



The Carpathian Mountains, a realm of Sacred Natural Sites

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The Carpathian context

The Carpathian Mountains form an arc roughly 1 500 km long across Central and Eastern Europe, making them the longest, largest and most twisted-shaped mountain range in Europe. From the Danube Gap, near Bratislava, Slovakia, they swing in a wide crescent-shaped arc, surrounding Transcarpathia and Transylvania, to Orșova, Romania, at the section of the Danube valley called the Iron Gate. With an the average elevation of around 850 m and its highest peak, Gerlach, in Slovakia, rising at 2 655 m above sea level the elevation of the Carpathians is much lower than this of the Alps. The total surface area of the mountain chain is

190 000 sq km, while the area of the broader Carpathian region is 470 000 sq km.

The Carpathians are considered to be a reservoir with the highest biodiversity in Europe, including around 60 000 wild species. The wooded areas include the largest pristine forests on the continent, while some primeval beech forests in the Carpathians were designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The fauna includes the most significant population of large carnivores in Europe (bears, wolves, lynx), in addition to bison, deer, boars, chamois, marmots and numerous bird species. The rich variety of the endemic plants and animals, characteristic of the Carpathian



A map of the Carpathian Ecoregion

ecosystems, form a relevant part of the European biodiversity. Beside the large forest patches, areas of other land use types, such as grasslands, cultivated fields and pastures are small; the related agro-biodiversity, though, is very significant due to a long-established agricultural tradition, its most prominent elements being seasonal pasturing in mountain meadows and the cultivation of local plants and trees varieties.

There are seven countries in the Carpathian region, and the total population of around 20 million people is divided among seven nations: the Hungarians, Ukrainians, Slovaks, Czechs, Poles, Romanians, Serbs and several

other ethnic groups. A distinctive feature of the Carpathian region is that in each country minority groups from neighbouring countries live. This ethnically diverse and multicultural region is further enriched by Russians, Jews, Germans, Greeks, Armenians and Roma. However, specific minorities, such as the Rusyns, Lemkos, Bojkos, Hutsuls, Góralcs, Szeklers, Csángos, and Moji consider themselves different from the Carpathian nations (Nikitin et al., 2009; Eberhardt, 2003). The mountain ranges have divided and isolated these populations from each other for centuries, and as a result they have developed and kept their own beliefs, dialects and ethnic identities.

Throughout history, the Carpathian region has been a 'border area' for the large empires, such as the Ottoman, Habsburg, or Russian/Soviet. Solidarity rather than joining of forces was in the political agenda and strategies of the smaller nations in this 'border area'; moreover, the great powers sustained hostility among these nations. The state borders changed many times, and in some areas even the ethnic composition of the population changed substantially. For all these reasons, the border areas remained deliberately underdeveloped and were not industrialised; during the communist era even the collectivisation was not carried out in some mountainous areas, so the direct impact of modernity, with all its implications, is quite low, even today.

Ancient sacred natural sites

Lepenski Vir, situated in the Carpathian Mountains near Danube in Djerdap National Park, Serbia, is considered the oldest urban settlement in Europe. It was a permanent settlement established at a time when elsewhere in Europe only temporary shelters of nomadic hunters were in use. Lepenski Vir was a Mesolithic site of significant religious importance. The fishlike humanoid figural sculptures discovered are related to primeval religion, and represent one of the oldest stone sculptures in Europe. The remains of numerous sacral buildings dating from 6500 BC to 5500 BC have been found. Artefacts covered with pictograms dated around 5000 BC, constitute another

reason to rank Lepenski Vir as one of the most outstanding spiritual sites in the European and world prehistory.

Around 1000 BC, the Geto-Dacian civilisation had spread through the entire Carpathian Mountains region. The main deity of the Geto-Dacians was Zamolxe, its name deriving from the words '*zelmo*' that means skin and '*olxis*' that means bear. According to mythology, after his birth he was blanket-ed in a bearskin and spent long parts of his life living in an underground cave, appearing and teaching people occasionally. This is why each ancient sacred place in the Carpathians is associated with caves or tunnels. The centre of this civilisation, located now in Grădiştea Muncelului Cioclovina Nature Park, Romania, is a colossal complex of hundreds of temples, sanctuaries and fortresses spread over an area of around 3000 square kilometres. All the mountains around this complex are terraced and walled. The Dacian buildings and complexes are positioned following precise geometrical patterns, occult symbols, and maps of the sky. The greatest achievement and mystery of this ancient civilisation is the capital, Sarmisegetuza, called also the 'City Calendar'. 'Sanctuarul Mare Rotund' (Big Round Sanctuary) has an identical structure with Stonehenge, whereas another sanctuary, called 'Soarele de Andezit' (The Andesito Sun), resembles strongly the famous Maya calendar. (Daicovicu, 1991).

