

# Can Nature and Business Exist in Harmony? Local Entrepreneurs' Perceptions of Protected Areas and Economic Development

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**Abstract:** Bulgaria has one of the richest biodiversity in Europe. To conserve it the state has built a network of national protected areas and included it in the Natura 2000 European ecological network. In attempts to create a vital example for sustainable local development Bulgarian NGOs demonstrate that protected areas are not prohibited for any human activities, but can be prerequisite for such development. This idea became the main mission of one particular project, managed by several NGOs, which aims to show that creating a protected area could be a guarantee of the establishment of a successful model for local people, for business and for the environment. The text will explore whether the project achieves its aims, whether there are clashes between cultural models of developmentalism and environmentalism, what social impact protected areas have on local entrepreneurs, and what their perceptions are of linking nature conservation to economic development. It will present different perspectives, both those of entrepreneurs who are part of the project network, and those of others who are not.

**Keywords:** environmentalism, developmentalism, nature conservation, NGOs, protected areas

## Introduction

Bulgaria is among Europe's top countries for biodiversity. The country ranks third in Europe in terms of the percentage of its territory that is included in the Natura 2000 European ecological network. Protected areas that are part of this network total 34% of Bulgaria. There are also three national parks, eleven nature parks and ninety reserves. Following global tendencies in conservation practice, Bulgarian NGOs attempt to demonstrate that protected areas are not prohibited for any human activities, but can be prerequisite for such development. This turned into a mission for one particular project, managed by several NGOs, that of preserving the balance between nature and the development of rural areas. The Balkans and the People project team wishes to present to the general public and local producers the idea that areas that are part of the Natura 2000 network, nature and national parks, are not forbidden territories; on the contrary, they are a guarantee for the establishment of a successful model for local people, for business and for the environment<sup>1</sup>. The project's motto – "Nature and business can coexist in harmony" – demonstrates this clearly. A coordinator of the project thinks that "every personal success of a family farm and a local entrepreneur from the project network in the nine Natura 2000 areas is a powerful and convincing example of the inextricable link between protected nature and fair livelihood". The team believes that they manage to build "a successful and vital model for the development of the economically poor but naturally rich areas" and suppose that it can be applied in other regions of Bulgaria as well as in united Europe<sup>2</sup>. Whether the project actually achieves this is among the questions of the present study.

The main aim of this article is to analyse what social impact protected areas have on local entrepreneurs and what their perceptions are of linking nature conservation to economic development. I explore concepts, implemented and popularised by the For the Balkans and the People project, and how producers who are part of it perceived them. At the focus of my research are also producers who are not part of the project's network but have developed their activities within the protected areas. The study poses the following main questions: are there clashes between cultural models of developmentalism and environmentalism? Can economic development and nature conservation exist together? What kind of social production and social interaction create protected areas? I

argue that in most case studies there is no conflict between nature conservation and business development. But none of the entrepreneurs appreciate the role of conserved nature as an essential prerequisite for such development. The analysis is based on fieldwork carried out in 2021–2022. Eleven entrepreneurs engaged in animal breeding and bee keeping are interviewed. Producers have developed their activities in diverse areas<sup>3</sup>, with different regimes of management that reflect their perceptions and livelihood strategies. During the fieldwork I conducted structured and semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs. The main issues discussed related to the benefits and the challenges in their work within protected areas and their perceptions of economic development and nature conservation. The names of the respondents have been changed.

## Nature conservation and development

The analysis will follow Kottak's understanding of new ecological anthropology and how it can help recognise the pervasive linkages and concomitant flows of people, technologies, images, and information, as well as acknowledge the impact of differential power and status in the postmodern world on local entities. In this new anthropology, everything is on a larger scale. The focus is no longer mainly the local ecosystem. The 'outsiders' who impinge on local and regional ecosystems become key players in the analysis, as contact with external agents and agencies has become commonplace. According to Kottak, the ecological anthropologist must pay attention to the external organisations and forces (for example governments, NGOs, businesses) now laying claim to local and regional ecosystems throughout the world (Kottak 1999: 23).

