Vitosha Nature Park
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Vitosha is the first park in Bulgaria and on the Balkan Peninsula.

The idea of creating protected areas in Bulgaria appeared as far back as the beginning of 20th century. An important step in this direction was the creating of the Union for Protection of Native Nature in 1928. It was established by the botanical, natural historian, geological and speleological societies, and the societies of foresters-academicians and of Bulgarian foresters, the Bulgarian Tourist Union, the Youth Tourist Union, the Bulgarian Hunting Organization and the Bulgarian Fishing Union. Consequently, the Ministry of Agriculture and State Property joined the Union.

In 1931 on the grounds of a Union’s proposal, a commission from the Ministry of Agriculture and State Property was appointed to suggest a list of the plant species and territories under protection. The initial idea was a National park in Rila Mountain to be created. Two years later, the commission, reviewing the existing ideas, put forward at the Permanent Wood Council a suggestion for establishing Vitosha National Park and the reserves Parangalitsa in Rila and Gorna Elenitsa - Silkosia in Strandga mountains. With a protocol of the Permanent Wood Council from 1933 the proposal was accepted for promulgating the National Park at the high part of the mountain which was possession of the state. The motives of the Council stated that Vitosha was the mountain that is nearest to the capital and visited by tourists and it had an unarguable importance for the development of science. The council appointed to a commission to define more accurately the borders of the park and the reserves within its territory and also to prepare a cultural plan for its development.

By a decree of the Ministry of Agriculture and State Property from 1934 Vitosha National Park with the reserves within it was proclaimed, its total area being 6 410 hectares.

In 1935 the first specialized administration of protected territory in Bulgaria was created - the administration of Vitosha National Park. It included a director with high forestry education, assistant forester, three supervisors on forestation and four rangers. Working out of a map of the park of the scale of one to five thousand, creating of four forest-tree nurseries and forestation of the deforested terrain around Aleko hut and Boeritsa wood-house were among the first activities of the administration. During the first five years 750 hectares new forests were planted, roads were built from Boyana to Planinet's hut and from Dragalevtsi to Aleko hut, 22 km tourist paths were made, equipped with direction signs, benches and shelters.

In 1936 by proposal of the Union for Protection of Native Nature a decree-law was prepared and promulgated for protection of native nature according which the park was no longer National, but People’s.
In 1939 rules for managing and administration of the Vitosha People’s Park and the reserves within it were published. In the rules the borders of Bistrishko and Torfeno (Peat) Branishte reserves were defined and a territory was differentiated where the construction of public buildings was permitted. The rules set ski ways and routes where passing on horses and transport vehicles was allowed. In the rules the allowed and prohibited activities within the borders of the park were pointed out. These rules had been working till 1 August 1952 when by a decree of the Council of Ministers Vitosha Mountain was proclaimed People’s Park with area of 22 725.8 hectares. With this broadening the foothills of the mountain to the side of Sofia were included in the park as well as parts of the land belonging to the villages Kladnitsa, Rudartsi, Marchaev, Bistritsa and Zhelezmitsa.

In 1981 with an order by the Committee for Environmental Protection the area of the park was changed to 26 547 hectares as territories from the land belonging to Jarlovo and Bosnek were included.

In 1991 with an order of the Ministry of Environment it was expanded to 26 606.6 hectares by including territories in the region of the way Zhelezmitza - Yarema. In March 2004 with an order of the Ministry of Environment and Water the park’s area was expanded to today’s 27 079,114 ha.

In July 2000 with an order of the Ministry of Environment and Water People’s Park Vitosha was re-categorized into Nature Park with the same name. The change is in accordance with the requirements of the Protected Area Act.
Since antiquity the villages around Vitosha have been giving shelter to many tribes of Thracian and Slavic origin. Goths, Huns, Avars, Tatars, Pechenegs, Magyars passed from here. In the Middle Ages the mountain was known as center of the Bulgarian Little Mount Athos. During the Second Bulgarian state Vitosha and its surrounding areas were strwn with fortresses and about 40 big and small monasteries. In the times of the Ottoman invasion most monasteries were burned out. Their reconstruction was absolutely prohibited by sultan’s directives from the Sublime Port. During the five centuries of Ottoman slavery Vitosha was kind of protector of Bulgarian people. In 1918 here, in the foothills of the mountain, the Soldiers’ uprising was routed.

The following Medieval cultural and historical monuments have been reserved:

**DRAGALEVTSI “ASSUMPTION” MONASTERY** is part of the group of monasteries that appeared towards the end of XIV century around Sofia and were called Little Mount Athos. Historical information about the monasteries was found in the royal decree of Tsar Ivan Shishman, the last Turnovo tsar. In the Vitosha deed, as they call the royal decree Ivan Shishman called the monastery “Vitosha immaculate custodian of God” and notes that founder and decorator of the monastery was his father, Tsar Ivan Aleksandar (1331-1371). Now the deed is kept in the Zograph Monastery (Mount Athos). It was given to the monastery before 1328, i.e. before the fall of Sofia and its surrounding areas under Turkish rule. In the royal decree Ivan Shishman gave full autonomy to the monastery and ordered: “No one should dare to interfere in this monastery... and no authority at all should venture to be obstructive to the people from the Vitosha immaculate custodian of God and all such to be chased away and this royal decree from our kingdom to be shown. Only the Father Superior alone... and no one else should not venture to dare or to touch a hair of the heads of these monastery people...”. It is the last written document from Shishman’s time.

Of the old monastery complex only the church is now preserved, decorated with noticeable frescos. Of the initial wall-painting only fragments stay - the scenes of “Pilate’s trial”, “Judas returns the pieces of silver”, “The hanging of Judas”, “Peter’s denial”, the faces of St. Roman Sweet-singer, St. Peter and others and in the narthex of the church it is fully preserved. The greater part of the walls is covered with frescos of later times.

Here, on the western wall, old testimony scenes “The hospitality of Abraham”, “Abraham’s sacrifice”, “Prophet Elija in the cave, being fed by the craven” and a unique moralizing scene from monastery life - the sending of a monk in the sinful world outside the monastery to fight temptations. The whole vault arch, the eastern, northern and southern walls of the narthex are occupied by the large “Doomsday” composition.
In it Christ is presented in radiance, surrounded by apostles and angels in natural, free and easy poses. It is shown how, at the Last Judgement the earth and the sea throw out the dead, how the sky twists as a roll, how angels trumpet and gather the resurrecting, how the throne is prepared for Christ and the supreme judge divides the just men from the sinners, rendering to the just men the kingdom of heaven. The signs of the zodiac over the unfolded “roll” in the sky and the personifications of the winds (inherited from antiquity) are curios and rare details, that distinguish the Dragalevtsi composition. The viewer’s interest is attracted not only by the scenes of the sinners’ tortures but also by the salvation of the just men in whose faces (especially those of the holly women) links with real life can be caught, facial features of popular types, recreated by the painter.

The western facade of the old monastery church, devoted to Virgin Mary was decorated a little later with the images of Virgin Mary and of three of the most popular warriors saints-riders. Also scenes with the miracles of St. George, St. Dimitri and St. Mercury each are presented.

The next stage of renewal activity in the monastery continued during XVII century. It is then that frescos on the outer northern wall of the church were created including the faces of famous monks of the East Orthodox among which St. Ivan Rilski and St. Petka Turnovska. In 1932 to the old church an extension and a round gallery were built so that these frescos are today in the interior of the second monastery church, adjoined to the old one.

Dragalevtsi Monastery is a place that kept Bulgarian culture, traditions and language during the five centuries of Turkish slavery and in the years of fighting for national liberation, one of the most active centers of the fight for freedom. The monastery had often been visited by Vasil Levski during 1871-1872.

Dragalevtsi Monastery is a preferred tourist site due to its proximity to Sofia, the automobile road to it available and the beautiful nature.
KLADNI TSA “ST. NICHOLAS” MONASTERY is situated east of Kladnitsa village. The church is in the yard of the monastery. It was reconstructed upon old foundation in 1841. It is built of stone and plastered, there are old rocks walled in with images and patterns on them. There is one altar. The metropolitan of Samokov consecrated it. In 1890 Bishop Partenii consecrated it. Church-donor was Spas Burnov from Marchaevo. He was slaughtered in the church by Sofia’s pasha who was against its building. There are frescos from 1883, some of which are signed by the painter Kosto Anticarov of Samokov. Only on the “St. Virgin Mary” icon there is a signature from the year of the church’s erection. In the yard of the church is the grave of the church-donor. There are buildings for guests to the monastery.

BOYANA “ST. PANTELEYMON” CHURCH is situated at the border with the park. It is a unique monument of Bulgarian spirit, an exceptional example of medieval Bulgarian icon-painting and architecture from that period. As a landmark of world importance it was listed as a world heritage UNESCO site. This church is not an isolated phenomenon, but is in connection with a chain of monuments in Bulgaria, many of which were destroyed by Ottoman invaders.