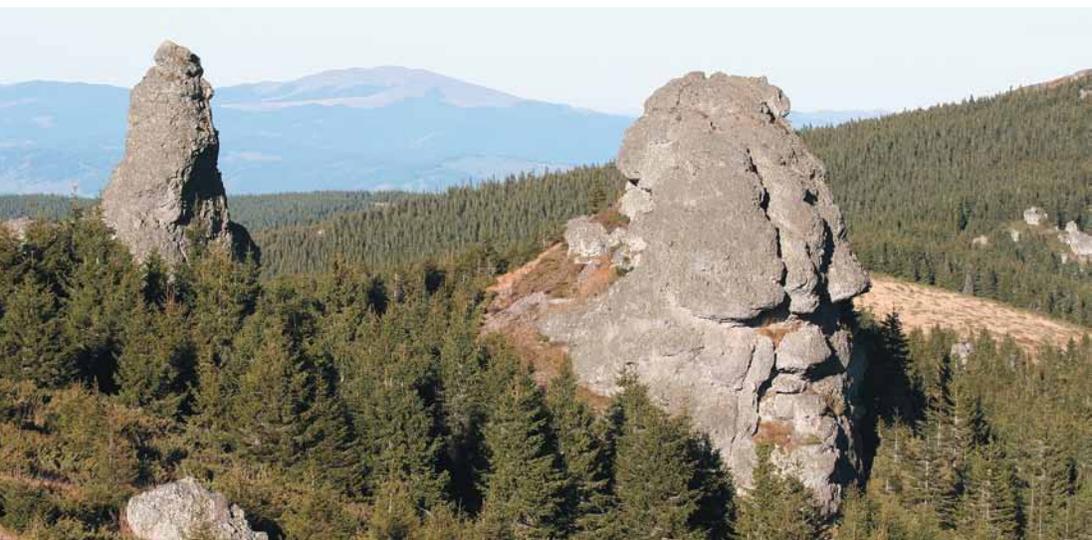
The Romanian Carpathians are famous for their cultic anthropomorphic rocks, the most famous being the 'Sphynx'

(which has the same height as the Egyptian one), the 'Babele' (The Old Women) in Bucegi Nature Park, and 'The Twelve Apostles' in Călimani National Park. For ancient Romanians, the sky, '*cerul*' in Romanian, was called '*Caelus Manus*', '*Kerus Manus*', or '*Duonus Cerus*' that means the Lord Sky. The actual name of some Romanian mountains such as '*Căli-man*' and '*Carai-man*' represent not only the mountain, but also Divinity (Geticus, 2003). In Romania, there are three Caraiman Mountains and four Calimani Mountains, all of them considered sacred.

The Bucegi Mountain, located in the Bucegi Nature Park, Romania, is believed to be one of the possible locations of the Dacian holy mountain Kogainon, in which Zalmoxe resided in a cave. In that mountain, there are some amazing and mysterious places like the Omu Peak, known as 'Zamolxe throne', which includes the name '*om*' that is also the sacred syllable of Hinduism and Buddhism as well as the

Caraiman Peak and a vast system of caves, some of them not yet explored. The top of Caraiman, due to its numerous anthropomorphic rocks positioned in a specific way, is considered to be an immense stellar temple, compared with Glastonbury (Geticus, 2003). The Bucegi Mountain is considered to be an intersection of Earth energy lines, an area of very strange magnetic abnormality. It has been discovered that a specific site near the Ialomicioara Cave had positive effects on human bodies, resetting physical and chemical bodily functions to normal state and restoring energy levels. In the popular Romanian tradition this site is called the 'Gura de Rai' (the Mouth of Heaven), and is considered to be sacred, a gate between different worlds, a road to Heaven. Because of the combination of these unique features and its natural beauties, Bucegi Nature Park is currently the most visited park in Romania, receiving around one million visitors per year.