The analysis is also based on Kottak's assumption of ethnoecological clashes between cultural models of *developmentalism* and *environmentalism*. Kottak defines these two models as two originally Euro-American ethnoecologies that challenge traditional ethnoecologies<sup>4</sup>. Developmentalism is shaped by ideals of industrialism, progress and (over)consumption. Environmentalism entails a political and social concern for the depletion of natural resources and has arisen with, and in opposition to, the expansion of a cultural model of developmentalism. Kottak points out a third new possibly mediating model, that of sustainable development, which has emerged from recent encounters between local and imported ethnoecologies responding to changing circumstances. Sustainable

development aims at culturally appropriate, ecologically sensitive, self-regenerating change. It thus mediates between the three models – traditional local ethnocology, environmentalism, and developmentalism. “Sustainability” has become a mantra in the discourse surrounding the planning of conservation and development projects, but clear cases of successful sustainable development are few (Kottak 1999: 26).

According to critical analysis by Arturo Escobar, the sustainable development discourse purports to reconcile two old enemies, economic growth and the preservation of the environment, without any significant adjustments in the market system. He thinks that in this discourse nature is reinvented as environment so that capital, not nature and culture, can be sustained. This approach redistributes in new fields many of the concerns of classical development: basic needs, population, resources, technology, institutional cooperation, food security and industrialism are found reconfigured and reshuffled in the sustainable development discourse. This reconciliation of economy and ecology is intended to create the impression that only minor corrections to the market system are needed to launch an era of environmentally sound development, hiding the fact that the economic framework itself cannot hope to accommodate environmental concerns without substantial reform. It is growth (i.e. capitalist market expansion), and not the environment, that has to be sustained (Escobar 1996: 330).

Thomas Hammer notes that the idea of combining conservation and regional development is gaining impetus, particularly in the discussion of sustainable development (Hammer 2007: 21). Ingo Mose outlines new approaches that aim for consistent integration of conservation and development functions, making protected areas real “living landscapes”. Agriculture as well as forestry, handicrafts, tourism and education offer potential arenas to test in which way and to what extent this process of integration could be developed in practice. Mose thinks that expectations are high and protected areas could be used as laboratories for experimental projects or even as models for sustainable regional development, based on the endogenous resources and potentials of the region and the development of these resources via a specific protected areas policy. According to him, large protected areas are increasingly considered to also function as instruments of regional development. This perspective could be applied particularly to many peripheral rural areas throughout Europe that

are faced with severe problems due to economic and socio-cultural disparities (Mose 2007: xv).

As Brockington and Duffy point out, neoliberal conservation is but the latest stage in a long and healthy relationship between capitalism and conservation. This close relationship is nothing new. Alliances between capitalism and conservation are characterised by an aggressive faith in market solutions to environmental problems. These alliances actively remake economies, landscapes, livelihoods, conservation policy and practice; they are partying in the symbolic heartlands of capitalism (Brockington & Duffy 2011: 2). Robert Fletcher and Svetoslava Toncheva also write about the establishment of “neoliberal conservation”, which embodies core principles of neoliberal economics, including commodification, marketisation, decentralisation, and privatisation via so-called market-based instruments (MBIs) such as ecotourism, payment for environmental services (PES) and others (Fletcher & Toncheva 2021: 3). According to Tobias Haller and Marc Galvin conservation is no longer just a noble goal, it can be viewed as a kind of global business based on the construction of what we call “nature”. The construction of nature produces goods such as tourism, which can be sold internationally and in which large-scale investments are made. But the view of nature in peril also generates cash resources because it gives access to funds, today often combining conservation with development goals (Haller & Galvin 2008: 15). Other authors note that conservation is more conciliatory and accommodating of the needs of capitalism than it once was, noting that conservation is not merely about resisting capitalism, or about reaching necessary compromises with it. Conservation and capitalism are shaping nature and society, often in partnership (Brockington, Duffy & Igoe 2008: 3; 5). West, Igoe and Brockington note that part of the neoliberal conservation agenda is the need for biodiversity or nature to become commodities. According to them, some of the most pervasive and far reaching changes wrought by protected areas are visible in the spread of ecotourism and commodification (West, Igoe & Brockington 2006: 257; 262). These authors examine protected areas as a way of seeing, understanding, and producing nature (environment) and culture (society) and as a way of attempting to manage and control the relationship between the two. The areas (re) producing the world and as such, are rich sites of social production and social interaction (West, Igoe & Brockington 2006: 251).

