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International support for Rila National Park

Position paper of international nature conservation NGOs

January 2008

Rila National Park in Bulgaria is the biggest of three national parks in Bulgaria, IUCN category II. It is also part of the EU's Natura 2000 network of specially protected areas together with the buffer zone around it. The national park is one of the largest protected areas in Europe and the highest mountain of the Balkan Peninsula.

We congratulate Bulgaria for becoming the first European country with two protected areas certified by PAN Parks - the management quality certification system for protected areas. Rila National Park is one of the nine European protected areas members of the network. This is recognition not only of the exceptional value of its nature but also of the efforts for its protection.

Thus, it is with great concern that we learn about an ongoing construction of lift and road affecting Rila National Park. We are aware of the violations related to the construction activities in the area of Panichishte. We are also aware that sanctions have already been imposed by the Bulgarian environmental authorities. Despite that the construction still continues and may become a reason for undermining the belief in the ability of Bulgaria to implement nature conservation legislation. Particularly alarming is also the fact that the Natura 2000 site acting as a buffer zone of the national park was the only habitat site to be discarded from the list of habitats sites forming the Natura 2000 network Bulgaria.

By joining the EU Bulgaria has made a commitment to implement the nature protection directives, which stipulate the precautionary principle in exercising plans and projects affecting Natura 2000 sites. Being a member of the Council of Europe Bulgaria has also signed and has obligations under the Convention on the Conservation of Wild Flora and Fauna and Natural Habitats to ensure the protection of habitats and species on its territory. Last but not least, the EU has decided to stop biodiversity loss by 2010 and in order to achieve this goal each EU member state, including Bulgaria, has to extra carefully observe the legislation which is in place to ensure this.

We insist Bulgarian Ministry of the Environment and Water and all other relevant authorities in Bulgaria to take all necessary steps to ensure that the law is observed. We support our colleagues from Bulgarian nature conservation organizations in their demand that construction in Rila National Park should stop until all breaches of law are removed, the Rila Buffer Natura 2000 site is officially adopted and conservation of European natural heritage is ensured.