

Hello, friends!

April is here, the International Earth Day is approaching and soon we will celebrate it together, but in this issue we want to tell you about how March passed and what happened with the Coalition and our volunteers.

**“FOR THE NATURE” COALITION
INFORMATION NEWSLETTER
MARCH 2009**



This newsletter is supported by a grant from Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway through the EEA Financial Mechanism under the project “Let nature remain”.



THE DIRECTORS OF THE NATURE PARKS

The beginning of the month was neither pleasant, nor surprising with the attempts of the director of the State Forestry Agency to remove the directors of three of the biggest nature parks with solid investor appetites – Strandzha, Vitosha and Vrachanski Balkan. The three directors have made considerable contributions in the field of preserving and maintaining the parks and nature. Their colleagues from other nature parks, non-governmental organizations from the Coalition, the Bulgarian Climbing and Mountaineering Federation (BCMF), the Bulgarian Extreme and Free Skiing Association (BEFSA), and the Bulgarian Speleology Federation (BSF) and the wide public went out to show their absolute support for the directors.

Except for the official opinions that were deposited with the institutions and circulated to the media (<http://forthenature.org/attitudes/1>, <http://forthenature.org/news/633>), many letters were sent to the responsible institutions, and there were two spontaneous civil actions (<http://forthenature.org/actions/179>, <http://forthenature.org/actions/180>), whose effect was that members of the Coalition were invited to a meeting with the deputy Prime Minister Plugchieva and later with Yurukov. On this meeting it became clear that there are no reasons for discharging the directors (<http://forthenature.org/news/639>). We, from the Coalition still feel apprehensive, having in mind our long-term experience and knowledge of dismissals of many servants of state agencies from the ecological sphere (in MOEW – Ministry of Environment and Waters, RIEW – Regional Inspectorate of Environment and Waters, and others), who tried to do their job and work within the boundaries of law and with their actions stood in the way of the investors' interests.

The pressure on the directors of Vitosha, Strandzha and Vrachanski Balkan is not over. Stay tuned for more details.

THE THREATS TO VITOSHA NATURE PARK

The other big case on which we work – Vitosha and the law violations of Vitosha Ski AD – is closely connected to the previous. Vitosha Ski AD is the offshore company holding the concession of all lifts and equipment on the territory of Nature park Vitosha. In October 2008, Vitosha Ski AD started illegal construction works on the territory of the park, blew up 200 “moreni” (so-called “stone rivers” which are Vitosha’s “trademark”) and built an illegal ski path (<http://forthenature.org/cases/28/>, <http://forthenature.org/news/535>). Since then, all institutions in charge and the prosecutor's office have been approached and signalled. We insist that in Bulgaria illegal actions of investors are finally sanctioned and really punished.

The position of BAAT (Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism), BCMF, BEFSA, BSF, and many other sports associations, clubs, ski schools and civil formations is that we hope the monopoly owner of the ski lifts and equipment in Vitosha repairs, improves and supports the existing ski equipment in the mountain. We would prefer that the investor make skiing an affordable pleasure for everyone, rather than plan 19 illegal new ski tracks and may ski facilities and artificial lakes on the territory of the park. We insist on and fight for observing the laws, sanctions for violators and conscientious and beneficial development of ski sport on the territory of the Nature park. The joint position of BCMF, BEFSA, and BSF can be read here: <http://forthenature.org/attitudes/12/>.



March 4, 2009 — public action in support of the directors of the nature parks in Sofia in front of the Council of Ministers.

«PLANINIADA” ON VITOSHA

On March 15, volunteers, ski instructors, and other organizations and clubs in cooperation with Vitosha Nature park, organized Planiniada (an “olympiade” for mountain snow sports) of alternative sports. More than 500 people took part in the event. Over 50 children aged 1-15 won one sunny day in the mountain and more than 20 mountain awards, provided by Red Rock and WWF for the first “edition” of the Planiniada in Vitosha.

The event gathered on upper station of the Dragalevtzi lift young and old lovers of the mountain, who learned more about the wild Vitosha nature from the materials in a special igloo-info-center, put snow-shoes and telemark skis,

flew a kite and rode snowboard, pulled by the wind. The most exotic from the winter sports were Snowkite and Kite-wing. All had the possibility to learn how to make an igloo or a shelter, how to survive in the mountain and which are the rules of avalanche safety. The colours of the kites inspired scores of people to discover anew the mountain and the possibilities for practising sports which preserve nature.

Pictures: <http://forthenature.org/gallery/122> .



LIFT IN PANICHISHTE, RILA

Except for Vitosha, March passed under the sign of the fight for another lovely mountain – Rila. There the director of the National park was removed the year before and the new management of the park made possible the maintenance and exploitation of an illegal lift on the territory of the park (officially inaugurated in the beginning of April 2009). The lift is not perfectly safe from technical point of view and its bottom station is on situated on an active landslide (<http://forthenature.org/cases/18/>, <http://forthenature.org/documents/383/>).