Ecotourism and commodification are part of a more generic process of post-productivist transition in rural areas. With the declining importance of agriculture in the economy (Galani-Moutafi 2013; Storey 2006) rural communities are looking for ways to deal with the situation. They try to adapt to it through the “post-productive” vision, associated with the exploitation of new economic opportunities, their rationalities and the strategies they implement” (Galani-Moutafi 2013: 103) and focus on “re-package the countryside in different ways”, regarding rural areas in “places of consumption rather than production” (Storey 2006). Michael Woods points out that in searching for alternative ways to conceptualise this change in the rural economy, rural geographers established another concept, “multifunctionality”, which particularly focuses on the increasingly multi-functional nature of the contemporary countryside (Woods 2011: 80). Monica Gorman presents three types of activity to describe multifunctionality using the classification of “broadening”, “deepening” and “regrounding”, one of which, “deepening”, is essential for the present study. According to this type, farm households add extra value to their produce within the agrifood supply chain, such as region-specific, organic and high quality products, on-farm processing or short producer–consumer chains (Gorman 2006: 27; 32–33). It is important to note that both in post-productivism and multifunctionality, environmental protection and recognition of nature as valuable in itself have essential places.

## **The For the Balkans and the People project**

One of the aims of the For the Balkans and the People project is to give extra value to agricultural products that originate in protected areas. Thus, preserved nature in these areas became a commodity that can be sold and could help increase farmers’ incomes. The project is funded by the Bulgarian-Swiss Cooperation Program, through the Reform Fund linked to Civil Society Participation and includes 10 partners from Bulgaria and Switzerland, mainly NGOs. It was launched in 2012 as a pilot in nine Natura 2000 areas, which by the end of 2017 had become more than 20. The main idea of the project is to demonstrate that nature and business can exist in harmony, which is expressed in the name Linking Nature Protection and Sustainable Rural Development<sup>5</sup>. The project partners wish to prove that local development and nature conserva-

tion can coexist without conflict and can contribute to increase the quality of life in rural areas, and especially in northwest Bulgaria, which remains one of the poorest regions in Europe. In order to achieve its main purpose, the project sets several smaller goals: development of local family businesses, preservation of biodiversity in areas of high natural value (HNV), increasing consumers' knowledge about the protection of these areas through direct sales of quality products produced on small family farms, and support for farmers who are making additional income from products with extra value<sup>6</sup>. The products are promoted as such through the various project channels and in the media. The project works in several directions: the establishment of payment schemes for ecosystem services, training and exchange of experience among the administration and the farmers, changes and adaptation of Bulgarian legislation through development of measures from new Rural Development Program 2014–2020, revision of regulation and improvement of working conditions for producers. As a result of the project, according to official data, 26 sites for processing raw materials of animal origin have been registered<sup>7</sup>; a farmers' market has been set up where farmers can present and sell their products directly it continues to exist after the end of the project; and two websites have been created, Food from the Balkans, and Produced on the Farm, where consumers can see detailed information about every farmer and product. The project attempts to change the common perception that protected areas hinder development. According to this concept, local development means successful business. Thus, the project demonstrates how nature conservation is put into practice 'with' the people, not 'against' them, and attempts to implement successful practices. So far one can observe the simultaneous presence of all the prerequisites for a successful model of sustainable local development, from supporting family businesses, to preserving biodiversity, adding extra value to agricultural products, and the coexistence of nature conservation and economic development. But what are the farmers' perceptions of these processes, and what are the results of the project?