Mosul, Calimani National Park, Romania. The Romanian word Mosul means the Old Man, but it is also a popular name for the Divinity.



In Ceahlău National Park, Romania, the Ceahlău Mountain, called the 'Romanian Olympus' is considered since times immemorial a holy mountain. It is visible from the Black Sea coast, 500 km away. A strange phenomenon occurs regularly: in the first week of August, at sunrise, the shadow of two of its peaks forms, for one hour and half, a spectacular hologram of a pyramid. At the same period of time, above the Toaca Peak, which has a perfect square pyramidal shape, for some minutes, an intense light pillar goes up towards the sky. Some researchers believe that Ceahlău Mountain is traversed by one of the energetic axes of the Earth (www.2012en.wordpress.com). The 'Dobogókő' (The Pulsating Stone), Pilis area, Duna-Ipoly National Park, Hungary, is considered to be the Earth's heart *chakra*. It is in the same place that Attila the Hun chose to place the centre of his great empire. When the Dalai Lama visited Hungary he declared: *'The approach and behaviour of Tibet, similarly to other holy knowledge, sees and experiences the eternity as unity. According to this, the so-called power and energy centres are being counted, not only in a human body, but on the Earth as well. According to the tradition, the Earth heart chakra is in Hungary, more exactly in the area called Pilis.'* (www.docstoc.com)

An amazing mixture of beliefs concerning nature

Recognising the importance and the value of the ancient sacred sites, main-

stream religions established their own shrines and places of worship in their vicinities. It is the Ceahlău Mountain, which, due to its ancient age and the actual monastic life, is considered the second holiest mountain of Christian Orthodoxy, after Mt Athos. Another example is the Sinaia Monastery, also called 'the cathedral' of the Bucegi Mountains, which was built on the main road to the Bucegi Plateau, where the ancient sacred site was located. The entrance to the famous Lalomicioara cave, the place from where Zamolxe supposedly has disappeared, is nowadays guarded by an Orthodox Monastery. Another outstanding sacred place is Dobogókő, which is frequently visited by high-level priests, Buddhist monks, and healers from around the world. Even the Chinese Shaolin order has created its Eastern European monastery close to this sacred site.

The highly spiritual sites up in the mountains, the processions, the calendars, and even the physical locations of the early churches were clearly the same of those of the ancient shrines. Many significant names also testify to their long history. For instance, Saint Andrew, who introduced Christianity to Romania, is locally known as the 'Apostle of the wolves' - a name charged with profound connotations, given that the wolf was one of the spiritual ancestors of Dacians and its head was both a significant ethnic and a military symbol for them. Another example is the myth of Rusalii, according to which the souls of the girls who die young can be seen sailing through the

sky or in the forest, in a gracious dance. If they happen to be seen or heard by someone, that person shouldn't move or speak to the spirits.

For Hutsul people (of Ukraine) the Carpathian Mountains are the land of '*bisytshas*', beautiful ethereal women who, with their song, lure men to their demise. This myth was assimilated with the Christian Post-Pascal feast day of The Fiftieth Day, which became the Pentecost '*Rusalii*' Sunday. '*Rusalii*' is the traditional feast day which is celebrated on the same day with the Fiftieth Day, being devoted especially to the celebration of the spirits of the dead.

Zamolxe, the brown bear, known in folk beliefs as 'Martin', 'Martin the crone' or 'the elder', was a sacred animal for the Geto-Dacians. Even today in the popular calendar, which combines phenomenology with pre-Christian and Christian events, the brown bear is well represented; 24 March is the 'Saturday of the bear', 31 July, 1, 2 and 13 August are the 'Days of the Bear'. The most important period for the bear is 1–3 February, which is called '*Sretenie*' (Winter Martins). Offerings consisting of meat and honey are left in the forest, near a passage of the bear, on 2 February, which is called 'The big Martin'. For all Carpathians the twelve cosmogonic days from Christmas to Epiphany represent the clearest example of syncretism between Christianity and pre-Christian faiths. In accordance with pagan heritage, masks are used during the winter feasts in order to avoid malevolent spirits. The game of

bear masks, which is very spectacular in the Moldavia region, represents the death and resurrection of nature, also demonstrating vitality, finesse and force. Given the fact that these ancient beliefs are deeply rooted and frequently met in local traditions, the bear is currently quite abundant in forested areas of Romania; their population accounts for two thirds of the entire European brown bear population. (Gorovei, 2003).