The tireless fights of the international group Citizens for Rila had as a result many initiatives in the country and abroad. The third national strategy meeting took place in Veliko Tarnovo. All responsible institutions were again notified and

public information was required from them (Ministry of Environment and Waters, Regional Directorate of Construction Control, Sapareva Banya Municipality, State Agency for Metrological and Technical Control, The Directorate of Rila National Park). International media visited the construction site.

FORESTS AND FOREST SWAPS

The forests of Bulgaria were another sphere in which the Coalition was quite active in March. The matter was referred to the prosecutor's office because of the forest swaps and violations committed by the State Forestry Agency (SFA) and its director Stefan Yurukov.

<http://www.mediapool.bg/show/?storyid=150264&srcpos=1>

On the Internet page of SFA only 5 forest swaps are announced for 2009 and the last 2 are dated January 16, 2009 and have been made after the National Assembly voted to amend the Law on Forests with the aim of prohibiting swaps of forests by legal entities. This amendment was voted on January 16, 2009 after social outrage from the practice of forest swaps had piled up for years and the severe critiques in the report of the European Commission made Bulgarian deputies outlaw this corrupt practice.

The Chairman of the Bulgarian Parliament Georgi Pirinski committed himself to the promise that the ban on forest swaps be published in the earliest possible issue of State Gazette, which did not happen.

<http://forthenature.org/news/658/>

<http://forthenature.org/news/687/>

<http://forthenature.org/news/654/>

Last, but not least, comes the best news! :)

THE COMPLEX OF "CRASH 2000" IN VARVARA WAS FINALLY PROVED TO BE ILLEGAL

March brought us one of the best news in the history of justice and nature protection. After three years of fights, actions and work on the case, the Supreme Administrative Court cancelled the ten permits with which the complex "Golden Pearl" in Strandzha Nature Park was built. The court finally declared the notorious vacation complex illegal.

http://www.panda.org/bg/news_facts/?160421/strandzhagoldenpearl

[Article in "Dnevnik" newspaper.](#)

We soon expect that the Regional Directorate of Construction Control in Burgas do its job and issue an order to re-

The Supreme Administrative Court cancelled the building permits of the "Golden Pearl" complex near Varvara. We expect the Court to make the same decision on the Irakli case.



move the illegal complex and recultivate the site. We are in fighting trim to help if the municipality again claims that it doesn't have enough money to dismantle the illegal complex.

We work in the same direction on the Irakli case and the building of the offshore company "Swiss Properties". The construction of Riverside Village and the cutting of the vegetation along the Vaya river were carried out in violation of many Bulgarian and European laws and we think that the recultivation of the destroyed areas must start immediately.

INFORMATION TOURS AND TRAININGS

This month saw the information tours for awareness raising about the Coalition and the trainings for civic activity continue with full steam. The information tour visited the South Black Sea coast (Burgas, Sozopol, Malko Tarnovo and Tsarevo) and was part of the project of Citizens for Rila and Ecological Association "For The Earth" (Za Zemiata) for civic empowerment through strengthening the campaign for the protection of wild nature in Bulgaria (<http://forthenature.org/news/655/>).

Representatives of the "For The Nature" campaign met students aged 11-14 from the English-American school in Sofia <http://forthenature.org/news/671/>. The trainings for civil activity continued in Sofia, Ruse, Varna, and Veliko Tarnovo with presentations and discussions on topics such as bicycle transport and work with municipal authorities, work with media, the danger from GMOs, group dynamics, the legislative and judicial power in Bulgaria. You can come to the forthcoming trainings in different cities after informing yourself about them on <http://forthenature.org>.

ECOFESTIVAL IN PLOVDIV

The Plovdiv Ecofestival also took place during this busy month. It is a celebration of music, nature protection and art, organized by volunteers from the civil group "Nature Paradise" and Green Balkans in Plovdiv, one of the members of "For The Nature" Coalition. Pictures and more information about this incredible festival: <http://forthenature.org/news/680/>.

EARTH HOUR

On March 28, a few hundred million people became part of Earth Hour, organized by the international nature protection organization WWF and proved that the time for serious actions against climate change has come. In Bulgaria Earth Hour was properly met with events in Sofia and Plovdiv: <http://forthenature.org/news/678>.



«FOR THE NATURE» COALITION MEETS BUSINESS

And last but not least, this month we finally held the long-awaited and prepared round table with representatives of business. On March 13, 2009 in Sofia a discussion took place on the topic: "ECONsensus – a challenge for business and nature protection organizations". The aim of the meeting was to talk about the barrier between nongovernmental organizations and business. It is a common claim about us in the business circles that we aim to stop economic development, while for us businesses are all bad and dark. With that meeting we want to open the dialogue between the two sides – economy and nature are connected and we have to find the way to reconcile them. On the other hand, it is now very fashionable to be "eco" which is very often understood by firms only in terms of free "green" PR and useless one-time campaigns. In this connection we want to promote the adherence to a certain ecological and ethical code. And only if a certain business follows it, can it be called ecological. More on: <http://forthenature.org/news/643/>.

Working with volunteers and supporting their initiatives is among the main priorities of "For The Nature" Coalition. Photos from the Ecofestival in Plovdiv and the strategic meeting of the civil campaign for preserving Rila.