## **The perceptions of entrepreneurs who are part of the project network**

In order to achieve the project's aims, coordinators are looking for producers who are already developing activities in Natura 2000 areas, nature and national

parks. They present to them the possibilities which these areas provide and support them financially, with expertise and through direct sales at a specially organised farmers' market in Sofia, the Bulgarian capital. My research shows that some of the entrepreneurs in the Berkovica region, most of whom are local, do not recognise nature as a factor in the quality of their products. One of the producers was not sure whether the location of his hives still fell within the Natura 2000 area, as was indicated on the label of a product made years ago. He thought that Natura 2000 did not affect the quality of his honey in any way. Another entrepreneur noted that pasture was generally important for the quality of milk and its products, but was not primary. Grazing and nature were among his criteria for choosing a place to start his activities, but nature was perceived mainly as part of the background: "Well, I really liked the nature... First of all, [it is important that] there is pasture for the animals, the nature is beautiful, as I'm going there to live and to have good time, [I need] to feel good about the place"<sup>8</sup>. Two beekeepers say that honey production in the mountains is less than in the plain. They say their hives are not in the Central Balkan buffer Natura 2000 area, as stated in the project guide, but in the foothill of Sredna Gora, where they get more honey and production is more profitable. Both of them have no idea if their lands fall within Natura 2000 area. One of them thinks that among his clients at the farmers' market in Sofia there are very few who appreciate that the product came from a protected area<sup>9</sup>. For another farmer, what is most important for the quality of the milk is the climate, and for him pastures in the protected and the unprotected areas are the same<sup>10</sup>. In general, conversations with these producers show that they are not aware of the extra value that Natura 2000 gives to their products and they do not emphasise this as project experts do. My previous study of the New Thracian Gold project and Slow Food Presidia producer's networks also confirm these conclusions about local producers' understandings<sup>11</sup>. In the present case I conclude that people and organisations external to the specific settlements identify opportunities (especially in protected nature) that can contribute to the development of small producers.

For these producers it is very important that this project "opened their eyes"<sup>12</sup> about direct sales and farmers' markets. They admit that the project helps them a lot with funds and expertise when they want to register under the regulation on direct sales in order to be able to make such sales, assisting them in realising production and increasing their incomes. The Covid-19 pandemic



affected sales because the farmers' market was closed for a period of time. These producers all claim that even after the reopening of the market, consumption has reduced compared to the time before the pandemic. One beekeeper says that before he used to supply honey to 11 shops in Sofia, now it is only two or three. Communication with representatives of these shops took place at the farmers' markets. This once again proves the effectiveness of this channel in increasing incomes. Before this beekeeper started to realise his production at the farmers' market, he sold the honey wholesale at a very low price. One of the animal breeders relies on direct sales not only at the farmers' market, but also on the farm. The other has an established network of customers to whom he delivers products mainly in the capital. For these producers what is important is their (business) development, and not so much nature conservation. The latter is not present in their conversations and thinking and leads me to the conclusion that they do not realise the benefits of Natura 2000 areas and preserved nature as prerequisite for business and local development. The communication and promotion of these concepts is performed primarily by the project team.

