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CULTURAL POLICY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF SHAR MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK*

This study investigates the potential for sustainable development and cultural cooperation within the Sar-planina National Park, emphasizing the challenges of managing natural and cultural resources. The primary objective is to identify key structural barriers and propose strategic guidelines to enhance sustainability and foster cultural collaboration. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach that includes a systematic literature review, ethnographic field studies, and participatory observation, the research seeks to clarify the social dynamics of local communities and their interactions with the environment. The findings indicate significant opportunities for developing sustainable tourism, biodiversity conservation, and promoting cultural heritage through revitalizing local assets, including traditional crafts and festivals. Additionally, the integration of winter sports is recognized as a crucial factor for economic development. However, ongoing challenges such as ecosystem degradation, socio-economic inequalities, and geopolitical tensions hinder progress. The study advocates for establishing partnerships between local communities and international stakeholders, emphasizing the necessity of integrating local knowledge with global cooperation frameworks to

* Note: For this research, the term 'Sar-planina' will be used as the primary name for the mountain range. This term is chosen for consistency throughout the paper and is presented without diacritics or special characters (originally *Šar-planina*). Alternative names include *Sharr Mountains* in English, *Mali i Sharrit* in Albanian, and *Шар Планина* in Macedonian.

optimize resource management and ensure active community engagement in sustainable development initiatives.

Keywords: *cultural policy, sustainable development, Balkans, Sar-planina, international and regional cooperation*

INTRODUCTION

Promoting sustainable development and international cultural cooperation is key to improving the quality of life and preserving cultural heritage in contemporary development and globalization. As Karakul (2019) noted, sustainable development emphasizes a harmonious balance of economic, social, and environmental dimensions to meet current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. At the same time, fostering cultural cooperation between peoples and regions facilitates the exchange of ideas, values, and practices, promoting mutual understanding and strengthening ties between different populations. Vegheş (2018) states that cultural cooperation is pivotal in promoting inclusive societies and enhancing mutual respect among diverse communities.

This research seeks to explore the potential and challenges inherent in integrating sustainable practices and cultural exchange within the countries of the *Balkan Peninsula*. This unique region, rich in cultural heritage and natural resources, is uniquely positioned to advance its global standing through sustainable development initiatives and cultural cooperation.

Sar-planina is an illustrative example of the region's sustainable development and cultural potential. Declared a national park in 1986, *Sar-planina* covers a large area of 39,000 hectares. Its favorable geographical location makes it suitable for artistic endeavors, with the northern part in the Republic of Kosovo and the southern part in Macedonia. Significantly, the mountain is framed by the Prizren basin in the northwest, the Kosovska basin in the north, and the *Poloska* and *Mavrovska* basins in the south. Moreover, its cultural importance is enhanced by its proximity to key routes such as the Novi Sad-Belgrade-Kragujevac-Pristina-Uroševac-Strpce road network. Various geomorphological processes shape the topography of *Sar-planina*, and its artistic potential is additionally enriched by the presence of numerous glacial lakes and springs. The climatic conditions of the mountain are suitable for sports and recreational activities, with an average annual temperature of 10-12°C at the foot and from 0 -2°C in the higher areas. The yearly amount of precipitation falls between 1250 and 1500 mm, and the snow cover reaches a height of about 120 cm.

Sar-planina also has biogeographical value due to the presence of relict species, among which are *Mollica* [Bosnian Pine; Lat. *Pinus heldreichii*], *Monika* [Macedonian Pine; Lat. *Pinus peuce*], and *Mountain Maple* [Lat. *Acer pseudoplatanus*]. In addition, nature reserves such as *Osljak* and *Golemi Bor* are crucial for preserving biological diversity. The area also has historical and cultural value, and the city of Prizren is known as an actual city museum with 59 cultural monuments.

Despite its significant potential for sustainable development and cultural cooperation, the "*Sar-planina*" National Park faces countless challenges, including forest degradation and inadequate protection, attributed to Kosovo's prevailing political and economic circumstances. These challenges are further aggravated by the complex political situation that prevents effective implementation of protective measures and adequate management of natural resources. The draft law for the "*Sar-planina*" National Park calls for the tightening of protection measures, defined through protection regimes, to preserve the rich biological diversity and natural wealth of the Park. Implementing these measures is essential to prevent further ecosystem degradation and ensure sustainable development, supporting the local community's ecological, economic, and cultural interests. However, the success of these efforts relies on political will, adequate funding, and international support. This emphasizes the need for a coordinated approach to address the region's protection and sustainable development challenges. Thus, it is crucial to investigate how these challenges manifest in practice and to identify strategies that yield the best results.

In this context, this research's primary objective is to comprehensively analyze existing practices, identify best practices from current initiatives, and propose strategic interventions to enhance sustainable development and cultural cooperation in the Balkan region. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of integrating cultural heritage into sustainability frameworks while examining the interrelationship between cultural dynamics and sustainable practices.

Ultimately, this study aims to provide actionable guidelines and recommendations for government bodies, non-governmental organizations, and local communities. This approach seeks to optimize the region's inherent potential and enable sustainable development through practical cultural cooperation, fostering a holistic understanding of the interdependence between cultural and environmental sustainability.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Sustainable Development of National Parks: Harmonizing Economic, Ecological, and Cultural Objectives

The concept of sustainable development represents the integration of economic, social, ecological, and cultural goals to meet the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). In the context of national parks, sustainable development includes the protection of natural resources, the promotion of ecotourism, the preservation of cultural heritage, and the strengthening of local communities. National parks are key in preserving biological diversity and protecting natural habitats. Sustainable development in these areas implies implementing strategies that minimize the negative impact of human activities on ecosystems. This includes regulating visits, managing waste, and protecting endangered species and habitats. Visitation regulation is comprised of determining the maximum number of visitors to prevent the overuse of resources. At the same time, waste management includes measures to recycle and dispose of waste in an environmentally friendly manner. The UN (2015) emphasizes that sustainable management protects ecological systems and promotes social justice and economic prosperity, requiring policies that consider long-term environmental impacts alongside social and economic benefits (United Nations, 2015). Protecting endangered species and habitats is also key, including programs to conserve particular species and their habitats and restore degraded ecosystems. Ecotourism is a form of tourism that emphasizes responsible travel to natural areas, preserving the environment and improving the well-being of local communities. Promoting ecotourism within national parks can bring economic benefits while raising awareness of the importance of conserving natural resources. Ecotourism encourages tourists to learn about the environment and its conservation while promoting environmentally friendly practices. Sustainable development of national parks includes developing ecologically friendly and socially responsible tourism infrastructure, such as hiking trails, cycling routes, and information centers that educate visitors about the importance of nature conservation.