Architecturally the church is very interesting, its design dating back to V-VI century. The complex consists of three successively built parts, as the oldest church, the east one, was built in X and XI centuries. The two-floored church, which was added to it in XIII century, is very well connected in architectural aspect with the first one. The third part was built of stone in XIV century and does not have architectural and artistic value. It is the world-famous Boyana church frescos illustrating the achievements of Bulgarian icon-painting school from the Middle Ages that is of great value for the Bulgarian cultural heritage. They were painted in 1259 by order of Sebastocrator Kaloyan.

The oldest part, the east one, dates back to the time of the Boyana fortress. It is built of bricks. Its lay out is that of a cross with equal arms. Its cupola stands on four arches over the cross’s arms. The apse has a semicircular form and one window.

Boyana church is famous both in Bulgaria and abroad mainly for the high artistic qualities of the 1259 frescos, which follow the decorative system and iconography of Byzantine art from XI-XII century. In terms of their style and mixed fresco-tempera technique the Boyana church wall-paintings are very close to the XIII century ones in Tarnovo. They were created by an unknown painter, a Bulgarian who worked in the style of the Tarnovo artistic school. With their vital, humane realism they are a Renaissance phenomenon, at that in its culmination phase for the whole European art. They take one of the first places in medieval XIII century European painting.
The Boyana master has succeeded to put in exceptional for the time realism and new for the Middle ages humane aesthetics. Man is in the center of attention - wise, gentle, and compassionate. The images of Jesus are many. He is presented in different roles, conditions and age - Christ All-powerful, Christ Benefactor, 12-year-old Christ in the temple, etc. In the Boyana church 89 different scenes can be seen with 240 human images painted, together or separately. The height in the Boyana master’s work are the four church-donors’ portraits, those of Sebastocrator Kaloyan and his wife Princess Desislava and Bulgarian Tsar Konstantin Asen (1257-1277) and Tsaritsa Irina. The images are accurately individualized and the dress and decoration give us exact impression for the formal court dress in XIII century. Kaloyan is presented with the model of the church he built in his hands.

The writing on the church says: “It was raised from its foundations...with the means, care and the great love of Sevastocrator Kaloyan, cousin of the tsar and grand son of Stefan, Serbian king. It was painted in the Bulgarian kingdom at the time of the good and faithful, devout and pious Tsar Konstantin Asen in index 7, year 6764/1259”

Till the end of XIX century here had been kept many Old-Bulgarian books. For ages and ages, at liturgies here the names of Bulgarian tsars, patriarchs and boyars had been mentioned, which kept the national consciousness.

From 1968 the Boyana church is a national monument of culture.
Today’s appearance of Vitosha had been formed in the remote past about 80 million years ago in the end of the mesozoic era. Where now the mountain raises there had been a sea. On its bottom had been depositing layers of sands, limestone and clay. The slow rhythm of these processes had been interrupted by intense tectonic activity accompanied by mountain forming motions. The earth’s layers had been folding, crushing and splitting. During upper Cretaceous period in the region of Vitosha began strong active volcanic activity. Under the waters of the sea great amount of lava had been flowing. After implanting of magma in the earth’s crust a rising began of the earth’s surface. As a result a plutonic body formed (Vitosha’s core), which stayed under the surface of the sea.

On the place of Vitosha in the end of the mesozoic and the beginning of the neozoic eras a deep crack having north-northwest-south-southeast direction appeared. In it, at four successive impulses magma implanted, forming the four upper layers of the plutonic rock: gabbro, monzonite, quartz and granite.

Vitosha’s plutonic rock after its getting completely cool started ousting upwards. It tore the andesite cover of which only the frame stayed. It raised mostly in its southeast parts where are the high peaks of the mountain as the northwest part descended and covered with Tertiary layers of the Pernik hollow.

The highest central parts of Vitosha where are mounts above 2000 meters, together with Cherni Vruh (the highest point of the mountain, 2290 m), as well as a great part of its western side, are built of Vitosha’s plutonic rocks. It has wedge-shaped form, 13 km long and up to 9 km wide. It is wrapped by kind of an andesite ring, torn only to the side of the Pernik plain, and covered with sediments. These andesites form the steep northern side of Sofia districts Knjazhevo, Bojana, Dragalevtsi, Bistritsa and Zhelezitsa. In the plutonic rock are situated mounts Kamen Del, the Kupens, Boyana Waterfall and others. In the southern parts of the plutonic rock are located the Duhlata Cave and Zhivata Voda Spring near the village of Bosnek in the Struma River valley.

Nowadays’ relief of the mountain is a result of the weathering, erosion and the activity of water. Vitosha in its shape stands out as a heap (which differentiates it from our other mountains), with almost equal sizes at length (23 km) and width (18 km). Due to the mountain's heap-like shape mounts do not stand out clearly from its overall silhouette. Within the park there are 9 peaks which are above 2000 m high.
Actually, when seen from Space, the mountain consists of several concentric levelings, one above the other, and of different geological age, formed at the repeated raisings of the earth layers during the mountain’s formation. These levelings correspond to the periods of repose which followed each of Vitosha’s raisings. Active processes of destroying and leveling up of the earth’s surface at which the four Vitosha’s surfaces were formed accompanied the periods of repose. The first and oldest leveling, formed after the first raising of Vitosha is the ridge’s surface above 2000 m above sea level the second one stands out at the belt around 1800-2000 m above sea level the third one was developed at 1400-1600 m the fourth one is found at about 1200-1400 m. On the last level surfaces the peat and bogs came into being, keeping up the waters of Vitosha rivers all through the summer. Here are most of Vitosha plateaus, too. Defined in such a way, these levels determine a terraced landscape and show that the mountain had been raising at stages. To some extent these steps correspond to the climate and plant zones in the mountain.

As a consequence of these continuous rising processes and the characteristic bulbous cracking of the basic rock - sienite, the unique “stone rivers” of Vitosha were formed which do not have anything in common with the glacial moraines known. Researches made so far relate their formation above all to the type and structure of the basic rock. The surface’s rounding of a rock block is explained on the one hand as a result of the water penetrating into the cracks, and on the other - the process of the normal mechanical weathering of the basic rock which also leads to a superficial destroying particularly of ribbed parts of the stone blocks. The gravitation processes play major role for the accumulation and movement of the sienite blocks to the lower parts of the valleys. The moraines are characteristic with expressiveness and largeness which are rarely seen in other Bulgarian mountains. In difference from taluses, stone rivers can be found not only on the swaths but also on the different surfaces of the steps. On Vitosha there are taluses around Cherni Vruh, the Rezens, the Big Kupen, Siva Gramada, Chernata Skala, etc.

Low mountains and hollows surround Vitosha. With the nearer and lower mountains (Lozenska Mountain, Plana, Verila, Ljulin) it is connected by saddles. The rest of the mountain ranges that surround the mountain are the following ones: Rila Mountain (to the south-east), Rui Mountain (to the west), Stara Planina (to the north, behind Sofia’s hollow) and Sredna Gora (to the north-east).
Over the territory of the park 61 main types of habitats have been distinguished. Because of this variety it was included in the list of places that keep natural values with European importance on the CORINE BIOTOPES Program.

The main types of natural habitats are distributed into several main groups. Abiotic components of the environment (rivers, waterfalls, caves, rocks, etc.) comprise 7 of them. Forest type natural habitats are 19 and include the variety of broad-leaved, coniferous and mixed forests. Communities of bushes and scrubs are distributed in 8 types of natural habitats. Fourteen are related to the grass communities. Anthropogenic habitats include two types of arable land, wood cultures are 8 types, and the urbanized territories are distributed into 3 types.

From the natural habitats, listed in Annex I of the Biological Diversity Act, 18 types have been specified in the park’s territory. This makes Vitosha Nature Park particularly important in building the National Ecological Network and requires its designation as a protected area. Habitats included in Annex I of Directive 92/43 of the European Union are of special importance. Within the nature park’s borders 32 types of natural habitats from the Annex are specified. They cover 66% of the park’s territory. Most valuable are the forest type habitats, steppe and grass communities, moraines, caves and peat complexes. The natural spruce forests, beech forests and riparian communities are of greatest nature protection interest. There are little remains of preserved old coniferous forests along the Vladaiska river and in the “Bistrisko Branište” Reserve. The greatest part of the beech forests are of offshoot origin. Small spots of old trees of mixed origin (near Dragalevtsi Monastery) remind for the once magnificent beech forests. Of riparian communities the habitats of Common Alder along the rivers in the southern part of the park are particularly interesting.

In the southern parts of the mountain the appearance of the grass vegetation differs from that in its northern parts. The karst base in the area around the village of Bosnek has created preconditions for formation of steppe communities, of which a major species is the European Feather Grass. In this region caves are also concentrated representing a unique natural complex. More than 30 caves are known, the longest cave in Bulgaria - "Duhlata" being here.