The case of Kaloyan's livestock farm is a little different. He manages a family farm with 700 sheep. He tells me that he became aware of the concept of small family livestock farming that cared for nature before this project through the Slow Food movement<sup>13</sup> and his visits to Italy a few years earlier. The farm has closed the cycle by grazing the animals, growing the rest of the food for them and making products from their milk. According to Kaloyan, in pasture livestock breeding the milk has much better aromatic and taste qualities, its production is cheaper, but yields are lower. The family is local to small town in northern Bulgaria; it inherited lands within the Natura 2000 area that are close to the Persina nature park and 20 years ago began purchasing more. Kaloyan says that the fact that their lands are in a protected area was not initially a factor in the development of their activities. He takes this for granted and says that he is "happy and pleased" that the lands are there. At this stage there are more benefits than challenges. According to Kaloyan, the benefits are healthier animals because they are pasture-fed with a variety of food that stems from the great biodiversity. He realises that this gives good extra value to the products. But not all clients are aware what Natura 2000 really means, and only a very small number of them appreciate it. Kaloyan says that they try to talk to people about it, but in order to be more efficient they need to be an established brand and put a lot of effort into explaining. However, detailed information about the

farm being located in a protected area, about its history and mission is listed on its website. The product's label indicates that the animals are pasture-fed, the location in the nature park and a statement saying that, "with every quality and clean product we build a bright future... today". On the inside of the label there is detailed information about the farm's philosophy.

Kaloyan has an interesting point of view about ecological sustainability. According to him, "when people develop something they rather destroy nature or seek to destroy it with minimal impact. We can never give more than we take"<sup>14</sup>. He thinks that there has to be long-term scientific research to prove that farm activities give something to nature and the soil. Before, the land was forested, wild nature with animals, but now because of their activities, there are fewer wild animals. For this reason he thinks that he cannot define the farm as ecologically sustainable. Rather, this term is used as a label for organic production to highlight and demonstrate that something different is happening. The farm realises products through direct sale to an established network of client deliveries and shops. It is still not economically sustainable, despite European funding, because it has taken out bank loans to build infrastructure. The family has other occupations apart from the farm.

## **The perceptions of entrepreneurs who are not part of the project network**

It was important for me to draw a parallel between the two set of producers, and so here I will discuss those producers who are not part of the For the Balkan and the People project to see their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of developing businesses in a protected areas. Do different entrepreneurs appreciate conserved nature as a prerequisite for business development or is the popularisation and implementation of this concept mainly a priority of NGOs? Two beekeepers in the Pleven region, who are not part of any networks and rely on their own efforts to sell products, appreciate the rich diversity of nature in Natura 2000 areas, but do not promote their products through this. Their hives were located in other settlements, having decided to move them to such areas. One beekeeper, registered under the direct sales regulation, does not indicate on the label of his honey that it originates from a Natura 2000 area. Nevertheless, his words show that he appreciates the preserved nature of the

protected area: “It is not a small advantage that the nature is rich, the difference is just huge”<sup>15</sup>. He proves its quality by offering samples from each batch, which, according to him, speak about the rich herbal content. He says that he is pleased with the income he earns from bee products. The problem is that the whole Pleven region has had huge issues with bee poisoning for the last three years (from 2020). According to Tsvetan, a large agricultural company is to blame because they have not met deadlines for spraying with insecticides. He tells me that in Natura 2000 areas no insecticides are allowed, but investigations found that the same company used insecticide that was forbidden 10 years ago. Tsvetan thinks that this is serious violation, but the company received only one fine of 10,000 BGN (approximately €5,100) because the state administration protects it. He said that if the bees are poisoned again next year, he won't be able to survive. Beekeepers have few options for subsidies regardless of whether they are in protected areas or not.

Other challenges are seen in the case of Kalofer's animal breeders. The town is located at the foot of Stara Planina mountain and is used as a starting point for different tourist's routes. Twelve kilometres from the city is the area of Panitsite, where the Central Balkan National Park and the Byala Reka eco-trail begin. The Central Balkan National Park is one of the three national parks in Bulgaria. It was created in 1991 and is located in the highest parts of the Central Stara Planina mountains. Within the boundaries of the National Park, there are nine reserves. A special directorate manages the Park in order to preserve and maintain biodiversity and protect wildlife, and also to provide opportunities for scientific and education activities for the development of tourism and ecological livelihoods.