National parks often contain significant cultural heritage, including archaeological sites, traditional communities, and historical monuments. Sustainable development implies preserving and valorizing this heritage by integrating local communities into park management. This enables the preservation of cultural values while simultaneously supporting economic development through tourism (Borges, Carbone, Bushell, & Jaeger, 2011). Cultural heritage

can be preserved by restoring and maintaining historical buildings and promoting the local population's traditional crafts and customs. The integration of local communities ensures the transmission of cultural practices and knowledge to future generations, contributing to their preservation and valorization.

The involvement of local communities in the management processes of national parks is essential for achieving sustainable development. Community engagement is vital to ensuring that their needs and interests are acknowledged. This involvement facilitates the development of local capacities for effectively managing natural resources and promotes sustainable practices within the community (Pretty, 2003). This includes education and training, the development of local infrastructure, and promoting traditional practices that contribute to preserving the environment. Education and training can be provided through workshops, seminars, and training programs that help local people acquire the skills to manage resources and provide tourism services sustainably.

Sustainable development of national parks requires a multidisciplinary approach involving different sectors and experts. This involves collaboration between ecologists, economists, sociologists, cultural anthropologists, planners, and other relevant experts to provide holistic and integrated solutions. A multidisciplinary approach enables a comprehensive understanding of complex challenges and the identification of optimal strategies for the sustainable management of national parks (Redclift, 2006). The cooperation of different disciplines enables the creation of policies and strategies that consider all aspects of sustainable development, including ecosystem preservation, economic development, cultural heritage preservation, and local communities' social well-being (See *Diagram 1*).

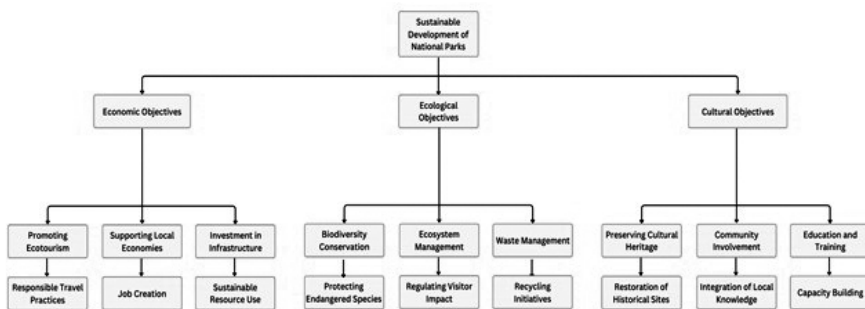


Diagram 1. *Sustainable Development of National Parks: Harmonizing Economic, Ecological, and Cultural Objectives.*

Diagram 1 offers a clear overview of the interconnected objectives for achieving sustainable national park development to better visualize the theoretical concepts discussed in this subsection. It emphasizes the importance of integrating economic, environmental, and cultural goals, as each aspect contributes to a balanced approach to park management. The diagram also underscores the need for a holistic strategy for sustainable development in national parks, where economic growth, ecological integrity, and cultural preservation are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. This integrated framework is crucial for addressing the complex challenges that national parks face in pursuing sustainable development.

Cultural Heritage as a Basis for Sustainable Development: Policy and Practice

Cultural heritage is celebrated for shaping community identity and fostering social cohesion; however, this perspective often overlooks the complexities and challenges of its preservation and promotion. While Giliberto and Labadi (2021) highlight the positive aspects of cultural heritage, it is essential to critically assess how cultural policies may inadvertently prioritize certain narratives, potentially marginalizing less dominant cultures. Critics argue that such policies can sometimes be well-intentioned but fail to account for the diverse realities of all community members, leading to a superficial representation of cultural diversity.

Moreover, UNESCO's emphasis on culture as a driver of sustainable development raises questions about the practical implementation of these policies. As noted by Pereira Roders and van Oers (2011), the effectiveness of cultural heritage in promoting social inclusion and job creation varies significantly based on local contexts and governance structures. For instance, regions with decentralized governance may be better equipped to engage local communities in heritage preservation, whereas centralized systems may impose top-down policies that overlook local needs.

The assertion that cultural heritage fosters innovation and creativity (Hosagrahar, Soule, Fusco Girard, & Potts, 2016; Skrede & Berg, 2018) may not universally apply, as economic and environmental solutions sometimes conflict with traditional practices. A more nuanced approach is necessary to ensure that cultural heritage serves as an inclusive and sustainable foundation for development. This includes recognizing the significance of intangible cultural heritage, such as oral traditions and rituals, which reflect communities' lived experiences and values. Integrating intangible heritage into cultural policies can enhance community engagement and ensure a more holistic representation of cultural identity.

While cultural heritage is recognized for its universal value and role in enriching community identities (Bleibleh & Awad, 2020; UNESCO, 2007), it is crucial to examine its preservation implications critically. Focusing on historical monuments and tangible heritage can overshadow intangible aspects, leading to cultural homogenization. Furthermore, while cultural heritage contributes to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), integrating cultural values into development strategies can be challenging. The effectiveness of such integration often depends on local governance, community engagement, and resource allocation.

Additionally, "protecting and promoting" cultural heritage raises questions about who defines what is worth preserving, potentially leading to conflicts over cultural ownership and representation, especially among marginalized groups. A more inclusive and participatory approach is necessary to ensure that cultural heritage reflects the diversity and complexity of community identities. Cultural cooperation is often celebrated for its potential to enhance sustainable development (Froner, 2017). However, critically assessing the effectiveness and inclusivity of such initiatives is crucial. Knowledge exchange and intercultural dialogue can inadvertently reinforce existing power dynamics, where dominant cultures overshadow marginalized voices. This raises concerns about whether cooperation genuinely reflects diverse perspectives or perpetuates a singular narrative.

Integrating ecological practices into cultural policies is commendable; however, implementing these practices often lacks consistency. Tokenism, characterized by superficial involvement without genuine influence, can lead to stakeholder disillusionment (Turco, 2010; Pollock & Sharp, 2012). In contrast, genuine ownership signifies meaningful participation, where communities actively engage in decision-making processes (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2017). Efforts to promote environmentally friendly cultural production and consumption may face resistance from stakeholders who prioritize economic gains over sustainability, leaving the actual impact of these policies on mitigating adverse environmental effects uncertain.

As UNESCO (2005) emphasized, local community participation is crucial, yet its meaningfulness can vary significantly. For instance, successful initiatives in Valencia, Spain, illustrate the importance of community engagement and social inclusion in regenerating historic city centers. These projects cultivate a sense of ownership among residents, ensuring equitable distribution of benefits and fostering sustainable urban development (Tanrikul, 2023). Conversely, the Love Canal incident is a cautionary tale, highlighting the severe consequences of inadequate community involvement in hazardous waste management. Initially, residents were not genuinely engaged, leading to

significant health and environmental repercussions, underscoring the dangers of tokenistic participation (Culley & Hughey, 2007).