Stone rivers and taluses are another specific natural habitat type. At them there are a number of representative species from the lower plants (lichens and mosses) and some rare and endemic higher plants.
The biggest peat complex in the country is being preserved in Vitosha Nature Park. The peat complexes are provided with water in different ways and the presence of certain plant species, particularly peat mosses (Sphagnum genus) is quite characteristic for them. These mosses have special hyaline (dead) cells, which keep the water. In such a way a plant can hold up to 25 times more water than its dry weight. In the conditions of low temperatures, limited quantity of oxygen and high acidity of water, the decay of plants is very slow. This leads to accumulation of peat (semi-decomposed organic mass). The peat can reach such thickness that plants on the surface become fully isolated from underground waters and atmospheric precipitation to be the only way for providing moisture. Peat’s thickness can reach 7-8 m but in Vitosha it does not exceed 2 meters, as the living part of the plant cover most often is from 30 to 50 cm. Peat areas in the southern parts of Europe can be treated as “pieces” from the arctic tundra, that have survived only in the high mountains after the glacial epochs when they were much more widely spread. The age of Vitosha peat areas varies in a very wide scope. The one considered oldest is the peat area situated east from “Kumata” hut which dates back to 1000-1500 years ago. The youngest one is the peat area below “Ostritsa” hut and is about 150 years old.

Forest peat areas are a rarely met habitat. In Bulgaria they occupy limited areas in the high mountains - Rila, Rodopi and Vitosha. They are rarity in Europe, too. They have been defined as priority ones for protection also because of their relict nature. With the warming of the climate after the glacial epochs they have been replaced by forests. At places, however, they have survived amidst forest vegetation. In Vitosha they occupy small areas among spruce forests where through leveled terrains and terraces in the forests come down mountain springs and little rivers.

Forest peat areas are often in complexes with mountain riparian grasslands. They form strips along springs and little rivers in the forests. The water is shallow, often runs fast and is deficient in nutritive substances. These communities consist of big herbs, often with wide leafs which is a sign that they grow under the shadow of forests. In Bulgaria, including Vitosha, they are specific for some Balkan endemics can be seen in them. Except scientific, these communities have also esthetical value because of the presence of some plants with particularly beautiful flowers.
The vegetation of Vitosha Nature Park is extremely rich and diverse. Its formation has started millions of years ago and it is a result of the specific geological conditions in the mountain and climate changes as well as the active human intervention during the last couple of centuries.

The mountain is a habitat of a great number of higher and lower plant species. This variety can be observed all over the open green meadows, in the rivers and cool forests.

Over the territory of Vitosha Nature Park, about 500 algae species have been encountered in the flowing rivers or permanent calm bodies of water. The open grass area and forests provide habitat for the mushrooms, which are presented by 805 species. Rare species of mushrooms identified in Vitosha are 15, 4 of them inhabiting only the park’s territory. Lichens are also numerous – over 360 species with 22 of them growing only in Vitosha. The mountain is rich in mosses, too. Three hundred twenty-six species have been found over the park’s territory, which forms about 47% of the moss flora in Bulgaria. Mosses are spread across all mountain belts and occur in various types of habitats. There are 13 rare, 8 vulnerable and 7 endangered moss species.

One thousand four hundred eighty-nine higher plant species have been described for the territory of Vitosha which is about half of the higher flora of Bulgaria and one third more than the whole flora of Great Britain. Ten of these species are distributed only in Bulgaria (Bulgarian endemics) while the Balkan endemics are much more. Fifty-nine of the plant species that inhabit the nature park are listed in the Red Data Book of Bulgaria.

The diversity of tree and shrub species (about 150) is not smaller than that of flowering plants. Many of them are of extraordinary conservation importance. Some relict tree species, which survived former geological epochs, occur in the park’s territory, such as the Macedonian pine (Pinus peuce) - Tertiary relict that is distributed only on the Balkan peninsula. One of the biggest areas covered by another Tertiary relict - the Yew (Taxus baccata) is located in Vitosha and is a remainder of even wider formation largely devastated by the human interference. There are about 100 trees in the territory of Vitosha Nature Park of a third relict and endemic for the Balkan Peninsula species: the Heldreich’s Maple (Acer heldreichii). Willow family (Salicaceae) includes a species which is protected - the Bay Willow (Salix pentandra). This species is listed in the Red Data Book under “endangered” category. The last surviving habitat of the Bay Willow in Bulgaria is located in Vitosha - near the Hut of Artists.

The round yellow flowers of one of the rare flowering plants, included in Bulgarian Red Data Book can be seen high in the mountain in the open areas. This is the Globe Flower (Trollius europaeus), known also as Vitosha Tulip which period of blossoming starts in the beginning of June. Another rare plant with beautiful yellow flowers, from the Buttercup family (Ranunculaceae) is the Gold Columbine (Aquilegia aurea). It is endemic species for the Balkan Peninsula. One of the most beautiful and rare flowers in Vitosha is the Fairy Flower (Lilium jankae). Unfortunately, its number is decreasing as a result of the interest that it raises among the uninformed visitors of the park. The Fairy Flower is included in the lists of the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats which indicates its decrease at European level.
Half of the species of Orchid family (*Orchidaceae*) growing in Bulgaria are also found in Vitosha. The Traunsteinera (*Traunsteinera globosa*) and European Lady’s Tresses (*Spiranthes autumnalis*) are representative species of this family listed in the Bulgarian Red Data Book under the category “rare”. All species of *Orchidaceae* are listed and protected by the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). A seldom occurring species of *Listera* genus belongs to this family. Local people call these plants with the common name “shelter”, probably because their flowers are sheltered between two big leaves. In the spruce forest along the upper reach of Vladayska River, the famous Bulgarian botanist Boris Kitanov found in 1938 a very rare *Listera* species.

In the high and open parts of the mountain two insectivorous species can be found: the Common Sundrew (*Drosera rotundifolia*) and (*Pingicula vulgaris*). *Pingicula vulgaris* is encountered in not too damp places in the peat reserve “Torfeno Branishte” while the Sundrew grows on the wet micro-lowerings in the peat bogs.

Balkan endemics that inhabit Vitosha Nature Park are the Bulgarian Gentian (*Gentianella bulgarica*) which is widely distributed, particularly along the tourist trails in the upper parts of the park and *Iris reichenbachii* which has beautiful flowers and therefore is often gathered illegally by tourists. Bulgarian endemic species which grow over the territory of Vitosh Nature Park are also interesting. Most characteristic of them are *Jasione bulgarica*, *Minuartia bulgarica* and the Wood-rush species *Lusula deflexa*.

The nearness of Vitosha to the capital city makes the mountain resources very vulnerable. Let us have responsible behavior that does not spoil the harmony and beauty which nature has created for us.
The rich and diverse invertebrate fauna is typical for Vitosha Mountain. The mountain is a representative spot hosting unique communities of invertebrate animals. According to its number of endemic, rare and endangered species Vitosha ranges at second place in Bulgaria. One hundred forty eight endemic species (Bulgarian and Balkan), three hundred rare species and eighty-five species of relict invertebrates, eighteen of which typical Arcto-Alpine glacial relics, are spread here. The underground invertebrate fauna in the region of Bosnek’s karst is particularly original. Some crustacean species are found only in Vitosha caves and thus known for the science. Cave dwelling organisms are adapted to specific microenvironment, which makes them extremely vulnerable to its deviations, and therefore these organisms are protected by the law.

Typical insects of the mountain are the Great Capricorn Beetle (*Cerambix cerdo*), the cerambycid beetle *Morimus funereus*, various species of wood ants (*Formica sp.*) and others. As a result of habitat changes, and probably other reasons, one of the most beautiful and popular butterflies – the Red Apollo Butterfly (*Parnassius apollo*) has become extinct in Vitosha. According to some researchers similar destiny has befallen also the diurnal butterfly *Colias caucasica balcanica* which is Balkan endemic.

Vitosha is deficient in fish diversity. The middle and upper reaches of the rivers are mainly inhabited by the Brown Trout (*Salmo trutta fario*). In the past, almost all of Vitosha rivers were planted with artificially bred Brown Trout but also with untypical of the mountain alien species such as Charr and Rainbow Trout. Currently the fish populations are reduced in number. Aiming at improving their state Vitosha Nature Park Directorate planted two of the rivers in the park with Brown Trout.

Twenty four reptiles and amphibians have been distinguished in the park, among which the Fire Salamander (*Salamandra salamandra*), Crested Newt (*Triturus cristatus*), Common Tree Frog (*Hyla arborea*), and Aesculapian Snake (*Elaphe longissima*).

During different seasons of the year approximately 200 species of birds can be observed in Vitosha, 120 of which breed here. One of the most characteristic inhabitants of spruce forests is the Nutcracker (*Nucifraga caryocatactes*). This bird often reveals its presence by its specific crack. Spruce forests are also inhabited by the Goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*), Coal Tit (*Parus ater*), Crossbill (*Loxia curvirostra*), Siskin (*Carduelis spinus*), Bullfinch (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*) and others. Often Great Spotted Woodpecker (*Picoides major*) and Black Woodpecker (*Dryocopus martius*) can be seen. The Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*), Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*), Long-legged Buzzard (*Buteo rufinus*), Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) and others are among the predatory birds encountered in Vitosha Nature Park.