Along with these activities the Park is used by locals as a natural pasture for animals. South of the Park there are small towns and villages with a large number of livestock husbandry farms. According to breeders with whom I spoke the increased number of farms is due to the potential for European subsidies. At the same time, they say that free pastures, allowed for use by the directorate, are reduced every year and are not enough for all of the breeders. The problem with the shortage of grazing areas started in 2015. One breeder says “everyone is fighting for a pasture in the Balkan because of the subsidy”<sup>16</sup>. There is no way there will be enough territory for everyone, because it decreases every year, and the number of breeders increases because of the subsidy. This results in a number of conflicts that make the coexistence of biodiversity and grazing-

livestock husbandry difficult. Breeders explain that if you have two fines you cannot receive European subsidies and cannot get pastures for animals in the National Park next year. This is a huge problem for animal breeders because grazing on pastures located on the city's land is prohibited for a certain period, during which the animals go to the National Park. Without access to the Park the animals have nowhere to graze. They think that the Park's inspectors do not always evaluate the situation correctly and do not consider the fact that they are dealing with animals. Two local breeders suppose that grazing in the National Park is not a huge benefit except for the better subsidies, although these come with more obligations and more auditing. They highlight that troubles outweigh benefits. Petar, one of the breeders, admits that he cannot exist without subsidies: "If they continue to act like this with these restrictions and requirements and these prohibitions, I have the feeling that animal breeding in Bulgaria will perish"<sup>17</sup>. This farm succeeds to subsist because of the subsidies. If it relies only on sales, they will not be enough for all expenses like fodder for animals during the winter, insurances and subsistence of the family. Another breeder, Mihail, defines Bulgarian animal husbandry at the moment as an "ill man who is on a ventilator"<sup>18</sup>. If the subsidies are just stopped, everything will be over in two years. If this happens, only breeders like him, who have always existed with and without subsidies, will remain.

During the study another significant problem was outlined – many municipal, monastery and private properties fall within the boundaries of the Park after 2016. The farm of the abovementioned breeder Petar also falls within the boundaries of the Park and is close to the entrance in the Panitsite area. He says that he owns 35 acres of inherited land, on which he has built farm buildings and a house. His animals also spend the winter there. Petar's property has been within the park's boundary for a long period, but until 2016 this hadn't given rise to any problems. After 2016, however, he no longer had the right to claim subsidies for his land. Since then, he says, the property has been considered 50% his and 50% state property. He does not know what caused this change. It becomes clear from the Park's website that the changes probably stem from the 2016 new management plan. This case is not unique, there are other properties within the boundaries of the Park which, according to the locals, have been "taken away". For several years Petar has brought legal action against the Park, but as of the time of fieldwork the case is ongoing.

According to an inspector from a local office of the Central Balkan National Park this huge concentration of livestock husbandry farms negatively affects the biodiversity of the Park. He thinks that very few breeders understand the real value of nature and biodiversity. Most of them are driven by business, not environmental concerns. The directorate has tried to establish dialogue with local breeders and to work with them, but not everyone understands the rules and the requirements of the Park. Some breeders graze more animals in the Park than the directorate allows. Others do not have hired shepherds who control the movement of the animals through the territory. Thus, some animals enter prohibited areas such as reserves, where grazing is not allowed. According to the inspector the breeders prefer to pay a fine for this violation rather than hire a shepherd because the fine is smaller than the shepherd's salary.

This free movement of animals creates another conflict, this time with tourists. Some of them complain that animals occupy the tourist routes, or that there is animal excrement on the trails. On this subject, one of the interviewed animal breeders said, "Animals are no longer wanted absolutely anywhere. Wherever an animal goes no one wants it, absolutely anywhere. For some it interferes with hunting, for others it interferes with villas, for yet others it interferes with vacationers and so on"<sup>19</sup>.

