses in Balgarevo. However, there are at least a dozen more unregistered accommodation places, mainly offering guest rooms.

¹¹ The farm was established in 2010, and the restaurant in 2016.

¹² Increasing interest not only in the restaurant, but also in the village in general, motivated the owners to expand their activities and the construction of a demonstration centre for the stages of snail breeding, as well as a snail museum (which as of 2022 is under construction). Since 2018, there has also been a cosmetic line with snail mucus, sold exclusively at the farm.

¹³ A media report, see <https://bntnews.bg/bg/a/zhiteli-na-balgarevo-gotvyat-protest-ako-se-ogranichi-dostapa-do-bolata-756275>, last accessed on 2 January 2023.

¹⁴ Visitors are diverse: they are of different ages and social statuses including families with small children from all over the country; some families form from abroad, mostly Romania, who prefer the natural features of the area to those of their own (rockier) Black Sea coast; tourists, accommodated both in Balgarevo and Kavarna, and other sea resorts nearby, such as Balchik; foreigners; water sports and wild camping enthusiasts.

¹⁵ There have been some ridiculous incidents involving SUVs with boat trailers stuck in shallow water. The incident took place in September 2016 when the bonito fishing season began. After a couple of hours unsuccessfully trying to get the vehicle out of the water using other SUVs, a local farmer successfully rescued the vehicle using his tractor (<https://offnews.bg/112/dzhip-vleze-v-moreto-na-bolata-636276.html>, last accessed on 2 January 2023). The entrance of such heavy machinery to the beach alone is a violation of the protected regime of the reserve.

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/zaturizmanakaliakra/posts/pfbid02yVogm2gzfxSvdG-kWMjK1sWMocJgpjwZoQC1S3DjhBd3G54YaUH3xg422jSG3DCWzl>, last accessed on 2 January 2023.

¹⁷ The full document is accessible here: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:62014CJ0141>, last accessed on 2 January 2023.

¹⁸ The World Conservation Union (IUCN) defines ecotourism as “environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features — both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations” (Ceballos-Lascuráin 1996: 20).

¹⁹ In June 2020, the committee transformed into an NGO with the same name. The aims of the organisation are concentrated in a few spheres: supporting entrepreneurship and agriculture in the area; assisting municipalities in the region in applying for various regional and European programs; “development of projects for environmental protection in relation to the protection of biological and landscape diversity, and the system of protected territories and zones”; protection and popularisation of local natural, archaeological, ethnographic, and architectural sites; working towards convincing state authorities in reconstruction and maintenance of coastal fortifications. The statue of the For Kaliakra’s Tourism NGO can be seen at <https://www.ngobg.info/bg/organizations/activity/112405-за-туризма-на-калиакра.html>, last accessed on 2 January 2023.

²⁰ In the order, this is argued as follows: “due to the fact that they represent the Bolata sea beach, a road, the territory between the road and Bolata beach, coastal fortifications... and they lack plant and animal species and natural habitats – a subject of conservation in the Kaliakra reserve, including: monk seal habitat, coastal marine ecosystems, char-

acteristic steppe vegetation and fauna and nesting niches of rare and endangered bird species, and the same should be excluded from the reserve.” (<http://eea.government.bg/zpo/docs/1-1-6-267-2018.pdf>, last accessed on 2 January 2023).

²¹ The possible construction of a large resort or golf course near the bay is of concern to local residents and entrepreneurs, as well as the village administration and a number of eco-NGOs. They have in mind some specific examples of the construction of large resort complexes on the Black Sea that limit access to the coastline.

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