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THE USE OF NATURAL RESOURCES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN THE SERBIAN MUNICIPALITIES OF KOSOVO AND METOHIJA: A CASE STUDY OF ŠAR MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK

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Abstract

The "Šar Mountain" National Park represents a biological and cultural asset of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija. Since 2008, Kosovo and Metohija have undergone a series of demographic and constitutional changes, which have resulted in an unfavorable position for the Serbian minority. The aim of this paper is to offer a possible alternative to the existing established practices of economic aid and to propose ways in which the local population can improve their economic situation by utilizing the available resources. Due to the delicate nature of international relations, this issue is multidisciplinary and requires an approach and analysis from both ecological-biological and socio-humanistic perspectives. The structure of the paper is designed to provide an overview of the potential of plant and animal resources, similar solutions related to the defined aim and objectives of the paper, implemented in other parts of the world, as well as final recommendations aimed at sustainable development of ecotourism in the studied area.

Key words: *Šar Mountain, biodiversity, Kosovo and Metohija, ecotourism.*

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Introduction

The "Šar Mountain" National Park spans four municipalities in the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija: Štrpce, Prizren, Suva Reka, and Kačavnik. According to available data, the municipality of Štrpce covers an area of 247 km², encompassing 16 villages and a population of 6,449 inhabitants [1]. Of these, the majority are Albanians with 3,757 residents, followed by Serbs with 3,148 residents, and Roma with 24 residents, while other minorities number fewer than 10 inhabitants per group [1]. In this municipality, the dominant economic sector is agriculture, with raspberry production being the main activity [1]. The municipality of Prizren covers an area of 640 km², with a population of 177,781 inhabitants distributed across 74 villages [2]. According to OSCE data, there are 237 Serbs living in Prizren [2]. The main economic activities are agriculture, trade, construction, and food production [2]. Suva Reka covers an area of 361 km², encompassing 42 villages with a population of 59,722 inhabitants. According to OSCE data, only two residents in this municipality identify as Serbs [3]. Unlike the previous two municipalities, Suva Reka's dominant industries are rubber production, as well as the production of alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. The municipality of Kačavnik spans 210 km², encompassing 31 villages with a population of 33,409 inhabitants. According to OSCE data, there is only one resident who identifies as an ethnic Serb [2]. The dominant economic activities include lime and brick production, construction work, and agriculture [2]. OSCE data on the number of Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija should be interpreted with caution, as the Serbian population in this territory refuses to participate in the census under the conditions prescribed by the Kosovo Agency of Statistics [4].

According to data from the Kosovo Agency of Statistics, the average salary is €570, and the unemployment rate stands at 10.7% [5]. In a UNDP survey conducted in March 2020, Kosovo Serbs identified unemployment, interethnic relations, and corruption as the most pressing issues [6]. The same study shows that the percentage of Albanians in Kosovo who believe that employment in the public sector is based on merit slightly increased compared to 2019, while Kosovo Serbs continue to express skepticism towards this type of employment, highlighting political party affiliation as the main criterion for hiring [6].

In line with this, sustainable tourism is a potential instrument for empowering the Serbian population in these municipalities. Sustainable tourism could lead to: employing a greater number of household members, marketing handmade products, selling agricultural products, and potentially reviving certain traditional crafts. Regarding direct tourism services, rural households could, with minimal investment, offer accommodation to potential visitors, thus securing a secondary source of income. The importance of sustainable tourism lies in its multiplier effect in rural areas, where the entire rural lifestyle is considered a tourist attraction [7]. Such an approach would address all four groups of potential problems faced by Šar Mountain, as a mountainous area in Serbia:

- Demographic problems (depopulation, aging population);
- Socio-political and economic factors (neglect of mountainous regions, absence of long-term development plans and strategies, infrastructural isolation, lack of awareness about development opportunities, economic migration);

- Spatial-environmental factors (inadequate infrastructure and inadequate protection and presentation of natural values), and;
- Administrative factors [8].

An important question arises: *Where do plant and animal resources fit into sustainable tourism?* Flora and fauna enhance the appeal of many destinations, particularly in biodiversity "hotspots" such as the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia [9]. Even beyond these regions, biodiversity-rich areas have proven highly attractive, with certain forms of tourism directly dependent on it [9]. Recognizing this link, the World Tourism Organization initiated the Convention on Biological Diversity project in Thailand and Indonesia as an economic instrument.