In the Carpathians some ancient Pre-Christian rituals and beliefs are still alive, and have survived Christianity. The '*molfars*' (for Hutsul people, Vysnytsky National Park, Ukraine), are wise botanical healers who gather medicinal plants from the mountainscape, and use chanting and music from a small instrument known as '*drimba*' in the healing process. They have an intimate and loving relationship with all components of the natural world, from Earth to water, fire to forest and all of the animal and plant life of the Carpathian environment. The Goddesses of Kopanice or the Mystery Wise Women (White Carpathians Protected Landscape Area, Czech Republic) can heal a person using only curative herbs, can find lost or stolen things or give good advice in partnership relation problems. Within the isolated communities of the Romanian Carpathians (Apuşeni Nature Park, Munţii Maramureşului Nature Park) certain people, especially old women, know and use magic incantations against illness, bad luck, hex, etc.

Christian sacred natural sites

Nowadays, the majority of the inhabitants of the Carpathian area are Christians, and many of them are strong believers. A large part of the Polish, Slovak, Czech and Hungarian population is Roman Catholic. There are also Hungarian Calvinists and German Lutherans. The Szeklers belong to the Transylvanian Unitarian Church, which is a religion established in and spread from the Carpathian area. The majority of the Ukrainians, Romanians and Serbs are Eastern Orthodox Christians. The Greek Catholic Church has a special significance in the Carpathian region, because the greatest part of its adherents live in this part of Europe, mostly Ukrainians and Romanians, but also Slovaks and Hungarians. In all countries of the region, owing to the current deterioration of living conditions, the collapse of earlier systems and ideals contributes to the increase of the number of adherents of new Christian religious movements.

Characteristic of the Carpathian region are the centuries-old wooden churches, adapted perfectly to the landscape and to the small local communities, scattered in the forests. The most significant wooden churches in Romania (Bârsana, Budești, Desești, Ieud, Plopiș, Poienile Izei, Rogoz, șurdești), Slovakia (Hervartov, Tvrdošín, Hronsek, Leštiny, Kežmarok, Bodružal, Ruská Bystrá, Ladomirová) and in Poland (Binarowa, Blizne, Dębno, Haczów, Lipnica Dolna, Sękowa) have been declared World Heritage Sites. The architectural forms of these churches repre-

sent a marvellous blend of Western and Eastern influences; there are Romanian Orthodox churches with a Gothic architecture, but also Polish Romano-Catholic churches with Orthodox onion shaped spires. The craftsmen were able to build these amazing buildings only with wood, without using any iron nails or any written plans, just using their knowledge, a secret transmitted only to chosen members of their guild.

Another old custom of the region, which is still preserved nowadays, was that monks built small hermitages in the vicinity of their monastery. Along the years, many of these hermitages have grown, becoming new monasteries with their own priors.

Because there were many invasions, wars and riots during the Middle Ages, some of the Carpathian churches and monasteries were strongly fortified. Outstanding examples are the German fortified churches in Transylvania that have been declared World Heritage Sites (Biertan, Călnic, Dârjiu, Prejmer, Saschiz, Valea Viilor, and Viscri).

The number of Christian Sacred Natural Sites of the Carpathians is very large, although, at this moment a complete inventory does not exist. Only inside the legally established protected areas of Romania, there are 198 operating churches, monasteries and hermitages, populated by around 1800 monks and nuns. It suffices to mention only some protected areas where these kinds of sites exist at a higher concentration:

- Vânători Neamț Nature Park, Romania, the spiritual heart of Romania: 16 monasteries and hermitages (Neamț, Secu, Sihăstria, Sihla, Vîratec, Agapia, etc) are located inside the Park boundaries as well as around 40 churches, small hermitages, and monasteries in the proximity.
- Munții Maramureșului Nature Park, Romania: it hosts over 60 churches.
- Grădiștea Muncelului Cioclovina Nature Park, Romania: 10 churches are situated within its boundaries.
- Porțile de Fier Nature Park Nature Park, Romania: more than 30 churches, monasteries and hermitages can be found in its territory.
- Poloniny National Park, Slovakia, has the highest number of old wooden churches among all national parks in Slovakia: Uličské krivé, Jalová, Ruský Potok, Topol'a, Kalná Roztoka.