In the mixed woodlands of seldom visited areas, the Hazel Hen (*Bonasa bonasa*) can be observed though rarely. The open sub-alpine belt is inhabited by the Balkan Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris balcanica*), Water Pipit (*Anthus spinolaetata*), Rock Thrush (*Monticola saxatilis*), Whinchat (*Saxicola rubetra*), Alpine Accentor (*Prunella collaris*), and Ring Ouzel (*Taurus torquatus*).

Some nocturnal birds of prey that occur in the area are the Tawny Owl (*Strix aluco*), Long-eared Owl (*Asio otus*), Little Owl (*Athene noctua*), a rare owl species- Tengmalm’s Owl (or Rough-legged Owl) (*Aegolius funereus*) and others.

The small mammals of greatest distribution are the European Water Shrew (*Neomys fodiens*), Miller’s Water Shrew (*Neomys anomalus*), Bicoloured White-toothed Shrew (*Crocidura leucodon*), Common Dormouse (*Muscardinus avellanarius*), Forest Dormouse (*Dryomys nitedula*) and others.
Up to now, 13 species of bats have been encountered in Vitosha, some of which are: Lesser Horseshoe Bat (*Rhinolophus hipposideros*), Greater Horseshoe Bat (*Rhinolophus ferrumequinum*), Greater Mouse-eared Bat (*Myotis myotis*), Lesser Mouse-eared Bat (*Myotis blythi*), Particoloured Bat (*Vespertilio murinus*), Grey Long-eared Bat (*Plecotus austriacus*), Common Bent-wing Bat (*Miniopterus schreibersii*) and others. Greatest is the number of bats in the caves of Bosnek’s karst area. As a result of the enormous interest in this part of the mountain, the quantity of bat colonies has been greatly reduced. Bats are particularly vulnerable and very often suffer unscrupulous attitude. All bat species are protected by the Biological Diversity Act.

Some large mammals can still be encountered in the undisturbed places of the mountain. These are Red Deer (*Cervus elaphus*), Roe Deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*), Brown Bear (*Ursus arctos*) and Wolf (*Canis lupus*). As a result of poaching and disturbance, the number of these species has decreased immensely in the last years and currently they are slowly recovering. The mountain provides shelter for the European Hare (*Lepus europaeus*), Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), Common Otter (*Lutra lutra*), Common Wild Cat (*Felix silvestris*) and others. Some non-native species have been imported in the park such as Fallow Deer, Mouflon, Sika Deer, Marmot, Elk, Ibex, American Mink and Black Grouse. All of them have disappeared immediately or shortly after their introduction in the mountain.

The recovery of the population of the Balkan Chamois (*Rupicapra rupicapra balkanica*), a species which has been extinct in the mountain since more than 100 years, was initiated in 2002 in the territory of Vitosha Nature Park. The project is implemented by Vitosha Nature Park Directorate in partnership with Balkani Wildlife Society and State Game Station “Vitoshko-Studena” and with the financial support of the National Trust Eco-fund, National Forest Board, Frankfurt Zoological Society and Operational Programme Environment 2007-2013. After the successful completion of the project a species threatened at European level will return in the mountain.
Vitosha is extremely rich in water resources - springs, rivers, streams and waterfalls. The main Balkan Peninsula’s watershed passes at the ridge of the mountain dividing Aegean from Black Sea catchment basins. All rivers rising from Vitosha are feeders of the Iskar or Struma Rivers and as both big rivers belong to different catchment basins - the Black Sea one and the Aegean one Vitosha rivers can be divided into two groups - those that flow away to the Black Sea and those to the Aegean Sea. Rivers belonging to the Black Sea catchment basin are the following ones: Palakaria, Kurtova, Zheleznishka, Ljava, Bistrishka, Janchevska, Simeonovska, Dragalevska, Boyanska, Vldayska. Rivers belonging to the Aegean catchment basin are the following ones: Struma, Matnitsa, Tanchoytsa, Rudarshtitsa.

The Struma River, the largest one in southwestern Bulgaria, rises from Vitosha. Its length to the Bulgarian - Greek border is 285 km and its total length - 415 km.

Other big Vitosha rivers are the ones: Vldayska, Boyanska, Dragalevska, Bistritsa, Zheleznishka (Iskar’s feeders) and Kladnishka and Matnitsa (Struma’s feeders).

Most of Vitosha rivers have their beginning from the peat swamps which are vast bogs in the alpine part of the mountain. The peat on Visokoto plato (or the High Plateau) is the biggest one. This is also the most essential alpine peat complex in Bulgaria which was pronounced Torfeno (Peat) Branishte Reserve with a total area of 783 hectares. With its specific structure peat has exceptional water retaining qualities. Its thickness reaches 2 meters depth at places. Rain waters as well as water from melting snow penetrating into the peat’s cover drain very slowly and sustain the existence of damp meadows and bogs all year round. Capacity of the springs and rivers that rise from the reserve and provide drinking water for the city of Sofia is constant, too. That is why the whole area of the reserve has been included in the water-providing zone of the city.

Except for the capital city the mountain is major source of drinking water for the town of Pernik. Vitosha waters are being used for the water-supply of Bankja, Radomir, Dolno Dragitchevo and towns and villages from the entire foothills area. Territories in the park with sanitary-protective importance for drinking water supply surpass 60% of the park’s area.

Nowadays Vitosha lacks natural mountain lakes but there are historic data that confirm the presence of two of them till the middle of 19th century. According to some authors (Prof. Deliradev) those natural Vitosha lakes were dried at the time of the Ottoman rule for the needs of mining. The site where the two lakes had been located is now called “Suhoto Ezero” (or the Dry Lake). There are no natural lakes in Vitosha but artificial water areas have been created in return. Studena Dam Lake, the biggest one (its area being 1416 decares), is situated in the western part of the mountain and was build with the aim to supply Pernik with water. Another artificial lake is Boyana Lake, located near the round path Dragalevtsi-Boyana. It has been created on the place of a large wet zone.

Vitosha is extremely rich in springs. Their overall number exceeds 40, about 33 are appropriate for drinking water supply. Great part of them are caught for local needs, mainly leisure and tourism spots as well as wayside fountains (about 240). The water of Vitosha’s springs and wells is famous for its nice taste. The superb qualities of Vitosha water are thought to be related to the conditions of their running through the cairns.
Vitosha springs are divided into three groups: thermal, underground and karst ones.

**Thermal** springs are located at the foothills of the mountain (Rudartsi, Knjazhevo, Zheleznitsa, Pancharevo). These mineral springs are warm, of temperatures between 28° and 32° C, slightly mineralized, proper for healing and drinking purposes. Vitosha springs are in contact with the depths under Vitosha from which they receive their warmth. Temperature as well as their mineralization varies according to their underground route and the rock and mineral layers that they go through. It can be seen that the closer the springs are to the massif, the lower the temperature of their water is.

**Karst** springs are situated in the southwestern limestone parts. The site called Zhivata Voda (3 km west of Chuipetlovo) consists of deep limestone and dolomite layers. The whole Bosphor’s karst region to which the site belongs abounds in caves, underground streams and rivers. The pulsating karst spring named “Zhivata Voda” (or Living Water) whose pulsation is explained with its odd interconnected-vessels structure is particularly interesting. Vreloto, near the village of Krapets, is the biggest karst spring in the region and is a source of drinking water for the town of Radomir.

**Underground** springs appear throughout the mountain.

The famous Boyana Waterfall is in Vitosha, too. It is situated on Boyanska River at 1200 m height above sea level, fall of the water being 15 m.
On the southern side of Vitosha, on an area about 30 km² that includes part of the territory around the villages of Bosnek and Chupeitovo, is situated Bosnek’s karst region. Almost all of the territory is within the borders of Vitosha Nature Park. The karst rocks occupy an area of 23 km². The district’s relief is mountainous with an average height above sea level of 900 m. Karst regions have specific superficial relief - sharp grooves and edges closed negative forms - whirlpools and hollows, dry valleys, with often steep slopes and niches in them isolated rocks and heights as well as the most popular underground forms - caves and abysses.

Karst forms in the region are developed into rocks - limestone and dolomites. The waters of the Struma River play an important role in these rocks’ karsting and in forming the underground hydrographic network. Precipitation is second in importance. Rainfalls and melting snow quickly penetrate under the ground and go out in the lowest parts as karst springs. These waters are the main factor for cave, abysses and superficial karst forms formation.

There are two major and unconnected karst systems along Struma riverbed: that of Duhlata and the one of Vreloto. The zone around Zhivata Voda Springs is treated as a separate system.

The first written information about caves in Bosnek’s region dates back to 1900. Since 1964 the region has been a subject of systematic speleological studies which prove that underground karst in the region is very well developed. Over 40 caves and abysses have become known.