The aim of this paper is to propose a sustainable tourism model based on plant and animal resources as a means of strengthening Serbian municipalities and the local population in Kosovo and Metohija. The research combines qualitative and quantitative methods to assess the ecotourism potential of Šar Mountain by linking biodiversity with economic opportunities. Comparative analysis with the Alps, Pyrenees, and Tara National Park highlights best practices, evaluated through biodiversity levels, infrastructure quality, community benefits, and conservation measures. Biological resources were analyzed for their attractiveness, commercial potential, and conservation status, using recent scientific and statistical sources. This interdisciplinary approach connects ecology with sustainable tourism, addressing both environmental and socio-political challenges of the region.

Results and discussion

The floristic composition of Šar Mountain is highly diverse. The massif is home to florogenetic elements of the central and eastern Mediterranean, central Europe, the southern Siberian steppes, and the boreal and Arctic regions of Eurasia, which coexist with native Mediterranean and oromediterranean tertiary elements [10]. Of the five biogeographical regions of the Holarctic floristic kingdom present in Serbia, four are found on Šar Mountain, representing a rare phenomenon on a global scale [11]. The most significant floristic resource of Šar Mountain is its endemic and relict flora. The mountain hosts 247 endemic Balkan species [11]. It contains 46.16% of all endemics recorded in Serbia, and of the total 59 stenoendemics in Serbia, 18 are found on Šar Mountain [11]. The floristic composition of Šar Mountain varies in age, including tertiary, boreal, and glacial relicts. The best examples of this flora are tertiary relicts such as: Alpine rose (*Rhododendron ferrugineum* L.), alpine azalea (*Loiseleuria procumbens* L.), alpine aster (*Aster alpinus* L.), net-leaved willow (*Salix reticulata* L.), mountain avens (*Dryas octopetala* L.), alpine rockcress (*Arabis alpina* L.), and three-awned rush (*Juncus trifidus* L.) [11]. Within the Šar Mountain National Park, plants with medicinal, aromatic, edible, and melliferous properties are of particular importance [11]. Over 300 plant species exhibit such properties, with around 100 having proven pharmacological and medicinal value. Table 1 presents a detailed account of plant species from the Šar Mountain region, including species employed for medicinal applications and those identified as edible. Spices native to Šar Mountain include caraway (*Carum carvi* L.), oregano (*Origanum vulgare* L.), fennel

(*Foeniculum vulgare* Mill.), wild thyme (*Thymus serpyllum* L.), among others [11]. To date, 181 plant communities and 16 subassociations have been recorded on Šar Mountain, which is a hallmark of high ecological diversity [11]. The mountain's altitude has influenced the formation of climatically determined vegetation zones, with hornbeam and oak forests and thickets at its foothills, and high-mountain tundra at its peaks [10].

Table 1: Medicinal and edible plant species documented in the Šar Mountain Region

Common Name	Scientific Name	Category	Common Name	Scientific Name	Category
Bearberry	*Arctostaphyllos uva-ursi* L.	Medicinal	Nettle	*Urtica dioica* L.	Edible
Wormwood	*Artemisia absinthium* L.	Medicinal	Bilberry	*Vaccinium myrtillus* L.	Edible
Mountain savory	*Saturea montana* L.	Medicinal	Lingonberry	*Vaccinium vitis-idaea* L. 1753	Edible
Common centaury	*Centaurium erythraea* Rafn	Medicinal	Wild grape	*Vitis vinifera subsp. Sylvestris* L.	Edible
Foxglove	*Digitalis purpurea* L.	Medicinal	Wild pear	*Pyrus pyraster* L.	Edible
Bistort	*Polygonum bistorta* L. Samp	Medicinal	Crab apple	*Malus sylvestris* Line Miler	Edible
Great yellow gentian	*Gentiana lutea* L.	Medicinal	Rowan	*Sorbus aucuparia* L. 1753	Edible
Deadly nightshade	*Atropa bella-donna* L.	Medicinal	Service tree	*Sorbus domestica* L.	Edible
Agrimony	*Agrimonia eupatoria* L.	Medicinal	Blackthorn	*Prunus spinosa* L.	Edible
Lungwort	*Pulmonaria officinalis* L.	Medicinal	Cherry plum	*Prunus cerasifera* Ehrh. 1784	Edible
Coltsfoot	*Tussilago farfara* L.	Medicinal	Hazelnut	*Corylus avellana* L.	Edible
Wild strawberry	*Fragaria vesca* L.	Edible	Cornelian cherry	*Cornus mas* L.	Edible
Wild garlic	*Allium ursinum* L.	Edible	Walnut	*Juglans regia* L.	Edible
Sorrel	*Rumex acetosa L.*	Edible	Wild raspberry	*Rubus idaeus* L. 1753	Edible
Wild carrot	*Daucus carota* L.	Edible	Wild blackberry	*Rubus fruticosus* L.	Edible
Wild parsnip	*Pastinaca sativa* L.	Edible	Alpine currant	*Ribes alpinum* L.	Edible