In this case study, a conflict between nature conservation and business development is definitely emerging. On the one hand, we have local breeders who are concerned about their livelihoods. Both breeders I spoke with claimed that they had been doing this for a living long before European funding opportunities became available. On the other, we have the directorate trying to do its job by conserving the park's nature. It is clear that this conflict is due to the stricter management rules of the National Park and the high concentration of livestock breeders.

An organic farm has another perception of nature and development in the same region. It is located in the Natura 2000 area and produces dairy products from jersey cow's milk and as well as their own brand of gelato. The farm's business philosophy is based on a humane attitude to animals and people and on the protection and preservation of the environment. The farm is create by a team of people from different professional backgrounds who have similar lifestyles and who want to protecting the environment and invest in its development. One of the farm's employees with whom I spoke defined it as a "small oasis"<sup>20</sup>. The team undertakes different activities to manage their business within a

philosophical framework of sustainability, including providing environmentally friendly living conditions, minimising the negative impact on the environment, minimising the accumulation of packaging, composting, tree planting, caring for and protecting endangered species of birds, etc. They chose the location not because it was a protected area but because of the climate and especially of the Rose valley. The team wants to build a good image of the valley in Bulgaria with all of its activities. Maria says that the farm does not receive subsidies for their lands in the protected areas. She emphasises that the location of the animal husbandry is in such areas on the farm's website, as well as detailed information about the whole concept. However, this is not marked on the farm's product labels, which only state "100% Bulgarian product". The farm is economically sustainable due to the development of different mini-projects. As we see in this case study even if the team appreciates the preserved nature in the protected areas, it does not emphasise this on products and does not take enough advantage of the extra value this could give. This and other thoughts shared by Maria lead me to conclude that the team does not consider the fact that their lands are protected areas an essential prerequisite for business development. The farm's website mentions that the land was in a bad ecological state when their activities started.

## Conclusions

As we see from the diverse case studies presented above, the social impact that protected areas have on local entrepreneurs cannot be defined by a single characteristic. Each case has its own specificities and each producer his or her own interpretations of the benefits and challenges. They depend mostly on management's plans of protected areas. Most entrepreneurs in the project's network are more concerned about their livelihoods and business development than environmental protection. For some the latter is not even present in the conversations and respectively I cannot analyse a cultural model of environmentalism that does not exist in their minds. A cultural model of environmentalism is not widespread among producers. In fact, of 11 entrepreneurs only two appreciate nature itself and express concern for its conservation. But even they do not emphasise the extra value conserved nature gives to products, as the project experts do. I could summarise by saying that entrepreneurs of the

younger generation are more ecologically oriented and influenced by global conservation ideas.

Environmental concerns are mainly the priority of NGOs. Such external-to-local places, organisations and projects popularise and attempt to implement concepts such as harmony between nature and business, and conserving nature being a prerequisite for business development. As my studies have previously shown these organisations have a significant role in identifying opportunities (especially in conserved nature) that could contribute to the business development of small producers. They follow global tendencies of neoliberal conservation, which embodies commodification of nature and biodiversity and aims to increase incomes and economic growth for small family producers in protected areas. But does this approach really help nature conservation? As one of the producers states, we need a long period of research to find out what these practices really give to nature and whether they are ecologically sustainable.

The study outlines another case study in which conflict between cultural models of environmentalism and developmentalism are definitely emerging in one of the big national parks that has a strict management regime. Under these circumstances business development and nature conservation cannot exist together. For the animal breeders what is important is their business and livelihood, and for the directorate it is biodiversity and the protection of the Park's environment. They represent different points of view and cultural models that depend on their own interests. The team of an organically certified farm in the same region has another perception of nature and development. The farm's philosophy is based on nature protection, its development depends on this and so there is no conflict. For both case studies grazing in protected areas is not a significant factor that counts towards building a sustainable livelihood.