The longest and one of the most beautiful caves in Bulgaria - Duhlata is here. It is a complex, multi-floored labyrinth cave with 6 underground rivers. The total length of the underground galleries exceeds 18 km. Part of the cave is developed under the modern bed of the Struma River. The variety of underground karst forms and cave crystals is great as well as that of different types of cave sediments. Part of the cave galleries widen into large underground halls.

Vreloto Cave is the second longest one in the region (5.3 km). It is a complex two-floored cave with internal abysses with underground rivers running through it. The cave’s total displacement is +90 meters. The underground river has been studied along 1600 m of its length. The galleries discovered are enormous in their volume and are filled with moon milk, crystals and formations. A large cemetery of prehistoric animals has also been discovered.

The biggest underground hall in Bulgaria is located in Vreloto Cave called “My friends” (230/40/30 m), as well as the “smaller” “Hall of magicians” (62/25/35 m) and “Hall of the big taluses” (60/50/10 m). Despite its big size, Vreloto Cave is hard to get
in for it is a water one, demands a long stay under the ground, one has to pass through many unstable blockades, semi-siphons, etc.

“PPD” cave is the deepest abyss cave in the region with a 125-m displacement and 1020 m galleries’ length. Great part of the galleries’ walls and floor is covered with a cave clay layer. It is the second most difficult cave in Bulgaria. After a sequence of horizontal galleries and abysses an underground spring is reached which is connected to the system of Vreloto Cave. The cave system “PPD- Vreloto” has a total length of above 30 km and total displacement of ~180 m.

In the region near Zhivata Voda Springs three caves are known. The one of the same name “Zhivata Voda” is 240 m long. It is a horizontal cave, where fragments of ceramics have been found close to the entry. Most interesting is the pulsating karst spring near it.

Vodnata Cave (or The Water Cave) is a short spring cave (down floor of “Zhivata Voda”) about 30m long. “Suhata Peshtera” (or the Dry Cave) represents a developed underground hall 50-60 m long and maximum 7-8 m high.

“Akademic” is a horizontal water cave 320-m long, part of the underground hydrology system of “Duhlata”. Exceptionally beautiful, it ends with a big hall about 60 m long and 5-6 m high. One of the longest pipe stalactites in the region can be seen here.

Visitors of the underground world often encounter the mysterious bats. In Bosnek’s karst region 10 bats species have been discovered, as the Lesser and Greater Horseshoe bats can be seen all year round. Because of the intense cave tourism the once popular bat colonies have disappeared.

In Vitosha 13 bat species have been encountered or 45% of the total of 29 in the country. All species are protected under the law.

Caves are sources of diverse information about the development of material and spiritual culture of mankind, animals and plants that have inhabited the planet in prehistoric and historic time. Cave layers (sediments) contain material remains from the life of man from the Stone Age till Medieval times as well as bone material from animals that lived before and after the appearance of the rational man (Homo sapiens). Usually, these remains are well conserved in the layers for they have not been exposed to the outer environment’s impact. Because of the specificity of the cave sedimentation all materials in the layers are in chronological sequence. Every break of the layers’ sequence leads to an impossibility to date the findings.

The underground world is very vulnerable and we should not break its fragile equilibrium by our presence.

Through Bosnek’s karst region pass important hiking routes connecting the southern parts of the mountain with Cherni Vruh and the northern parts.
Bistrishko Branishte Reserve is one of the first Bulgarian reserves. It was established in 1934 together with the promulgation of part of Vitosha Mountain for a protected area. The idea of preserving this valuable territory is reflected also in the name of the reserve as “branishte”, coming from a word in Bulgarian which means “to guard, to protect”.

The objective of designating this territory as a reserve is to preserve the natural and untouched state of the high mountain spruce forests, sub-Alpine grass communities, rock formations, and stone rivers.

In 1977 the reserve was declared as an UNESCO Biosphere Reserve under the Programme “Man and the Biosphere” – MAB. Under this programme patterns of preserved natural sites characteristic with their immense diversity of plant and animal species are identified. Together with 16 other reserves in Bulgaria, Bistrishko Branishte is part of the global network of Biosphere Reserves.

Bistrishko Branishte Biosphere Reserve is located on the northeastern slope of Vitosha Mountain. The highest point in the reserve is 2,286 m above see level and the lowest is 1,430 m above see level. Its location, along with the characteristics of the mountain, results in the presence of various landscapes.

Forests are the wealth of the reserve. They cover 52% of its territory while the rest of it is covered with meadows, sub-Alpine grass formations, rocks and stone rivers.

Spruces (Picea abies) are the main tree species and they are represented by 7 forms and varieties, which classifies the reserve as a territory of European conservation importance. There are preserved single 140-150 spruce trees, with a diameter of 1.3 m and average height of 25 m. Fragments of a previously large Mountain Pine layer (Pinus mugo) also occur here. Some widespread species in the spruce forests are the Common Juniper (Juniperus communis), European Hazelnut (Corylus avellana), Mountain Cranberry (Vaccinium vitis-idaea), Bilberry (Vaccinium myrtillus) etc.

The sub-Alpine zone of the reserve represents a motley mosaic of grass and bush communities, rocks, stone rivers and river bogs. That is the richest in species vegetation zone.

In the reserve as well as in the park, the most remarkable are the Stone Rivers - unique geology phenomena for Vitosha Mountain. Within the range of Bistrishko Branishte Reserve two rock streams can be noticed which are found along the valley of Bistritsa River. These are disorderly piled enormous pieces of rock different in their shape and size.

The relatively small area of Bistrishko Branishte Reserve impresses mainly with its great diversity which includes large number of endemic and relict species.

There is a remarkable diversity of plant species preserved in the reserve - about 500 species of algae, more than half of the 360 species of lichens identified in the park and more than 500 mushrooms. Ninety-nine mosses represented in different ecological groups and about 450 vascular plant species have been explored.

Among the significant plants with nature conservation value, 21 species have been listed in Bulgaria’s Red Data Book. Some of them are the Globe Flower (Trollius europaeus), Anemone (Anemone narcissiflora), Yellow Gentian (Gentiana lutea), Bearberry (Arctostaphylos uva-ursi), Round-leaved Wintergreen (Pyrola rotundifolia), the distribution of which in Bulgaria is limited only to Vitosha.

The Balkan endemics are presented in the reserve with the Crocus (Crocus veluhensis), Gold Columbine (Aquilegia aurea), as well as the Fairy Flower (Lilium jankae) which locality in the reserve is one of the several places in the country where this species grows. A Bulgarian endemic is the Wood-rush species Luzula deflexa. It is a rare and globally endangered species.

There are more than 25 species from the Orchid family (Orchidaceae) in the reserve. Exceptionally rare for Vitosha Mountain among these species is the Globe Orchid (Traustheimera globosa) which in Bulgaria can be seen only in Vitosha and Pirin mountains. This species is listed as globally rare plant.
The coniferous forests and sub-Alpine vegetation in the reserve are a pre-condition for great diversity in the animal world. The conservation of many of the species is not only of national but also of European importance.

About two-thirds of the invertebrates (804 species and subspecies) identified in the park have been found here. The highest number of rare, endemic and relict species is that of the Spiders (Araneo) and Butterflies (Lepidoptera).

The number of small Rodents is also high. The Snow Vole (Chionomys nivalis) is an interesting representative of the Mice family, being a rare species which came here during the Ice Age and still living in the reserve surviving several geological periods. The Nannospalax leucodon is inhabitant of the sub-Alpine zone. The species is listed in the Europe’s Red Data Book and the lists of globally threatened species.

The world of birds is also rich and varied. We can find all species typical of coniferous forests. Among them are the Nutcracker (Nucifraga caryocatactes), Goldcrest (Regulus regulus), Siskin (Carduelis spinus), Bullfinch (Pirrhula pyrrhula), and some species of Woodpeckers’ family. The Crossbill (Loxia curvirostra) and Rough-legged Owl (Aegolius funereus) are also typical representatives of the coniferous forests and glacial relicts.

Most of the predators and ungulates inhabiting Vitosha and the rest of Bulgarian mountains are encountered in the reserve. Listed at the European Red Data Book and the Red Data Book of Bulgaria are the Wolf (Canis lupus), Common Wild Cat (Felis silvestris), Brown Bear (Ursus arctos), and the Pine Marten (Martes martes).

Bistrishko Branishte Reserve is exclusive state property. The conservation of this natural ecosystem requires strict regime of protection which stipulates all kinds of activities. The regime and conservation of the reserve are set with Protected Area Act. Visits with research and education purposes are only allowed, as passing of tourists is permitted only along the marked trails.

**Endemic species** - a species occurring only in a specific geographic region  
**Relict species** - a species preserved from older geological epochs  
**Glacial relicts** - species of Arctic origin, which settled on the present-day territory of Bulgaria during the Ice Age.
The Peat Branishte Reserve preserves the largest high mountain peat complex in Bulgaria along with the moisture loving vegetation related to it. The reserve was designated in 1935. Today its total area is 783 hectares. It is situated on the northern slope of Vitosha Mountain, at altitude from 1,750 to 2,290 m above sea level. It includes a large part of the so-called Vitosha Plateau, from which the Vladasyska and the Boyanska Rivers rise.