Source: [11]; [10]

The faunistic composition of Šar Mountain is among the richest in Serbia [10]. The Šar Mountain area is an important habitat for butterflies, with a total of 147 species studied [10]. The most significant butterflies include: grizzled skipper (*Pyrgus andromedae* Wallengren, 1853), swallowtail (*Papilio machaon* L. 1758), common blue

(*Polyommatus icarus* Rottemburg, 1775), scarce large blue (*Phengaris nausithous* Bergstrasser, 1779), scarce wood blue (*Iolana iolas* Ochsenheimer, 1816), scarce silver-studded blue (*Plebejus pylaon* Frivaldszky, 1835), and Alpine argus (*Aricia anteros* Freyer, 1838) [12]. Regarding the ichthyofauna of Šar Mountain, the river trout is especially notable [10]. On Šar Mountain, 12 amphibian species have been recorded, including four species of salamanders and eight species of frogs [10]. Additionally, 19 species of reptiles have been discovered in this area [10]. The Serbian part of Šar Mountain is listed as an Important Bird Area (IBA) in Europe [13]. To date, 159 bird species have been recorded on Šar Mountain, with estimates suggesting there may be up to 200 species. Of these 159 species, 128 are breeding species [14]. These data confirm that Šar Mountain represents a significant center of genetic and species diversity [10]. Important populations include rock partridge (*Alectoris graeca* Meisner, 1804), alpine lark (*Eremophila alpestris* L. 1758), yellow-billed chough (*Pyrrhocorax graculus* L. 1766), alpine accentor (*Prunella collaris* Scopoli, 1769), and wallcreeper (*Tichodroma muraria* L. 1766) [10]. The mammal fauna of Šar Mountain comprises 32 species, of which 8 are strictly protected, 15 are under some form of protection, and 7 are listed on the European Red List [15]. Notable species include: Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx* L. 1758) wildcat (*Felis silvestris* Schreber, 1775), Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra* L. 1758) brown bear (*Ursus arctos* L. 1758), snow vole (*Chionomys nivalis* Martins, 1842), Dinaric vole (*Dinaromys bogdanovi* V. et E. Martino, 1922), blind mole rat (*Spalax leucodon* Nordmann, 1840), red fox (*Vulpes vulpes L.* 1758), gray wolf (*Canis lupus* L. 1758), chamois (*Rupicapra rupicapra* L. 1758), and stone marten (*Martes martes* L. 1758) [10].
Figure 1 illustrates the biodiversity of the Šar Mountain region, presenting the number of butterflies, amphibian, reptile, bird, and mammal species, along with plant communities and subassociations.