Another characteristic feature of the Sacred Natural Sites in the Carpathians is that they are not only alive but also

strongly connected with the local communities and those beyond them as well, often through pilgrimages. As regards the mountain range of the Carpathians, it is estimated that there are more than 400 places of pilgrimage, while in the whole Carpathian region their number is approximately 700. Most of these pilgrimage sites are small and only of local significance, but 50 to 60 of them have national significance, and some 10 to 15 are of international importance.

The most famous and the most frequented pilgrimage sites in the Carpathian region are the following:

- In the Polish Carpathian region: the Jasna Góra monastery in Czestochowa, visited every year by several million pilgrims; the Calvary Sanctuary in Kalwaria Zebrzydowska, the biggest compound of its kind in Europe and Poland's second most important historic destination for pil-

The Agapia Veche Convent, Vânători Neamț Nature Park, Romania is a holy place dedicated to cenobitic life. Destroyed and rebuilt many times during the centuries, the Agapia Veche Convent (Old Agapia) was established in the fourteenth century.



grims; Wadowice, the birthplace of Pope John Paul II visited by around 200 000 pilgrims yearly, etc (Borsa et al., 2009).

- In the Czech Carpathian region the most significant sites of pilgrimage are: Velehrad and Křtiny (White Carpathians).
- In the Slovakian Carpathian region, the main national pilgrimage places are Nitra, related with the Saints Cyril and Methodius, the creators of the Glagolitic alphabet which was created to transcribe the Old Church Slavonic language; the Zobor Mountain where the first monastery in Slovakia was built; Hronský Beňadik, related with the Benedictine abbey established in 1075, all in or close to Ponitrie Protected Landscape Area; the Levoča Mariánská Hora church, close to Slovenský Raj National Park; Litmanová, the place of an apparition of Virgin Mary, in Pieniny National Park.
- In the Hungarian Carpathian region the most famous pilgrimage sites are Máriapócs, Máriaremete, Márianosztra, and BÉlapátfalva all situated in Bükk National Park.
- In the Romanian Carpathian region, the Orthodox monasteries are the main pilgrimage destinations. There are four main concentration areas of monasteries: those of Bucovina (Humor, Voroneţ, Moldoviţa, and Suceviţa), Neamţ region and Vânători Neamţ Nature Park (Neamţ, Secu, Vovidenia, Agapia, Sihăstria, Văratec, etc), the valley of River Olt, Buila Vânturariţa National Park and Cozia National Park (Hurezi, Curtea de Argeş, Cozia, Bistriţa) and Munţii

Maramureşului Nature Park (Moisei, Bogdan Voda, Rozavlea, and Bârsana). The main pilgrimage place of the Catholic Hungarians in Romania is the church and monastery in şumuleu Ciuc (around 300 000 pilgrims yearly).

- In the Ukrainian Carpathian region pilgrimage destinations are Krekhiv (miracle working icons), Hrushiv (apparition of Virgin Mary) etc.

The presence of the monastic communities and hermits living in solitude in the wilderness is another characteristic of the Carpathians. Only in the Romanian Carpathians, monastic communities are found within 13 National and Nature Parks. The life of these monastic communities in forested areas, usually living in harsh conditions, often includes an efficient use of pasture lands, hay fields, and glades. The monastic communities have a long-established tradition of wise use of natural resources, in order to cover only their essential needs, giving to the natural elements found in the Carpathians some utilitarian, cultural and spiritual value. Thanks to the ancient monastic recipes, the plants and herbs that grow near the monasteries are famous for their medicinal qualities. Brother Cyprian, an eighteenth century monk from červený Kláštor, Slovakia (Pieniny National Park), who was a famous pharmacist, is only one of many well-known examples. Each monastic community practises a number of traditional activities without a significant negative impact on the environment, such as livestock farming, woodcraft, fruit

growing, picking of mushrooms and forest fruits, apiculture, weaving, producing of traditional drinks from fruits, bakery, and fishing from ponds.