Peat forming in the reserve began more than 1,500 years ago. Presently the depth of the peat cover is up to 2 m and continues to increase by about 1 mm annually.

Peat is formed mainly by Sphagnum mosses. The specific characteristic of the species of this genus is that every year the lower part of the stem decays and the higher continues to grow. Under the conditions of relatively low temperatures, high humidity and lack of oxygen, the decayed stems are not completely decomposed and form the peat.

The history of the development of park vegetation in the mountain is recorded in the peat layers. The pollen from the surrounding forests fell into the peat layers. Each pollen mote has a firm cover and can remain for a long time, even for thousands of years in the earth sediments and peat bogs. It was found that most of the pollen identified recently in the peat belongs to species which are the same as present-day species in the Vitosha forests: Spruce, Scots Pine, Silver Fir and Beech. This proves that the forest structure in the high part of Vitosha has not changed since the glacial epoch. Only the quantitative proportion among the species has changed. This gives us grounds to assume that the principal changes in plant associations resulted not only from changes in the climatic conditions, but also from human activities.

With its specific structure, peat possesses exceptional water-retaining properties. The rainfalls and the melting snow waters drain very slowly and thus maintain the wet grasslands and swamps all year long.

A specific vegetation complex has been formed in the reserve, connected with the peat and excessively wet terrains. Four bushy and 14 grass associations have been identified. There is a remarkable diversity of plant species in the reserve. Some 100 species and varieties of mosses and more than 200 algae species occur in the peat lands and other wetlands. The peat-forming species comprise 9 representatives of the peat mosses (Sphagnum genus) and 12 of the green mosses (Bryum genus). Thousands of drought-resistant mosses are typical for the dry and rocky territories in the reserve.

Higher plants widespread in the wetlands are the Red Avens (Geum coccineum), Grass-of-Parnassus (Parnassia palustris), Snow Gentian (Gentiana nivalis), Round-leaved Saxifrage (Saxifraga rotundifolia), White-flowered Veratrum (Veratum lobelianum), Marsh Margold (Caltha alpestris), Mountain Buttercup (Ranunculus montanus), Star Sedge (Carex echinata), Bird’s-eye Primrose (Primula farinosa), etc.

Vast areas of the well developed Sphagnum cover are occupied by the low bushes of Lapland Willow (Salix lapponum), Goat Willow (Salix caprea) and other representative species of high-mountainous willows.

Among the rare vascular plants there are two insectivorous plants - Pinguicula balcanica and Common Sundrew (Drosera rotundifolia). Here one can also find the beautiful golden-yellow round flowers of the Globe Flower (Trollius europaeus) which is also known as Vitosha Tulip.
In the reserve can be observed some species that occur today only on the Balkan Peninsula (Balkan endemics). These are the *Angelica pancicii* and the *Senecio pancicii*. The latter impresses with its bright orange blossoms.

A total of 12 species included in the Red Data Book of Bulgaria are identified in the Peat reserve as “rare” plants.

The sub-Alpine wet meadows, swamps and peatlands as well the rock complexes in the Reserve are suitable habitats for the rich and diverse animal world. The invertebrate fauna is presented by more than 200 species and about 20 families.

The largest number of rare species, species with local distribution (endemics), and species from past geological epochs (relicts) is that of the Spiders (*Aranea*). Four species of spiders could be seen only in Bulgaria (Bulgarian endemics).

More than 110 species of diurnal butterflies give brightness and colour to the Vitosha nature. About 33 from these species are listed as global and European endangered by extinction species.

There are not many Amphibian and Reptile species that inhabit the cold peat land. The Common Frog (*Rana temporaria*) is the only Amphibian that survives the long winter in the severe conditions into the peat and the springs. Viviparous Lizard (*Lacerta vivipara*) also inhabits wet meadows and peat and dominates in the upper zones of Vitosha. The lizard as well as the Common Frog is preserved from earlier geological periods (glacial relict). The two species are protected under the Bulgarian legislation.

For avian representatives this zone is an important trophic base, especially for some representatives of *Falconidae family*, which hunt on the ground. The sub-Alpine zone of the reserve is important for the existence of the endemic Balkan subspecies of the Balkan Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris balcanica*) and the subspecies of Alpine Accentor (*Prunella collaris subalpina*).

Peat lands and wet meadows provide shelter for the remarkable Rodent Regnum. The dense grass cover and moss tufts are the place where the Vole (*Microtus arvalis*) and the *Micromys minutus* raise their offspring. Snow Vole (*Chionomys nivalis*) is also a representative of the Mice family and has survived several geological epochs. Typical for the highest part of the reserve is also the *Nonnaspalax leucodon*, threatened with extinction on a global scale.

Rocks and bushes are the favorite places for the Weasel (*Mustela nivalis*) and the Beech Marten (*Martes foina*).

The Wolf is also one of the inhabitants of this mountain world. It is listed as endangered species in the European Red Data Book. The Roe Deer and Red Deer are other representatives of the large mammals.

The Peat Branishte Reserve is exclusive state property. The strict regime of protection of the reserve stipulates all kinds of activities. The movement of tourists is allowed only along the marked trails. Visits for research purposes should be made with the permission of the Ministry of Environment and Water.
Vitosha Nature Park is the most visited protected area in Bulgaria with over 2.5 million visitors every year. This long-term tendency has its beginning from the years in the end of 19th century. At the time, right here, in Vitosha, Bulgarian organized tourism was born.

The path passing through the village of Zheleznitsa and Cherni Vruh to Vladay and Knjazhevo is one of the main routes in the mountain. Along it Aleko Konstantinov realized the first climbing of Cherni Vruh on 24 July 1889. On his first excursion he and a group of friends started from Sofia and through Gorublje, German Monastery - Pancharevo, Kokaljane Monastery and the village of Zheleznitsa made their way to Cherni Vruh. At the site called Urvich they decided, charmed by the beautiful nature, to create a tourist club that resembled European alpine clubs. Its existence continued for 7 years and included hiking not only in Vitosha but also in Rila and Rodopi Mountains.

In 1895, on 12 August, Aleko Konstantinov extended an invitation through “Zname” newspaper for an excursion to Cherni Vruh. The participation of 300 people from Sofia and the surrounding area speaks for the success of this excursion which took place on 27 August. That noticeable event put the start of organized tourism in Bulgaria.

The first Bulgarian tourist society “Aleko Konstantinov” was created on 20 July 1899 by the architect Georgi Kozarev and six other tourists during the Ilinden fair in Knjazhevo. It was then that Aleko Konstantinov’s phrase “Get to know your country so that you come to love it” became also the motto of Bulgarian tourists.

In 1901 in the region of Dragalevtsi Monastery the first tourist signification in the country was put directing the way to Cherni Vruh.

Except with hiking tourism, Vitosha is also connected with the first events in alpinism and ski sport. Practicing alpinism in the park dates back to 1929. That happened in the region of the Kominite and Rezen Mounts. There Sofia citizens’ first rock climblings took place.

Skiing in Bulgaria began in 1915 in the area below Cherni Vruh and in 1918 the first ski-group was created at the Sofia “Vitosha” division of the Juvenile tourist union. Nowadays 17% of the park’s visitors go skiing at the two ski centers, “Aleko” and “Vetrovala-Konjarnika”

The increased visits of the park in the beginning of 20th century called for building of tourist huts and shelters. In 1905 near the springs of the Struma River the foundations were laid of the future “Aleko” hut. Initiators were the members of tourist society “Aleko Konstantinov”. Unfortunately, lack of resources in the beginning and the wars afterwards stopped the nice initiative. In 1922 the idea was reborn and in the summer of the same year two tourist dug-outs were created, “Aleko” and “Hristo Kostov”, and construction of “Aleko” hut began. In 1924 the new hut was opened. The small one “Fonfon” (1926) followed, as well as “Kumata” hut (1926), “Vulchata skala” shelter (1929), “Selimitsa” hut (1930), “Kamen del” hut (1931).

The date 24 December 1923 is considered to be the starting date of mountain rescuing. It was then that the best tourists from “Aleko Konstantinov” society created a special group. That decision was made after the disappearing of Petar Dimitrov - Petreto during an excursion in Vitosha. In December 1933 on Bulgarian Alpine Club’s initiative the Mountain Rescue Service was also created, its first permanent posts being located in Vitosha huts.
Vitosha Nature Park is birthplace of tourist orientation in our country, too. In the autumn of 1954 near “Aleko” hut 28 instructors and tourists gathered in order to write down the rules of this sports-tourist discipline.

Nowadays the overall length of paths and alleys leading the park’s visitors to the tourist centers is over 300 km. They join 14 towns and villages from the foothills to the ridge parts of the mountain. The alleys network consists of radial and round alleys. In their greater part the alleys are marked with band signification in different colors according to the routs set. In the open Vitosha areas metal poles signification has been provided for orientation during the winter months of the year. Possible snow-slip places have been marked with signs referring to the border with the dangerous sections.