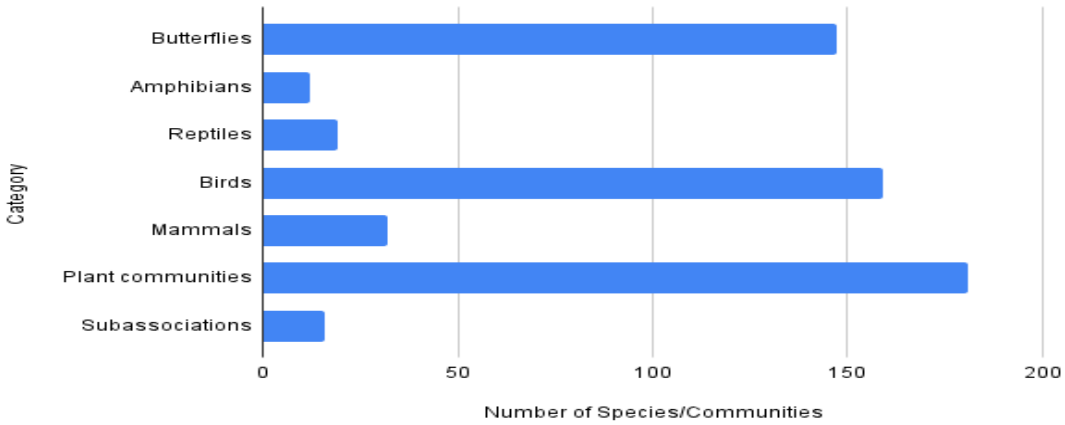

Figure 1: Biodiversity overview of the Šar Mountain Region
Source: Authors

The ornithofauna of Šar Mountain represents a significant potential for ecotourism in the region. Birdwatching is a unique branch of tourism, which can be further divided into three groups: casual birdwatchers, enthusiasts, and avid birding tourists [16]. The first group observes birds as a secondary activity, combined with camping, hiking, and other recreational activities offered by the area [16]. The second group is more

dedicated to the hobby but still enjoys other activities alongside birdwatching, while the third group plans their trips specifically around the birds they wish to see [16]. In 2022, birdwatchers in the United States spent $105 billion on this hobby [17]. A large portion of these expenses are travel costs, as passionate birdwatchers and birding organizations are willing to travel to distant destinations if a rare bird appears. A prime example is the case of a white-tailed eagle that appeared on the shores of New England, where it stayed for a month [17]. During the winter of 2021-2022, birdwatchers contributed approximately $750,000 to the economies of Maine and Massachusetts [17]. Colombia demonstrates how birdwatching can be a powerful tool for rural community development. Colombia maintains this potential at the local level by protecting birds and forests, and the local population is aware that overexploitation would lead to habitat degradation and the departure of birds [17]. Bird species that could be attractive to tourists include: griffon vulture (*Gyps fulvus* Hablizl, 1783), golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos* L. 1758), peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus* Tunstall, 1771), snow finch (*Montifringilla nivalis* L. 1766), bearded vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus* L. 1758), and western capercaillie (*Tetrao urogallus* L. 1758).

Watching brown bears, wolves, lynxes, as well as the aforementioned birds of prey, can be a source of income for local communities, through wildlife observation tourism. This type of tourism is present in Europe, with a focus on observing brown bears (*Ursus arctos* L. 1758). A similar project was developed by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in the Tara National Park area. This project was based on the previously mentioned species of bears, lynxes, and wolves. From this project, it can be concluded that the majority of tourists interested in this form of tourism come from the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Netherlands, are over 50 years old, and have a good financial status [18]. These tourists are able to spend several hundred dollars per day, and their trips usually last around seven days [18]. They prefer local accommodation, and it is estimated that approximately 60% of the total money spent by tourists remains with the local population [18]. In commercial tourism, this percentage would be about 10% [18].

Indigenous domestic animal resources can also be used for tourism purposes. On Šar Mountain, the Busha cattle (*Bos primigenius* Bojanus, 1827) can be found [19], which is classified as endangered [20]. The native mountain horse could potentially be an interesting tourist attraction, especially if present in larger numbers. This horse is listed as critically endangered [20]. It is characterized by an exceptionally strong build, robust constitution, and great resilience and endurance [19]. As an important genetic resource, it is included in a conservation program for the preservation of genetic resources, which has significantly contributed to restoring the breeding potential of these individuals [19]. The latest FAO data from 2020 indicate a population size between 1,000 and 3,000 specimens [21]. The Šarplaninac sheep is the only strain of the Pramenka sheep breed that has pure white wool, without black or gray details [22]. Its head and legs are covered with hair [22]. Indigenous breeds of domestic animals can serve as the foundation for the development of agritourism. Agritourism refers to products that are "directly linked to the agricultural/rural environment and agricultural products or to types of stays, such as farm stays in rooms or camping, educational visits, recreational activities, and the sale of agricultural products and handicrafts" [23]. The main attraction of agritourism is the experience of village life

[24]. Every host who decides to engage in agritourism would be encouraged to renew the stock of animals that once populated rural areas. The benefits of this practice are threefold:

- It would increase the offer for tourists;
- It would reduce farmers' dependence on purchased products; It would increase the number of indigenous breeds of domestic animals in the area.