Moreover, while a multidisciplinary approach (Galal Ahmed, 2010) can be beneficial, it may complicate decision-making and create conflicts among stakeholders with differing priorities. Therefore, a more critical and inclusive framework is essential to ensure that cultural cooperation effectively contributes to sustainable development.

Cultural policy refers to the strategies and actions governments and organizations take to promote and manage cultural activities and heritage. It is often viewed as a means to support social inclusion, which ensures that all individuals, particularly marginalized communities, have equal access to cultural resources and opportunities. However, the effectiveness of these policies in practice warrants critical evaluation.

Empowering marginalized communities to express their identity can sometimes lead to superficial engagement, where the underlying power dynamics remain unchanged. Initiatives that invite community participation may only involve token representation, failing to address these groups' genuine needs and voices. This raises important questions about whether cultural policies facilitate meaningful participation or serve as a façade of inclusivity.

While education and awareness of cultural heritage are essential for promoting sustainable development, the implementation of educational initiatives can be inconsistent. For example, programs that foster respect for diversity may overlook the complexities of cultural conflicts and the necessity for critical dialogue about power relations within communities. Moreover, cultural policy's adaptability is crucial, yet rapid societal changes can outpace policy responses, creating gaps in addressing emerging issues. Successful frameworks, such as the Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Development initiative, have effectively integrated ecological considerations into cultural policies, providing a roadmap for future initiatives. Strategies such as community-led cultural programs and inclusive policy-making processes should be employed to foster genuine stakeholder engagement, particularly among marginalized communities. These approaches ensure that marginalized groups' voices are heard and valued in decision-making.

In this context, policymakers should focus on enhancing the effectiveness of cultural policies by ensuring genuine community participation, addressing power dynamics, and implementing best practices that promote sustainability and social inclusion. Specific recommendations include establishing regular feedback mechanisms with communities, investing in capacity-building initiatives, and prioritizing inclusive cultural programming that reflects society's diverse identities.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Qualitative research is essential for understanding complex social phenomena, particularly in natural settings such as *Sar-Planina National Park*. Johnson, Adkins, and Chauvin (2020) argue that applying rigorous criteria in research design enhances data analysis and interpretation. They emphasize the importance of clearly defining the research question and grounding it within a robust conceptual framework, which ensures methodological coherence and improves the validity and reliability of the study.

Similarly, Dzogovic and Bajrami (2023) emphasize that qualitative approaches enable the in-depth identification of patterns of meaning and facilitate a deeper understanding of social phenomena within their natural contexts, rendering them indispensable for examining educational and cultural dynamics.

Building on this foundation, Brod, Tesler, and Christensen (2009) highlight the importance of content validity in qualitative studies, stressing the need to align research design with established methodological standards. Moreover, Richardson, O'Neil, and Thorn (2022) introduce the concept of methodological bricolage, which promotes flexibility and integration of diverse methods within a single qualitative framework.

This research, focused on the *Sar-planina National Park*, is guided by a methodologically rigorous framework designed to produce credible and contextually grounded qualitative insights into the nexus between sustainable development and cultural cooperation. The applied methods are mutually reinforcing and grounded in established research traditions, ensuring analytical depth and methodological coherence.

The *systematic literature review* constitutes the study's conceptual foundation. Through a structured and comprehensive examination of scholarly works on national park governance and sustainability, the review identifies prevailing theoretical approaches, thematic trends, and existing research gaps. This synthesis informs the formulation of research objectives and provides the critical context for subsequent empirical inquiry.

Based on participant observation, *field research* facilitates direct engagement with local communities and their interactions with natural and cultural resources. This method enables the documentation of lived experiences and local practices that are often inaccessible through standardized quantitative techniques. By fostering trust and immersion, it generates rich, situated data illuminating sustainability's socio-cultural dimensions in the context of sustainable development in the *Sar-planina National Park*.

The *ethnographic method* further deepens the analysis by exploring cultural norms, identities, and value systems embedded within the daily life of communities associated with the *Sar-planina*. This immersive methodology allows the researcher to observe, document, and interpret cultural expressions and environmental interactions, thereby elucidating the role of cultural heritage in shaping sustainable practices and community-based resource management.

Thematic analysis is the principal analytical tool for interpreting qualitative data. This technique identifies patterns and interconnections that respond directly to the study's research questions by systematically coding and organizing data into thematic categories. It facilitates a comprehensive synthesis of empirical findings while maintaining analytical rigor and theoretical alignment.

Ethical considerations are integral to every stage of the research process. The principles of informed consent, cultural sensitivity, and confidentiality are strictly observed to protect participants' rights and the integrity of the research. Particular attention is given to the respectful engagement with local knowledge systems and community values, fostering a research environment grounded in mutual trust and academic responsibility.

Although qualitative research can provide valuable insights, it has significant *methodological limitations*. Its subjective nature can lead to bias and limit generalizability, especially in a context like *Sar-planina National Park*. Political fragmentation complicates data collection and stakeholder engagement, resulting in inconsistent data. Geopolitical tensions and governance issues can impede collaboration, undermine data transparency, and lead to incomplete information. To address these challenges, researchers should use triangulation, participatory approaches, and long-term community engagement to improve the reliability and comprehensiveness of data.

ANALYZING AND DISCUSSION

Sar-planina: Natural, Cultural, and Touristic Context

Sar-planina is celebrated for its mountainous exoticism, featuring majestic snowy peaks, lush green pastures, and a rich geological diversity of ore-bearing rocks. The name "*Sar-planina*" is etymologically rooted in ancient languages and the Indo-European etymon, underscoring the historical significance of the region's early inhabitants and their pivotal role in cattle breeding (Dzogovic, 2019, p. 505). This mountain range is recognized as a pervasive geological system in the southern Balkans, with evidence of human habitation dating back to ancient times.

The geological features of *Sar-planina* present a complex framework characterized by significant mineral deposits, which significantly contribute to its geodiversity. The mountain's heterogeneous geological composition and jagged relief have resulted in a unique vegetative diversity influenced by Mediterranean and Continental climates.

The etymology of "*Sar-planina*" reveals a profound connection to the region's cultural heritage, highlighting its historical significance in agriculture and livestock management. This cultural importance is further underscored by the mountain's role as a refuge during the Ice Age, significantly shaping its ecological landscape.

Moreover, *Sar-planina* is a prominent site for scientific research and artistic exploration. The intricate interplay of its natural beauty, geological diversity, and rich cultural history attracts researchers from various disciplines. It fosters a deeper understanding of the region's ecological systems and cultural narratives. This multifaceted character ultimately contributes to preserving its unique heritage, making *Sar-planina* a vital interdisciplinary study and appreciation area.