This resilient model, characterised by a sustainable consumption and production, has not served to produce large amounts of food; the small surpluses are sold in the monastic stores or used as alms during the religious feasts. The hundreds of years of the monastic ownership of the land, and the continuous presence of the monastic communities during that time, shaped the Carpathian landscapes in particular ways.

In some cases (Agapia Convent and Văratec Convent, Vânători Neamț Nature Park, Romania) the monastic communities are not organised in monasteries but in monastic villages, developed according to self-sufficiency rules. These villages have their own post offices, dispensaries, mills and stores, and are almost entirely self-sufficient.

Modern sacred natural sites

During the World Wars, the Carpathians region was the scene of some of the largest and desperate battles. Only in World War I nearly two million soldiers died on the Galician and Romanian fronts. Because of changes of borders and translocation of populations related with the disappearance of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after World War I, as well as the Soviet domination after World War II, the graves of the soldiers are not cared for, while

many of them are not even marked (Borsa et al., 2009). Nowadays, these cemeteries represent places of pilgrimage and self-communion. This has happened all around the Carpathians; an astonishing characteristic example is the establishment of the Sfânta Cruce (The Holy Cross) Hermitage in Vânători Neamț Nature Park, Romania, a place where thousands of Romanian, German and Russian soldiers were killed during a battle of WW II. The corpses of the soldiers were not buried; they were simply left there decaying, because their number was great, the front line moved rapidly and the political situation changed; as a result the surrounding forest has become a sacred one. The Heroes Cross on the Caraiman Mountain (Bucegi Natural Park, Romania), 28 m high, is the tallest structure in the world dedicated to the heroes who died during World War I, situated at an altitude of over 2000 metres. Nowadays this cross is also a subject of pilgrimage, not only for those who want to pay their respects or honour the heroes, but also to worship the Divinity on the top of a sacred mountain.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Jewish population in the Carpathian region was estimated at around 5 million people. Since then, especially during and after World War II, their number rapidly decreased, and as a result, the old synagogues and Jewish cemeteries are now an object of attention for their descendants, which spread all around the world. The Carpathian Mountains are related with the



The Dacian King Decebalus, Porțile de Fier Nature Park, Romania. This statue, started in 1994 and finished in 2004, is the tallest rock sculpture in Europe (40 m high), located on the rock bank of River Danube.

birth of the 'Hasidic' (the word deriving from the Hebrew word 'Hasid' meaning pious, righteous, invigorated and alive). It is an important mystical movement founded by Baal Shem Tov in the seventeenth century, one of the greatest luminaries of the Jewish people. His later followers said that going out to nature to speak to God in our own language is the secret to spiritual growth for every Jew and every human being. Based on the teaching of Baal Shem Tov, his great grandson, Rebbe Nachman wrote: 'When a person meditates in the fields, all the grasses join in his prayer and increase its effectiveness and power.'

In Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park, Romania, near Herculane, 3000 to 5000 yoga adepts from all over Europe meet every spring, to do several meditative practices together, including a yang spiral. On the other hand, the New Age movements are interested in the

resurrection of the ancient Pre-Christian beliefs, even of the Zamolxe cult.

Not only the former sanctuaries and worship places are used, but also new artistic creations became the subject of spiritual interest, like the statue of the Dacian King Decebalus, carved in stone, in Porțile de Fier Nature Park, Romania.

Sacred natural sites, local communities and nature conservation

A characteristic feature of the Carpathian area is that there are several places inhabited by more than one nationality, with distinctive cultural heritage, while there are areas which were inhabited in the past by national and religious groups who do not live there anymore. Thinking especially about the ancient Sacred Natural Sites, it is

obvious that the sacredness of some of them does not present a spiritual interest for contemporary local communities, and preservation works in these sites is carried out only for touristic purposes. Even in this case, however, local communities are usually interested in maintaining unchanged the environmental quality of these sites.

It is indisputable that Sacred Natural Sites which are currently important for the local communities play a key role in nature conservation, because each of them conveys respect for Nature as

a divine creation, and allows raise of awareness for environmental matters and dissemination of sound nature protection practices. But more importantly, visits in these sacred natural sites require not only external cleanliness, but also internal purity and a reverential attitude. Therefore, affirming the sacred values of landscapes, sites and species is a necessary step to protect nature, emphasising thus the amazing integration of the natural and spiritual features of the Carpathian region.

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