Since the fall of 2009 the Directorate of Vitosha Nature Park has been at work on a project titled “Completion of Priority Activities from the Vitosha Nature Park Management Plan”, which is financed by the European Regional Development Fund and Bulgaria’s national budget through the Environment 2007-2013 operational program. The majority of the project’s funds are directed at the repair of the path network of seven of the Park’s most-used tourist routes and restoration of the markings on five other routes. Through this project over 60 km of trail posts have been installed.

Part of European Tourist Route E-4, connecting the Pyrenees with the Alps, Rila and Peloponnese, passes through the park. It leads tourists from Cherni Vruh to Verila, Rila and Pirin.

Visitors in Vitosha Nature Park are helped in their choice of places for rest and recess. Along the main routs and in tourist centers conditions have been created for short time stay and rest. There are tables and benches, fountains, safe fireplaces, shelters and bowers.

In order to facilitate passing through the bogs, damp areas and moraines wood grilles and bridges have been placed.
Education in ecological awareness and attitude towards our environment is increasingly included in educative programs, from kindergarten to university ones. Vitosha Nature Park’s proximity to Sofia and Pernik determines the use of the park’s territory as a place for learning, too. The support of using the territory of the park as a place for education and interpretations/illustration/ is one of the main aims in the park’s management plan.

Vitosha is a preferred place for carrying out green schools, students’ practices and sports holidays for children from kindergartens and students from primary and secondary school. For university students who study ecology, landscape architecture, forestry and tourism Vitosha offers a wonderful opportunity for interpretation of their knowledge.

Vitosha is also a place for practicing various types of sports. Except ski-sport, traditional during winter months, an increasing number of followers get some extreme sports, such as alpinism, delta-gliding, para-gliding, mountain biking, etc.
Part of the Nature Park’s challenges are its caves, which are about forty in number and are located in Bosnek’s karst region.

Except training in the different kinds of sports, teachers offer and more information about Vitosha Park and other protected areas in Bulgaria.

For those especially interested in the park’s nature and environmental protection Nature Protection Information Center “Vitosha” was created in Dragalevtsi district. In the territory of the park also function the Museum of Bear in Dendrariuma locality, the Owl museum and Dragonfly Museum in the Belite Brezi area, information alley about peat in the region of Ofelite, dendrology alley and Interpretation Children’s Center in Iglikini Poljani locality in the region of Dendrariuma.
Vitosha Visitor Centre

Vitosha is the most visited mountain in our country and its proximity to Sofia predetermines the enormous interest in the mountain of both children and grown-ups. It is a preferred place for carrying out practical activities, related to science and sport. That is why the institutions involved in the management of the Nature Park, in its protection and in control on the activities in its territory make efforts for turning Vitosha Nature Park into an accessible and desired place for everyone.

**NATURE PROTECTION INFORMATION CENTER “VITOSHA”** is the first one from the chain of information and education centers at protected areas in Bulgaria. The center was created on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the oldest park in southeastern Europe, Vitosha, and opened its doors in May 1998. The project was implemented with the joined efforts of Ministry of Environment and Water and the United States Agency for International Development. The nature protection information center is situated at about 1 km from Dragalevtsi district near the Dragalevtsi Monastery.

During the last several years many tourist routs orientated to disabled people have been built.

In the summer of 2000 as a project of “Agrolesproekt” and with the volunteer labor of students from over 10 nationalities **BOTANICAL ALLEY FOR BLIND MEN** was created. It is situated in proximity to the road to Zlatnite Mostove (Golden Bridges) in the Dendrarium locality. Its length is 610 m, the number of presented vegetation species is 26 and for each of them description have been given in Braille tangible writing, too.

**SPORTS AND INFORMATION ALLEY FOR PEOPLE WITH LOCOMOTORY SYSTEM DAMAGES** was built in the same locality near Iglika hut. The alley is a round route with 285 m length, 2 m width, maximum displacements 5% and smooth curves. Special sports facilities were built on the alley for disabled people as well as other park furniture. On nine boards information is offered for the biological diversity and cultural and historical heritage in Vitosha Nature Park and the parks in Bulgaria. The information is richly illustrated and offered in Braille writing, too. The implementation of the project was realized with the financial help of the National Environmental Protection Fund at MoEW, “Daimler Chrysler” AD - trade representation office in Bulgaria and Canadian International Development Agency.

**CHILDREN INFORMATION AND ENTERTAINMENT CENTER** at the Dendrarium locality was built at the end of the year of the 70th park’s anniversary on an area of 20 decares. It offers information for Vitosha biological diversity and the impact of ecological specifics on it. This information is combined with the possibility for diverse games and entertainment on 3 playgrounds with children’s facilities and a playground with labyrinth.

**THE BEAR MUSEUM** was created in proximity to the Dendrarium locality on the place of half-destroyed, abandoned roadman’s lodge which Vitosha Nature Park Directorate repaired and rebuilt. In it is presented life, ecology and biology of the biggest European predator - the Brown Bear. Traditional beliefs related to the bear are presented as well.
The OWL and DRAGONFLY MUSEUMS are located next to one another in the Belite Brezi area. You can reach them by taking the road from Boyana to Zlatnite Mostove. The Dendrarium is roughly two kilometers from these museums. The surrounding vicinity is a very pleasant recreation area for small children, which includes a playground with a slide, monkey bars and swings. Nearby there is parking space for cars and buses.

The OWL MUSEUM presents the ten species of owl that are found in Bulgaria. Information signs acquaint visitors with the unique characteristics of Bulgarian owls, including their size, habitat and diet as well as the dread that they aroused in people in the past who encountered them and the superstitions tied to these nocturnal creatures.

At the very entrance of the DRAGONFLY MUSEUM we are greeted by a model of this beautiful insect. A total of 68 species of dragonfly have been identified in Bulgaria, 30 of which can be found at Vitosha. The mountain’s reservoirs, rivers and bogs create a hospitable environment for them.

CHILDREN’S ECO-TRAINING CENTER was built in the area of “Belite brezi”, near the Dendrarium place, and next to the Museums of the owls and the dragonfly. The building is made of natural materials - clay, stone and wood. The funding of the Centre is provided by the financial mechanism of the European Economic Area (EEA FM) within the framework of the project “Revival and preservation of traditional building techniques and skills used in Bulgaria”, implemented in partnership with NHU (Norwegian Crafts Development) - Norway. Part of the project activities were directed towards training young craftsmen who continued to develop the old construction techniques applied in Bulgaria.

The KARST PATH was built in 2008. It is a loop ten km in length. This path begins on the outskirts of the village of Bosnek, ascending to the north opposite the flow of the Dobri Dol River, which is a tributary of the Struma River, then continues west and later south, returning to the village of Bosnek. The path opens up to beautiful vistas of Vitosha’s southern slopes. Ten informational signs are posted along the route that serve to familiarize tourists with the region’s natural and cultural wealth as well as the specific natural habitats located in the Bosnek karst region.

The BOG INFORMATIONAL PATH is located in the Ofeliite area, roughly one km from the lower Vetrovala area. Here visitors can obtain information about the significance of the Park’s bogs and marshes as drainage zones and important sources of raw materials used in industry and medicine.

The CHILDREN’S INFORMATIONAL and RECREATIONAL CENTER occupies 20 decares in the Dendrarium area. It provides a wealth of information about Vitosha’s biological diversity combined with opportunities for an array of games and activities on three playgrounds with playground equipment and a fourth with a labyrinth.

For the curious nature lovers NATIONAL PARK INFORMATION CENTER functions in Sofia, on Vazrazhdane Square, since the summer of 2002. It offers information for protected territories in Bulgaria and around the world. Here tourist maps can be bought as well as specialized publications dedicated to the diversity of vegetation and animals in Bulgarian national and nature parks.
Bistritsa village
Situated at 860 m above sea level and 15 km far from Sofia, Bistritsa is one of the oldest and biggest villages below Vitosha. It was from Bistritsa River that the village, which it passes through, took its name. Near the village there are two monasteries, “St. St. Joakim and Anna” (IX-X century) and “St. Petka” (X century). In the field of intangible heritage, The Bistritsa Baby – archaic polyphony, dances and rituals from the Shoplouk Region was proclaimed a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2005.

Bosnek village
Amidst amazingly diverse vegetation and plant life, at 940 m above sea level in the valley of the Struma River, the village of Bosnek is situated. The village has given its name to the region in which it is located, Bosnek’s karst region. Landmarks to be seen here make Bosnek one of the exceptionally interesting places not only in Bulgaria: a venerable oak more than 6 centuries old, remains of a Thracian mound and sanctuary, old roman road are only part of the tourist attractions. The caves and abysses discovered in the Bosnek karst region are over 30, the longest cave in Bulgaria, “Duhatla” (17,5 km) which is designated a nature monument, being here. In Vreloto locality is the biggest karst spring and in the cave of the same name - the biggest cave hall in Bulgaria. Zhivata Voda locality attracts people from centuries with the magic of different beliefs related to the “Fountain of happiness” as the once famous traveler Evlia Chelebi called the spring.