Geographical and Ecological Significance – Cultural Landscape of the Balkans

The *Sara massif*, spanning over 1,600 square kilometers between Kosovo in the north and North Macedonia in the south, is one of the highest mountain areas in the Balkans (See *Diagram 2*). Geographically isolated by the *Polog Valley* in the north, the *Prizren Plain* in the south, and the *Radika River* in the northwest, this isolation contributes to its unique ecological characteristics, making it a vital refuge for diverse species. The massif is home to rivers such as *Shkumbin* (Mk. *Pena*), *Lesocka*, and *Mazdraca*, as well as the *Vardar River*, which flows toward the *Aegean Sea* near *Thessaloniki*.

Numerous alpine settlements and those along rivers illustrate the long-standing human activity and economic pursuits, particularly in cattle breeding. *Sar-planina's* importance is further emphasized by its natural beauty and cultural and economic relevance throughout history (Dzogovic, 2019, p. 505).

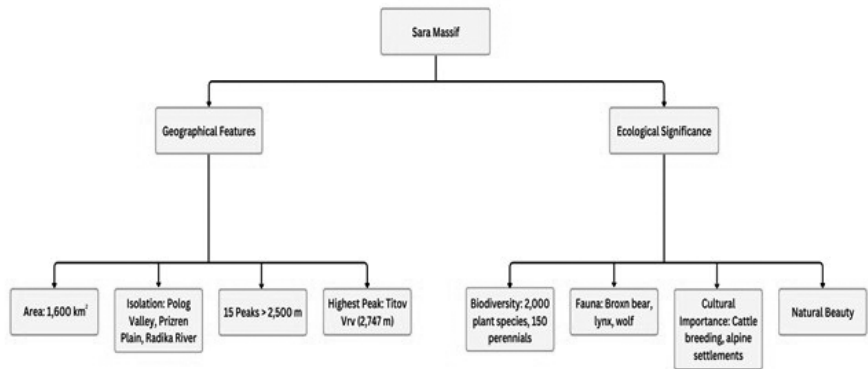


Diagram 2. *Geographical and Ecological Significance of the Sara Massif.*

With 15 peaks exceeding 2,500 m above sea level, including the highest peak, *Titov Vrv* (2,747 m), the *Sara massif* presents an impressive relief over its 80 km length, varying widths from 10 to 30 km. For the city of Tetovo, located at only 450 m above sea level, the mountain's relief is pronounced, resembling alpine mountains, characterized by rich forest vegetation ranging from beech in the lower elevations to grasslands above 1,600 m. The flora of the massif includes approximately 2,000 plant species, including 150 perennial species, while the fauna comprises numerous mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and many unidentified insect species. Among these, the brown bear, lynx, and wolf symbolize the region, highlighting its ecological significance.

A thorough examination of the ecological significance of the *Sara massif* reveals that the interplay between geographical isolation and biodiversity is crucial. The region's distinctive characteristics support many species and provide essential ecosystem services. However, increasing pressures from human activities and climate change pose significant threats to this delicate balance. Therefore, it is necessary to implement effective conservation strategies that prioritize biodiversity protection and sustainable management of natural resources. Such measures will ensure the preservation of the *Sara massif* as a vital refuge for future generations, maintaining its ecological integrity and cultural heritage.

Challenges in Preserving Cultural Resources

The *Sar-planina* is known for its rich ecological and cultural diversity, but faces numerous challenges that complicate conservation efforts. The region's biodiversity is threatened by habitat loss, climate change, and invasive species, necessitating urgent and sustainable conservation strategies. Howe-

ver, effective management is hindered by political boundaries that impede coordinated cross-border conservation initiatives (Miho, Marka, & Krasniqi, 2023).

Aside from administrative hurdles, the political landscape further complicates conservation efforts in the *Sar-planina*. Different jurisdictions have inconsistent laws and regulations regarding nature protection, making it difficult to harmonize strategies. The lack of institutional cooperation among the countries that share this region leads to inefficient resource management, and political tensions often push environmental concerns to the sidelines. Additionally, issues related to land ownership and the utilization of natural resources frequently result in disputes among state institutions, private entities, and local communities, complicating the implementation of sustainable policies.

Figure 1. *Tetovo Fortress*



Source: Culture Whiz (n.d.)

Figure 2. *The Arabati Baba Teke*



Source: (Explore Macedonia, n.d.)

The *Sar-planina* also possesses considerable cultural heritage, evidenced by historical sites such as the *Tetovo Fortress* and the *Arabati Baba Tekke* (See *Figures 1* and *2*). This cultural heritage is intricately linked to local ecological practices, underscoring the need for an integrated conservation approach that recognizes the interconnection between biodiversity and cultural identity. Nevertheless, the cultural sector is frequently influenced by political factors. Competing narratives regarding cultural heritage can become subjects of political discourse, thereby affecting the protection and promotion of cultural monuments. In this context, the politicization of heritage may result in the oversight of certain cultural elements, which warrants careful consideration in conservation strategies.

Local communities' active involvement is crucial to sustainable efforts to preserve the *Sar-planina*. Their participation can foster the adoption of sustainable practices that protect ecosystems and cultural landscapes, ensuring the long-term viability of this unique region. However, overcoming political barriers and creating an environment encouraging transparent cooperation among all stakeholders is essential for effective community engagement. Therefore, to attain a sustainable future for the *Sar-planina*, it is necessary to effectively align ecological, cultural, and political factors.

Challenges of Sustainable Tourism and Infrastructure Solutions

Sar-planina is a significant tourist destination strategically located along key transport corridors, making it easily accessible to visitors from the region and beyond. This mountain boasts remarkable natural wealth, including over 200 endemic plant species and more than 44 game species, forming the foundation for developing biodiversity tourism. Particularly noteworthy are the populations of chamois, bears, lynxes, and rare endemic birds such as eagles and falcons, making this destination especially attractive for ecotourism and nature lovers.

The mountain massif averages 2,000 and 2,100 meters above sea level, with 25 peaks exceeding 2,500 meters. *Titov Vrh* (2,747 m) and *Bistra* (2,651 m) stand out. Although the mountain has a general northeast-southwest orientation, its relief is highly diverse. The high *Prevalac Pass* characterizes the northern part, while the mountain system extends through the branches of *Osljak*, *Ostrovica*, and *Kodza Balkans*, contributing to the region's geographical and ecological diversity (Amidzic, Bartula, & Jaric, 2012, p. 348).