A potential drawback of this form of tourism lies in the conflict between agricultural activities and the holiday season, as the two often overlap, forcing hosts to choose between them [24]. However, these activities can also complement one another, particularly in the case of livestock farming [24]. For example, in the case of the Buša cattle, Šarplaninac sheep, or the Domestic Mountain Horse, a herder can take guests along to pasture, allowing them to better understand the behavior of these animals [24]. This practice can also extend to cleaning stables, feeding animals, and preparing fodder. One obstacle, however, may be household members themselves, who are not accustomed to such activities [24]. Jęczmyk, Uglis, and Steppa [25] conclude in their research that domestic animals act as an attraction for tourists, enabling households to achieve higher profits. They further emphasize that households with animals attract more visitors than those without livestock [25]. Livestock typically includes traditional farm animals such as horses, chickens, goats, cows, and pigs [25]. Interestingly, indigenous breeds dominated among these animals [25]. Nevertheless, socio-economic factors may hinder the development of this branch of tourism. Some reasons include the high average age of farm owners, lack of labor, insufficient infrastructure, high costs of animal care, and a lack of motivation to improve products [25]. Despite these obstacles, the potential use of agritourism as an economic instrument to improve living standards in Serbian municipalities in Kosovo and Metohija should certainly be considered. In 2024, the agritourism market was valued at 73.2 million USD, with projections suggesting it will reach 205.6 million USD by 2033 [26]. According to the European Commission's *EU Agricultural Outlook* report, the value of EU agricultural production is projected to reach EUR 527 billion (USD 553 billion) by 2035, with an average annual growth rate of 1.2% after 2025. Agricultural services, including agritourism and rural recreation, alongside on-farm transformation activities (e.g., processing), are expected to account for 4% and 5% of the total, respectively, thereby maintaining their historically modest contribution to overall production [26].

Dogs can also be an excellent economic instrument for income generation. In Serbia, there are five indigenous dog breeds: Serbian Hound, Serbian Tricolor Hound, and Šarplaninac [20], as well as Serbian Shepherd Dog and Serbian Yellow Hound [27]. The Serbian Hound and Serbian Tricolor Hound are not considered endangered breeds [27]. The Šarplaninac is a robust Balkan shepherd dog, calm and loyal yet highly alert, traditionally used as a livestock guardian and household protector. Males average 62 cm and 35–45 kg, females 58 cm and 30–40 kg, with a solid-colored coat ranging from white to nearly black. The breed has been internationally recognized by the FCI since 1939.[27]. The breed is not considered endangered. [27]. All Balkan shepherd breeds, including the Šarplaninac, developed in isolated mountain regions, which preserved their authenticity. One of the ways these breeds can be used as an

economic resource is through organizing dog shows. A dog show is a festival-like event where different groups of people gather, including professional judges, trainers, owners of show dogs, and dog enthusiasts. [28]. These events are not only competitive but also involve buying, breeding, and exchanging dogs, giving them significant economic importance [28]. The problem with this practice is that these breeds are not recognized as popular; as of 2024, they are not among the top 200 most popular breeds [29].

Amphibians also represent a valuable resource for ecotourism and a potential economic driver for Serbian municipalities. Although research on their tourism potential is limited, existing studies suggest the following conclusions:

- Tourists have limited knowledge about amphibians;
- Tourists are interested in amphibians, but only as supplementary content within a broader tourist tour [30].