Boyana district
In Boyana district is one of the greatest landmarks in Bulgaria - Boyana Church “St. Panteleymon” built in 1259 by Sebastocrator Kaloyan. The Boyana master has moulded the faces of 240 human figures. The church is listed as a World Heritage site by UNESCO together with St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome and Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris. Four and a half kilometers up in the mountain is the biggest Vitosha waterfall (40 m fall of the water).

Vladaya district
Little more than a century ago Vladaya was a pretty Vitosha village where about 450 people lived and many Sofia families spent their holidays. From here starts its lay the river with the longest flow through Sofia, Vladaya River. The path from the center of the village beside “St. Joan Bogoslov” church has been a favorite way to Zlatnite Mostove Tourist Center for more than a century. The first written information for Vladaya existence dates back to 1576 in a Turkish tax registers but the strategic position of the way to Sofia suggests that the place had been populated even earlier. Nowadays there are 5000 people living in Vladaya.

Dragalevtsi district
“Dear lions”, or “Dear fighters, my faithful warriors”. Perhaps this is the way Tsar Ivan Alexandar addressed his loyal fighters, defenders of “Sredets” fortress, so that the name of the Vitosha village stayed since 1345 until present days Dragalevtsi /from “drag”, meaning “dear”, and “lev” meaning “lion”/. Historians make this suggestion on the basis of authentic medieval documents, one of which the “Vitosha gold-sealed deed” of Tsar Ivan Shishman. Situated at 1,5 km above Dragalevtsi (XIV century) “Assumption” monastery was pronounced a cultural monument. Tsar Ferdinand personally endowed “Holly Trinity” church with two icons. The temple keeps also the relics of St. John Chrysostom, St. Trifon, and St. Panteleimon. In 1901 near Dragalevtsi the first tourist signification in our country was put to direct the way to Cherni Vruh.

Zhelezitsa village
At 950 m above sea level and 23 km far from Sofia, Zhelezitsa was founded several centuries ago thanks to the abundance of iron ore of which its name speaks. In the beginning of last century its population was 1000 people. Local people built a temple of their own, “Assumption” whose wooden bell tower evokes the visitors’ interest. Nearby is the Kokaljane Monastery and about 10 km far from the village is “Holly Ghost” Monastery. There are about 12-13 mineral springs in the region. Their water temperature is 30°C and in the 40’s of the last century it was bottled and sold around the country.
Kladnitsa village
The history of the pretty little Vitosha village is ancient. To this testify the ceramic remains and mortar found near the fortress 3 km far from the village. A great landmark of Kladnitsa is the still functioning “St. Nikolay” monastery (XIII century). Many of the houses here are historical monuments, the school has a 120-year history and the dance and musical ensembles make famous the local Graovo folklore.

Knyazhevo district
Traders’ caravans, military columns and settlers have been passing from here for centuries. Situated at 650 m above sea level on the two shores of the Vladaiska River amidst thick pine forests, Knyazhevo has its own typical climate - cool summer but also colder winter. The five Knyazhevo mineral springs were known from Roman times. “St. Iliya” church stands still in a quiet green yard but two weeks before St. Iliya’s Day one-month long celebrations start here on the occasion of the temple’s holiday. In 1635 Ahmed Pasha built in Knyazhevo a big inn - caravan seraglio. It had 50 rooms for travelers, 45 shops and a handicraft school. After the Liberation Konstantin Ireshchek found it half-destroyed. The oldest name of Knyazhevo was Eleshnitsa. Then it became Klisura, Bali Efendi and from 1881 in honor of Knjaz Alexandar Batemberg it was changed to Knyazhevo. Since 1958 it is a district of Sofia.

Marchaevo village
About the picturesquely situated on the mountain slopes village there is written information from 1576 Turkish tax registers. And the remains of a Thracian fortress west of the village speak for its even more ancient history. Main occupation here where ore-mining, coal production and stone cutting. Of interest is the still functioning “Holly Trinity” Monastery (XIII-XIV century). It was in Marchaevo where Petar Dunov spent the last months of his life. Here he summarized his philosophical ideas and his students took them down in shorthand and turned them into a book published under the title “The Spring of the Good”. Now the Teacher’s house is turned into a museum.

Rudartsi village
With its wonderful position, in the southwestern foothills of the mountain at 750 m above sea level and the existence of mineral water that is proper both for baths and drinking, the village has always attracted tourists’ interest. The remains of a medieval necropolis in the Tsurkvishteto locality testify to its distant historical past. Today Rudartsi is a spa resort with a sports complex including three open swimming pools with mineral water (one of them Olympic sized), a covered swimming pool with sauna, football stadium, basketball and volleyball playgrounds and a tennis court. The development of the village is closely related to the mountain, the clean air and mineral water.

Simeonovo district
In 1878 General Gurko presented the loud name “Tsar Simeon the Great” to the youngest populated area near Vitosha. Its previous name was Beiler Chiflik. Today’s Sofia district keeps traces of ancient history. Behind the “St. Archangel Mikhail” church remains were found of a one-time fortress from before Ottoman slavery times. In proximity to Simeonovo is the initial station of the cabin lift to “Aleko” hut.

Chuipetlovo village
Only the crowing of cocks showed that there was a village nearby, that is where the name came from. It is almost the same even today - it is when you see the board that you realize that you are in Chuipetovo - the highest located village below Vitosha, at 1300 m above sea level. This is also the only populated area fully situated in the territory of the park. The one-time settlers who came here about 300 hundred years ago were searching for salvation and security. The place was suitable - hidden, in the lee, at the southern side of the mountain. Not a single man died in the Balkan War. The village received a bell for the “St. Paraskeva” church - a present from the men for the fact that all of them returned alive.

Yarlovo village
In the end of XIX century Yarlovo was one of the biggest villages below Vitosha, its population being about 1800 people. The Palakaria river, which is the longest 44-km Vitosha feeder of Iskar, passes through the village. The waters of the Palakaria river were panned off for gold and that is why they called it “the gold-bearing river”. Today the residents of the village number about 600. Here the “St. Petka” chapel in Babina Koria locality draws tourists’ attention as well as the healing spring near the village and for those who have set out to Rila Yarlovo is a suitable starting point.
Vitosha was declared a park in 1934. Since then, the preservation of its natural integrity has been the highest priority in its management. Over the years, various institutions have been responsible for that task as well as the development of the territory's infrastructure with the aim of increasing the park's tourism potential.

Today, responsibility for the natural preservation of Vitosha Nature Park rests with the Ministry of Agriculture and Food and the Ministry of Environment and Water and their departments. The Ministry of Agriculture and Food is responsible for preservation of the Park's forest and grassland ecosystems. Protection and oversight of all forested territories is carried out by the Executive Forestry Agency and the Sofia and Kyustendil Regional Forestry Directorates. Management, utilization and preservation of the regions’ state forests is carried out by the Southwestern State Enterprise through its units: the Sofia State Forestry Reserve and the Vitoshko-Studena State Game Reserve.

The Directorate of Vitosha Nature Park is a unit of the Executive Forestry Agency of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food and is primarily responsible for the implementation of the Park's Management Plan. As an administration, though under a different name, it has been operating since 1935, one year after Vitosha was declared a protected territory. From 1954 to 1996 the Directorate of Vitosha Nature Park was an institution of the Capital municipality. In 1996 by order of the Forestry Committee the Administration of Vitosha National Park was created, while two years later by order of the National Forestry Administration of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests the name of the administration was changed to the Directorate of Vitosha Nature Park in accordance with the categories of protected territories adopted by the Law for Protected Territories.

The Directorate’s areas of activity include the following: conducting state policy through the execution of the Management Plan, organizational projects and programs in the territory of the park; organizing and carrying out measures for preserving and restoring biological and scenic diversity; conducting educational and interpretive activities; building and maintaining the park’s infrastructure for the needs of tourism and recreation; organizing and participating in carrying out tourism and recreational activities; implementing scientific and practical activities in the territory of the park and creating and maintaining a database and collecting and distributing information about the park and the territories adjacent to it.

The Ministry of Environment and Water, through the Sofia Regional Environment and Water Inspectorate, carries out the management, oversight and protection of the two reserves in the Park’s territory: Bistrishko Branište and Torfeno Branište. The Sofia Regional Environment and Water Inspectorate conducts oversight related to the preservation of environmental components in the Park’s territory as well as administrative adherence to the Park's Management Plan.

Vitosha Nature Park lies within the territories of four municipalities: those of the Capital, Pernik, Samokov and Radomir. These municipalities, as owners of the forests and land in the Park, are directly responsible for their management, while as social institutions they care for the development and cleanliness of the Park’s territory with the aim of increasing its tourism potential. As is well known, organized tourism in Bulgaria has its beginnings at Vitosha and this tradition continues today thanks to organizations such as the Bulgarian Tourist Union and the Mountain Rescue Service. These institutions are responsible for the safety and security of tourists in the Park.
Opportunities for better life

National strategic reference framework 2007–2013

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