While the *Sar-planina* natural resources offer significant potential for sustainable tourism, various challenges threaten the area's long-term sustainability. These challenges include insufficient infrastructure, inadequate planning for tourism activities, and ecological threats. The lack of quality transport links makes accessing key tourist locations difficult, and ineffective

regulation and control over tourism development can negatively impact sensitive ecosystems. Therefore, it is essential to implement integrated sustainable tourism strategies that balance the preservation of natural heritage with tourism development, ensuring long-term benefits for both the local population and visitors.

Sar-planina is one of the most prominent winter sports destinations in the Balkans, thanks to its favorable climatic conditions, elevation, and diverse terrain suitable for skiing activities (See Figure 3). One of the most famous ski resorts in the area is *Suncani brijeg* [Sunny Hill], situated at an altitude of 1,700 meters. It is the oldest and most renowned mountain resort in North Macedonia, famous for its challenging ski slopes and rich winter sports tradition.

Figure 3. *Šar (Shar) Mountains*.



Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica (n.d.).

The development of this ski resort began before World War II, and one of its most significant features is the *Sara Cup*, the oldest international ski competition in the Balkans, which continues to attract ski teams from around the world. Due to its historical significance and ongoing advancements, *Suncani brijeg* [Sunny Hill] plays a key role in the region's winter tourism.

The resort is 18 km from Tetovo and 53 km from Skopje, ensuring good transport connections. The infrastructure includes a modern paved road and a

seven km-long gondola that allows skiers to quickly and safely reach the highest parts of the ski area. The ski slope spans 10 km and can accommodate up to 8,000 skiers per hour, significantly enhancing the location's tourist capacity and appeal.

Despite its solid infrastructure and long-standing tradition, *Suncani brijeg* [Sunny Hill] faces several challenges that may impact its long-term sustainability. One primary issue is the seasonality of tourism—while skiing is the main draw during the winter, visitor numbers drop in the summer months, leading to decreased revenue and underutilized facilities. Furthermore, climate change could significantly affect the amount and duration of snow cover, potentially reducing the number of ski days each season.

In addition to environmental concerns, there are infrastructural limitations. Although the gondola and roads provide easy access, the accommodations available near the resort are limited, which may hinder further tourism growth. Additionally, competition from neighboring ski resorts in Bulgaria and Serbia, which have significantly modernized their infrastructure in recent years, presents another challenge (See *Diagram 3*).

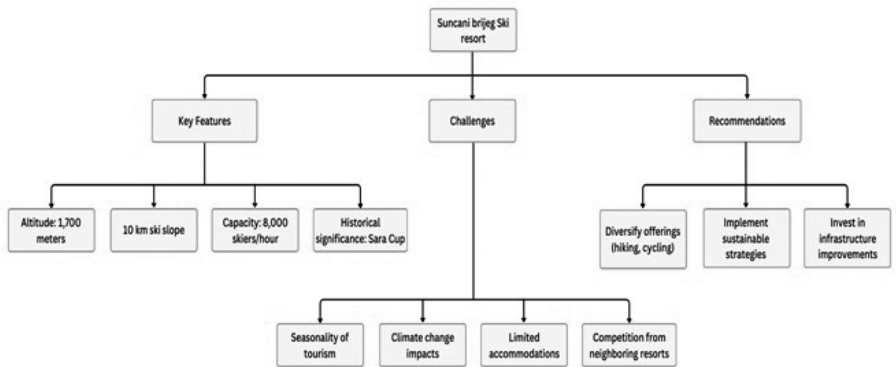


Diagram 3. Suncani Brijeg (*Sunny Hill*): *Key Features, Challenges, and Recommendations for Sustainable Development*.

Diagram 3 outlines the key features of the *Suncani brijeg* [Sunny Hill] ski resort, including its elevation, capacity, and historical significance. It also identifies the resort's challenges, including seasonal tourism, climate change, and increased competition. Additionally, the diagram provides recommendations for diversifying the resort's offerings and implementing sustainable strategies, emphasizing the importance of long-term development and sustainability in ski resorts.

Further investments in diversifying *Suncani brijeg* [Sunny Hill] offerings are essential for positioning it as a sustainable, year-round tourist destination. In particular, the development of summer tourism, through hiking, cycling, and ecotourism, could play a key role in reducing seasonal fluctuations in visitor numbers. To ensure the long-term competitiveness of the ski resort, it is equally important to implement comprehensive sustainable development strategies that include using renewable energy sources and preserving natural resources.

The Cultural and Natural Heritage of Popova Sapka: A Perspective on Sustainable Development

Popova Sapka is steadily developing into a modern tourist hub with excellent growth potential in regional and national tourism. Its unique combination of natural beauty and cultural resources gives it a key position in tourism development over the next decade. To compete with more established resorts such as *Bansko* in Bulgaria and *Kopaonik* in Serbia, diversification of tourism offerings is essential, including sporting activities, cultural and historical attractions, and rural tourism. A key strategy is to strengthen the region's competitiveness in the tourism market through targeted marketing campaigns and continued investment in infrastructure.

Preserving a region's natural and cultural heritage is crucial for sustainable tourism development. Research shows that such heritage sites are strong tourist magnets, with natural sites often generating higher revenues due to visitor spending patterns (Bacsi, Łęcka & Tóth, 2019). However, it is necessary to strike a balance between heritage conservation and tourism development, as excessive tourist pressure can threaten the integrity of these valuable sites. In this context, tourism development should be based on sustainable practices such as ecotourism, which promotes low-impact activities and thus mitigates the negative consequences of mass tourism.

Long-term sustainability includes integrating local communities into tourism planning and management. Residents should actively participate in decision-making processes to ensure that tourism's benefits are fairly distributed. Initiatives such as developing small family accommodations and promoting local crafts and traditional cuisine can help preserve cultural traditions while supporting the local economy. Additionally, involving local communities in sustainable resource management can help protect ecological balance, ensuring that tourism brings long-term benefits for all stakeholders.

The Sar-planina region in Kosovo, including the popular destination of *Brezovica*, is rich in cultural and tourist resources. The area contains hun-

dreds of kilometers of mountain ranges, extensive trail networks, fast-flowing rivers, glacial lakes, and around thirty picturesque villages. Special attention is given to local customs, traditions, arts and crafts, and traditional cuisine, deeply rooted in regional stories and history. The region is also known for its religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, offering hospitality to visitors worldwide. The region's natural landscapes and cultural heritage are rich, unique, and mostly untouched, providing an authentic experience for visitors.

The Sar-planina National Park, located in southern Kosovo, covers 53,272 hectares and encompasses the northern part of the *Sar-planina*, extending into northeastern Albania, southeastern Kosovo, and northwestern Macedonia. The park features diverse terrains, including glacial lakes and alpine landscapes. Its southern border follows the state borders between Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Albania. It includes the highest peaks of the *Sar-planina*, many exceeding 2,500 meters, such as *Çuka e Liqeni* (2,604 m) and *Bistra* (2,651 m).