The research leads me to the conclusion that the ideas of the For the Balkans and the People project has not succeeded in reaching or changing producers' perceptions of nature and local development in-depth, and neither has it reached society as a whole. As entrepreneurs point out, clients are not aware what the significance of Natura 2000 areas are and what their real value is for the products produced in these areas. The need to clarify this leads to the emergence of a new project named NATURA 2000 in Bulgaria – New Horizons, managed by another NGO. The project aims to achieve a significant change in public awareness of, and attitude towards, the Natura 2000 network using flagship, easily identifiable, species from the EU Directives on Birds and

Habitats. Undoubtedly the previous project managed to create a successful business development model for small family producers in protected areas with a less negative impact on nature. But my conclusion is that as a result of the project we have business development of individual entrepreneurs and cannot indicate any overall sustainable local development of certain regions. Despite the project's efforts, conserved nature remains unappreciated among entrepreneurs and the general public.

## Acknowledgements

The research was conducted within the scope of the Life in Protected Zones and Areas: Challenges, Conflicts, Benefits project, supported by the National Science Fund of Bulgaria, Contract No. КП-06-H40/12 (2019–2024).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> From the For the Balkans and the People guide.

<sup>2</sup> See the short resume called the For the Balkans and the People initiative: The Bulgarian Success Story for the interconnectedness of Nature and Small Local Businesses in one of the channels of the project – website of Association of Parks in Bulgaria – <https://parks.bg/initiativata-za-balkana-i-horata-balgarskata-istoria-na-uspeha-za-vzaimosvarzanostta-mezhdu-prirodna-i-malkite-mestni-biznesi/>.

<sup>3</sup> Natura 2000 areas, national parks and nature parks.

<sup>4</sup> An ethnoecology is any society's traditional set of environmental perceptions – that is, its cultural model of the environment and its relationship with people and society (Kottak 1999: 26).

<sup>5</sup> This is the official name of the project, but it is well known by its other name: For the Balkans and the People.

<sup>6</sup> For more details, see official information on the website of Bioselena organisation <https://bioselena.com/проекти/завършени-проекти/проект-за-балкана-и-хората/>.

<sup>7</sup> More official information about the results of the project can be found at (in Bulgarian only): <https://bioselena.com/en/projects/завършени-проекти/проект-за-балкана-и-хората-en/>

<sup>8</sup> V. T., male, about 50 years old, Yagodovo village, Montana region, interviewed in 2021, personal archive.



<sup>9</sup> N. C., male, about 60 years old, Kalofer, Plovdiv region, interviewed in 2021, personal archive.

<sup>10</sup> A. I., male, about 50 years old, Berkovitsa, interviewed in 2021 personal archive.

<sup>11</sup> For more information see Stancheva 2018a, Stancheva 2018b. For more studies exploring what social impact protected areas have on locals and local development in Bulgaria see Petrov 2021, Markov & Pileva 2021.

<sup>12</sup> P. T., male, 31 years old, Melyane village, Montana region, interviewed in 2021, personal archive.

<sup>13</sup> Slow Food is a global, grassroots, organisation founded in 1989 in Italy to prevent the disappearance of local food cultures and traditions. Its philosophy is based on three interconnected principles related to food: good (quality, flavoursome and healthy food), clean (production that does not harm the environment) and fair (accessible prices for consumers and fair conditions and pay for producers).

<sup>14</sup> K. D., male, about 35, Belene, interviewed in 2022, personal archive.

<sup>15</sup> T. D., male, about 30, Dragash voivoda village, Pleven region, interviewed in 2021, personal archive.

<sup>16</sup> M. L., male, 41, Kalofer, interviewed in 2021, personal archive.

<sup>17</sup> P. K., male, 65, Kalofer, interviewed in 2021, personal archive.

<sup>18</sup> M. L., male, 41, Kalofer, interviewed in 2021, personal archive.

<sup>19</sup> M. L., male, 41, Kalofer, interviewed in 2021, personal archive. From the For the Balkans and the People guide.

<sup>20</sup> M. R., female, around 30, Sofia, interviewed in 2022, personal archive.

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