Accordingly, the gene pool of Šar Mountain holds significant potential for developing unique tourism experiences. Nineteen reptile species are recorded in the area, offering opportunities for reptile-watching tourism. Similar practices, such as those on Pulau Bidong in Malaysia [31], show that this approach can both diversify tourist activities and benefit local communities by reducing pressure on other attractions, raising awareness about reptile conservation, and generating income. The reptile species identified on Šar Mountain are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Reptile species documented on Šar Mountain

Common Name	Scientific Name	Common Name	Scientific Name
Slow worm	*Anguis fragilis* L. 1758	Green lizard	*Lacerta viridis* Laurenti, 1768
Hermann's tortoise	*Testudo hermanni* Gmelin, 1789	Grass snake	*Natrix natrix* L. 1758
Horned viper	*Vipera ammodytes* L. 1758	Dice snake	*Natrix tessellata* Laurenti, 1768
European copper skink	*Ablepharus kitaibelii* Laurenti, 1768	Common wall lizard	*Podarcis muralis* Laurenti, 1768
Smooth snake	*Coronella austriaca* Laurenti, 1768	Balkan wall lizard	*Podarcis tauricus*
Caspian whipsnake	*Dolichophis caspius* Gmelin, 1789	Aesculapian snake	*Zamenis longissimus* Laurenti, 1768
Sand lizard	*Lacerta agilis*		

Source: [32]

Reptile-based ecotourism is unique, but there are tourists interested in this form of tourism. However, reptiles are very sensitive to any habitat changes, and with an increase in tourist numbers, the reptile populations on Šar Mountain could be endangered. Tobi Alan Gardner, in his research, states that reptile populations worldwide have drastically declined due to various external factors [33]. Care for the welfare of reptiles must be a priority. At the same time, this potential could be used to develop research tourism on Šar Mountain.

On Šar Mountain, medicinal and aromatic herbs can be found in their natural state, but their potential remains largely untapped. Table 3 presents the species identified as suitable for harvesting:

Table 3: Plant and fungal species identified as suitable for harvesting in the Šar Mountain Region.

Common Name	Scientific Name	Common Name	Scientific Name
Common juniper	*Juniperus communis* L.	Raspberry	*Rubus idaeus* L. 1753
Silver birch (leaves)	*Betula pendula* oth	Blackberry	*Rubus fruticosus* L.
Fir (needles)	*Abies alba* Mill	Cornelian cherry	*Cornus mas* L.
St. John's wort	*Hypericum perforatum* L.	Wild apple	*Malus sylvestris* Line, Miler
Wild thyme	*Thymus serpyllum* L.	Italian plum	*Prunus domestica subsp. italica*
Great yellow gentian	*Gentiana lutea* L.	Porcini	*Boletus edulis* Bull.
Hawthorn	*Crataegus monogyna* Jacq.	Chanterelle	*Cantharellus cibarius* Fr. (1821)
Bilberry	*Vaccinium myrtillus* L.	Parasol mushroom	*Macrolepiota procera (Scop. ex Fr.)* Sing.
Wild strawberry	*Fragaria vesca* L.		

The floristic composition of this species can be used either as gathered material or for plantation cultivation. However, certain species may be particularly interesting for research and therefore could represent a potential source of tourism income. One such species is the fungi *Zeus olympius*, which can be found in only two locations worldwide [34]. This would not be the only example of this practice—Karen Hughes and Moscardo presented positive conclusions about this type of tourism in their 2019 study [35]. Their stance is clear: this form of tourism is feasible, but a story must be created around the fungi themselves.

Conclusion

Šar Mountain National Park hosts rich genetic, species, and ecosystem diversity that can serve as a key economic resource for improving the situation of the Serbian minority in Kosovo and Metohija. Given the sensitive international context, this challenge is inherently multidisciplinary, involving not only biology but also political and legal perspectives. The main conclusions are:

- Plant and animal resources are present but insufficiently utilized as economic instruments;

- Each of these resources can individually represent a specific source of income, but it would certainly be better to offer a comprehensive, integrated package rather than fragmenting it;
- Relevant institutions must enable the local population to recognize the potential of these resources. Educational and scientific institutions can assist in this effort;
- Such activities would meet all ecotourism requirements and, with proper education, would also inform visitors about the concept of sustainable development;

In conclusion, further research is recommended to support biodiversity conservation, strengthen the Serbian community, and raise awareness of both natural and cultural heritage in the region—understood not only as monuments but also as living natural assets.

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