Tourism development in Kosovo, particularly in *Brezovica* and *Sar-planina*, has undergone significant changes through three key phases:

Development Boom (1970s): This period was marked by substantial investments in tourism infrastructure and professional staff training in Kosovo. In *Brezovica*, hotels such as "Narcis" and "Molika," with 275 rooms and 620 beds, laid the foundation for further development. Ski infrastructure was modernized with new ski lifts and cable cars, significantly boosting the local economy and creating jobs in Prizren and surrounding areas.

Destructive Period (1989-1999): The revocation of Kosovo's autonomy and the breakup of Yugoslavia severely damaged the ecological and tourism infrastructure in *Brezovica* and *Sar-planina*. A decline in domestic, regional, and international visitors resulted in significant economic losses and damage to the tourism infrastructure.

Reconstruction and Economic Reforms (Post-1999): After the conflict, Kosovo began rebuilding infrastructure and implementing economic reforms with the support of private initiatives and international investments. However, challenges persist in urban and rural areas, including *Planina*, with slow processes of reconciliation and decentralization hindering economic development.

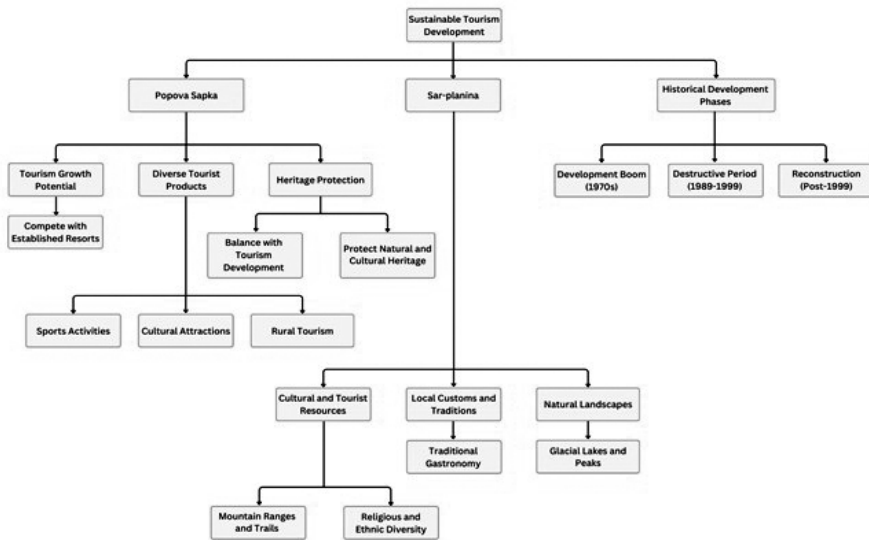


Diagram 4. *Sustainable Tourism Development in Popova Sapka and Sar-planina.*

Diagram 4 shows the complex interdependencies between tourism growth, cultural heritage preservation, and historical context, which form the basis for sustainable tourism development in the study area. Tourism sustainability relies heavily on the responsible use of natural resources and cultural heritage and their protection for future generations. Key elements include the active participation of local communities in the planning and implementation of tourism initiatives and an orientation towards sustainable practices that generate long-term ecological, cultural, and economic benefits.

Cultural Identity and Potential for Sustainable Development of the Polog Region

The *Polog Region*, the second-largest region in the country after Skopje in terms of population and number of economic activities, stands out for its cultural diversity and wealth. Located in the heart of Macedonia, the region has established eight statistical areas for more efficient resource management.

In the region's center is the *Center for the Development of the Polog Region*, a key organization that coordinates initiatives and projects, especially in cultural development. The center actively promotes cultural cooperation within the region and beyond, supporting small rural municipalities in realizing their artistic potential. The focus is also on the integration of the cultural

heritage of the *Polog Region* with a broader context, including the connection with *Sar-planina* mountain as a vital cultural and natural resource.

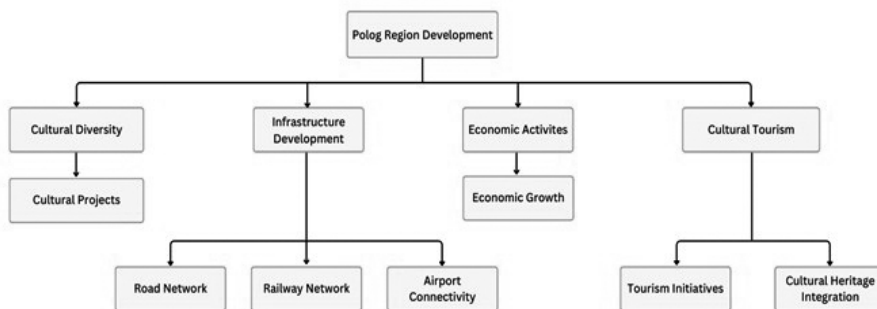


Diagram 5. *Development of the Infrastructure and Cultural Potential of the Polog Region.*

The region's development strategy identifies key directions, with cultural tourism as a significant driver of economic prosperity (See *Diagram 5*). This diagram outlines the main components of the region's development, including cultural diversity, infrastructure, economic activities, and the role of cultural tourism. The Center for the Development of the *Polog Region* actively creates mechanisms and financial structures to support cultural projects that benefit the local community and attract international partners. This includes the initiative '*Study of Cultural Projects Sar-planina*,' in collaboration with EPI Center International, the Ministry of Economy, and regional partners of North Macedonia.

The road network is relatively well connected to the infrastructurally developed area of *Polog*. The main infrastructural challenges are in the highlands of the *Sar-planina*, where some roads are underdeveloped and need to be adapted, especially the regional road Tetovo - *Popova Sapka*, which is crucial for tourism development.

The *Polog Region* is characterized by an underdeveloped and often inadequately maintained local road network, a common problem in mountainous areas. The incomplete railway infrastructure throughout the country is a significant obstacle to efficient rail transport and requires urgent reconstruction. However, the *Polog Region* is well connected to the existing international airports in Skopje and Ohrid, which allows for relatively fast travel to major airports.

Ethnographic Overview of Cultural Practices and Ecological Interactions in Sar-planina

The *Sar-planina* community exemplifies the complex relationship between cultural practices and ecological interactions. Traditional rituals and festivals embody the community's cultural identity and serve as vital mechanisms for environmental governance. These practices foster community cohesion and promote sustainable development by enhancing ecological awareness.

The research analyzed how these traditions influence community identity and their role in advancing sustainable development. A comprehensive methodological approach was employed, including *Ethnographic participant observation*, *Structured interviews*, and *Informal discussions with local informants*. These methods, conducted during fieldwork in July 2024, provided valuable insights into the community's cultural practices and social dynamics.

Participants were selected based on their active involvement in cultural activities. This ensured a diverse representation of perspectives, including insights from key informants such as Sadik Idrizi and Mejdin Saljiji, long-time educational and cultural workers. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring cultural identity and ecological sustainability themes. Ritual practices and festivals were selected for their significance in the context of cultural anthropology and environmental ethics, providing valuable insight into community identity and practices.

Cultural Practices and Festivals

Festivals in the region, such as "*Festival sarenih pruga*" [Candy Stripe], "*Sara pjevanje*" [Sara singing], and "*Tetovski filigranski folk*" (*Naimovi dani*) [Tetovo Filigree Folk (Days of Naim)], are central to the cultural identity of the Albanian and Bosnian communities. These events not only celebrate folklore but also promote the preservation of local traditions and cultural diversity. Furthermore, the *Sar-planina International Ski Cup* has been key in enriching the region's cultural and sports traditions. At the same time, festivals such as "*Bletezat*" [An international choir competition celebrating local traditions and culture] and "*Tetovske jabuke*" [Tetovo Apples; Children's festival] further highlight the region's vibrant cultural offering.

Connection to Local Natural Resources

Cultural practices in the *Sar-planina* region are intricately tied to the area's natural resources. Sadik Idrizi (personal communication, 20 July 2024) posits that the *Sar-planina* region boasts both material and intangible heritage, which provides a strong foundation for its potential to become an attractive tourist destination. Idrizi particularly underscores the significance of the *Pro-ljetni festival* [Spring Festival] in the village of *Sistevac* (Albania), celebrated

annually on 6 May, which features folklore events such as horse racing and the exhibition of the *Sarplaninac* – a renowned breed of shepherd dog. A similar festival, *Teferic*², is held in the village of Borje on May 7th.

The *Narcissus poeticus* field, situated near Sistevec and Novosej in Albania, represents a unique natural phenomenon that draws numerous visitors, especially during its blooming season at the end of May and the beginning of June. According to Idrizi, the breathtaking display of narcissus flowers is a rare and captivating sight; however, the 1.4 km-long access road remains in poor condition, which could deter potential visitors (personal communication, 20 July 2024).

To enhance the visitor experience and promote this exceptional site, Idrizi suggests creating an annual event called "*Days of the Narcissus*" during the peak blooming period (See Figure 4). This event could feature guided tours, local crafts, and cultural performances, thereby celebrating the beauty of the narcissus flowers and the broader regional heritage. Moreover, the nearby luxury hotel "*Stani i Hoxhes*" could provide convenient accommodations, further facilitating tourism. Improving access and hosting this dedicated event, the *Narcissus poeticus* field could evolve into a prominent attraction, stimulating community involvement and contributing to the local economy.

^{**} Note: *Teferic* is a traditional term used in the Balkans, particularly among Bosniaks, to describe a joyful outdoor gathering, often accompanied by music, food, and socializing. This concept signifies a festive atmosphere, relaxation, and enjoyment in the company of family, friends, and neighbors.

Historically, *teferic* played a significant role in social life, especially in rural areas, where people would gather in nature, such as meadows or by rivers, to celebrate special occasions like holidays, weddings, or the completion of agricultural work. Today, this custom persists in some parts of the Balkans, often taking the form of organized events that blend tradition with modern lifestyles.

In summary, *teferic* can be characterized as a form of folk celebration, emphasizing hospitality, community, and joy.

Figure 4. Field of Narcissus in Full Bloom (Sistevac, Albania).



Source: Photograph provided by Sadik Idrizi, personal communication, July 20, 2024, used with permission.

Furthermore, Mejdin Saljiji (personal communication, 20 July 2024) discussed the annual Proletni festival in the village of *Brod*. Local communities celebrate the biodiversity of the *Sar-planina National Park* through traditional dances, songs, and the preparation of local specialties such as *Sarski sir* [Shar Cheese]. This festival reinforces the deep connection between cultural expressions and the region's natural heritage.

In addition, local culinary traditions, particularly the use of indigenous herbs, reflect sustainable practices that have been preserved through generations. This profound link between culture and ecology offers significant potential for developing ecotourism initiatives, further enhancing visitors' understanding of the region's cultural and ecological value.

Ecological Practices and Sustainability

In addition to cultural celebrations, the pastoral practices of the *Sar-planina* are essential for the ecological sustainability of the region. Local herders use traditional grazing methods to reduce environmental damage and maintain biodiversity. According to Sadik Idrizi (personal communication, July 20, 2024), the *Sar-planina* boasts more than 200 mountain rivers and streams flowing down their slopes, providing exceptional ecological conditions and natural beauty. The rivers flowing from the *Sar-planina* are known for their *crystal clear water* and high oxygen levels. This natural phenomenon supports ecosystem diversity and significantly benefits human health. Mountain rivers provide habitat for many species of fish, plants, and other organisms, making

these rivers vital ecosystems. Unfortunately, some rivers have been dammed for run-of-the-river hydroelectric power plants in recent years. While traditional pastoral practices in Sar-planina are essential for maintaining ecological balance, the recent trend of damming rivers for hydroelectric power poses significant threats to these vital ecosystems. Therefore, it is imperative to develop sustainable energy strategies that consider the ecological consequences of damming, ensuring the preservation of the environment and the well-being of local populations.

According to Saljiji (personal communication, July 20, 2024), natural remedies are often used for livestock health, reducing the need for chemical treatments. This holistic approach to livestock management is essential for the sustainable use of local natural resources. However, while these remedies can promote sustainability and animal welfare, their effectiveness is not always well-documented, and there may be gaps in knowledge regarding proper usage. Therefore, balancing traditional practices with scientific validation is crucial to ensure safe and effective livestock health management.

Water Conservation Rituals

The local community actively participates in water conservation rituals like the annual *spring cleaning ceremony*. This practice ensures clean and sustainable water resources and symbolizes the community's profound respect for natural cycles. Integrating these traditional practices with modern environmental conservation programs could significantly enhance the efficiency of water resource management in the region, as noted by Sadik Idrizi (personal communication, July 20, 2024). Consequently, the inhabitants of *Sar-planina* exhibit a strong cultural reverence for grass, plants, water, and all elements essential for human survival. Throughout *Sar-planina*, the community constructs *hajrat-cesme* [special offerings]³ typically dedicated to deceased family members, further reflecting their deep-rooted connection to the environment and their commitment to preserving it for future generations.

While the community's traditional practices reflect a commendable commitment to environmental stewardship, there is a need for a more stru-

*** Note: Hajrat-cesma [charitable fountain] refers to public fountains established as acts of philanthropy, frequently funded through waqf (philanthropic endowments). These structures were prevalent during the Ottoman period and were typically constructed by affluent individuals or governing authorities to serve the community. They provided free drinking water to passersby, travelers, and residents and were regarded as a means of accruing religious merit through acts of generosity.

In essence, hajrat-cesme represents a specific category of public waqf dedicated to the community's well-being by delivering essential services such as water. These fountains were often integrated into the cultural and religious context of the period, highlighting their significance beyond mere utility.

ctured approach to integrate these rituals into broader conservation efforts. Relying solely on cultural practices may not be enough to tackle contemporary environmental challenges such as climate change and water scarcity. Therefore, it is essential to develop collaborative initiatives that combine local knowledge with scientific research and policy-making. This partnership can lead to innovative solutions that respect cultural heritage while enhancing the resilience of water resources in the *Sar-planina*. By doing this, the community can ensure that their rich traditions effectively contribute to sustainable development and environmental conservation.

Folk Beliefs and Myths

Sar-planina's folk beliefs, including myths about mountain spirits and magical springs, are a testament to the region's rich cultural tapestry. These stories, passed down orally, often incorporate natural elements and are integral to local rituals. As Dzogovic (2006, p. 12) notes, Bosniak cosmology in *Sar-planina* includes reverence for natural phenomena such as the sun, moon, and stars. These mythical elements persist in local poetry and cultural practices, providing a unique lens through which to view the relationship between culture and nature.

The findings of this research highlight the intrinsic interconnectedness between local cultural practices and ecological management in the *Sar-planina* region. This relationship suggests that artistic expressions and environmental stewardship are not separate entities but are intricately woven into the community's daily life, significantly influencing identity and sustainability.

Dzogovic (2006) notes that the Bosniak cosmogony in *Sar-planina* embodies a deep reverence for nature, where myths and rituals symbolize the intimate relationship between humanity and the natural world. This cultural perspective serves as a means of identity preservation and acts as an implicit model for sustainable resource management, reflecting a worldview that values ecological balance.

Traditional practices, including pastoral techniques, culinary traditions, seasonal festivals, and water conservation rituals, illustrate adaptive strategies enabling the community to thrive alongside its environment for generations. For instance, using natural remedies in livestock care and incorporating indigenous herbs in local cuisine exemplify sustainable practices deeply embedded in everyday life. These cultural-ecological synergies offer valuable insights for contemporary environmental conservation and ecotourism initiatives, suggesting that traditional knowledge can inform modern practices.

Integrating traditional knowledge systems into conservation programs is vital for developing comprehensive and practical sustainability strategies. Recognizing and valuing the cultural dimensions of environmental manage-

ment can foster stronger community engagement and resilience. Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) is crucial in biodiversity conservation and sustainable resource management (Drew, 2005). Promoting local festivals, rituals, and folklore helps preserve cultural heritage and raises ecological awareness, bridging the gap between traditional practices and modern sustainability goals (Pardo-de-Santayana & Macía, 2015).

Moreover, the study emphasizes the critical role of local stakeholders in shaping sustainable development strategies. Continuous dialogue with community members ensures that conservation initiatives are culturally appropriate and reflect local realities (Mekonen, 2017). This participatory approach enhances the effectiveness of environmental programs, strengthens community identity, and contributes to the long-term sustainability of *Sar-planina National Park*.

The research proposes an integrated framework aligning cultural heritage with environmental sustainability. By combining traditional knowledge with modern ecological practices, the *Sar-planina* region can pursue a development approach that honors its rich cultural heritage while ensuring its preservation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the critical necessity of integrating cultural cooperation and sustainable development within the Balkan region, with the *Sar-planina* serving as a representative case study. The findings indicate that when strategically aligned with sustainable tourism practices, cultural heritage can substantially contribute to local communities' socio-economic development while fostering broader regional collaboration.

Ensuring the long-term sustainability of cultural and natural resources requires a multidimensional approach, including continuous education, establishing robust institutional frameworks, and investment in adequate infrastructure. These components are vital to support resilient and adaptive tourism models that respect local identities while embracing global standards.

Given the persistent challenges, such as political instability and economic disparities, formulating and implementing targeted, context-sensitive policies is imperative. Cultural cooperation must be recognized as an instrument of heritage preservation and a dynamic force for regional development. In this regard, international organizations play a pivotal role in facilitating inter-regional platforms for knowledge exchange and best practices, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of cooperation strategies.

Nevertheless, the study also highlights several cultural and international obstacles that continue to hinder progress in the region. Inadequate promotion of local cultural assets undermines the authenticity and attractiveness of destinations such as the *Sar-planina*. At the same time, language barriers and the lack of intercultural competencies negatively affect the quality of visitor experiences. Furthermore, limited international cooperation, coupled with insufficient institutional support, constrains the global visibility of the region and reduces its competitiveness within the broader tourism market. Overcoming these structural limitations through comprehensive educational programs, capacity-building initiatives, and inclusive policy frameworks is essential for advancing a sustainable and culturally sensitive tourism paradigm.

Ultimately, this research unequivocally demonstrates that the integration of sustainable development and cultural cooperation is not only feasible but also imperative for preserving the unique heritage of the Balkan region and ensuring its long-term political and economic stability.

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KULTURNA POLITIKA I ODRŽIVI RAZVOJ: IZAZOVI I MOGUĆNOSTI NACIONALNOG PARKA ŠAR-PLANINA

Studija istražuje potencijal za održivi razvoj i kulturnu saradnju unutar *Nacionalnog parka Šar-planina*, naglašavajući složene izazove upravljanja prirodnim i kulturnim resursima. Primarni cilj je identificirati ključne strukturne prepreke i predložiti strateške smjernice usmjerene na povećanje održivosti i poticanje kulturne saradnje. Pristupom mješovitih metoda, koji uključuje sistematski pregled literature, etnografska terenska istraživanja i participativno promatranje, ovo istraživanje nastoji razjasniti društvenu dinamiku lokalnih zajednica i njihove interakcije s okolinom. Podaci otkrivaju značajne mogućnosti za razvoj održivog turizma, očuvanje biološke raznolikosti i promicanje kulturne baštine kroz revitalizaciju lokalnih dobara, uključujući tradicionalne zanate i festivale. Osim toga, integracija zimskih sportova prepoznata je kao ključni faktor ekonomskog razvoja. Međutim, tekući izazovi poput degradacije ekosistema, socioekonomske nejednakosti i geopolitičkih napetosti koče napredak. Studija zagovara uspostavu partnerstva između lokalnih zajednica i međunarodnih dionika, naglašavajući potrebu integracije lokalnog znanja s okvirima globalne saradnje kako bi se optimiziralo upravljanje resursima i osiguralo aktivno sudjelovanje zajednice u inicijativama održivog razvoja.

Ključne riječi: *kulturna politika, održivi razvoj, Balkan, Šar-planina, međunarodna i regionalna saradnja*