

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM INITIATIVES IN THE EASTERN RHODOPEs: ENSURING ECONOMIC BENEFITS THROUGH CULTURAL HERITAGE CONSERVATION

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Abstract

The Eastern Rhodopes can be considered an emerging tourism destination in Bulgaria, although several local centres possess accumulated experience in hosting visitors and developing tourism services. This article examines sustainable tourism initiatives in the Eastern Rhodopes, focusing on their economic effects and the role of natural and cultural heritage conservation as a prerequisite for long-term destination competitiveness. The region's development prospects are closely linked to the consolidation of a coherent tourism destination, the diversification and quality upgrading of the tourism product, and strategic promotion in domestic and international markets. The paper provides a structured overview of key natural and cultural assets and discusses how local cultural-tourism initiatives are frequently operationalised through informational and promotional outputs, the enrichment of the cultural calendar, and the development of tourism infrastructure. The Eastern Rhodopes combine diverse ecosystems, a high density of archaeological sites, and layered cultural landscapes that attract visitors and researchers. Protecting these assets is essential for securing sustained economic benefits, strengthening local entrepreneurship, and ensuring intergenerational value creation through tourism.

Keywords: sustainable tourism innovations, Eastern Rhodope's economic growth, natural and cultural heritage

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Introduction

The Eastern Rhodopes host some of the most well preserved biodiversity in Europe, with reported richness of 1,962 plant and 4,329 animal species. This natural capital, together with distinctive cultural landscapes and heritage sites, has positioned the region as an increasingly recognised destination for ecotourism and nature-based travel. Importantly, the Eastern Rhodopes are among the few areas in Bulgaria that function and continue to evolve as a relatively cohesive tourism destination, rather than a fragmented set of attractions. Achieving

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and maintaining such cohesion is demanding and requires sustained institutional coordination, investment, and local stakeholder engagement.

The region's limited presence of large industrial enterprises and major corporate actors can be seen as both a constraint and an opportunity. On the one hand, it limits employment options; on the other, it creates favourable conditions for small business development and place-based tourism entrepreneurship. Despite substantial untapped potential, entrepreneurial activity remains insufficient. Targeted initiatives could stimulate innovative tourism attractions (forest- and water-based experiences, craft demonstrations, agritourism, farmers' markets, and culinary experiences) that generate local income and strengthen territorial identity.

The Eastern Rhodopes also feature a demographically and culturally mixed population, forming a distinctive mosaic of religions, customs, and everyday practices. This diversity enhances destination authenticity and can be integrated into tourism product design, provided it is approached with cultural sensitivity and respect for local communities.

Persistent challenges such as depopulation, abandoned villages, and disused industrial buildings could also be reframed as opportunities for adaptive reuse within sustainable tourism. Architectural reserves, artisanal parks, multifunctional farms, and wildlife observation sites are among the potential models that could attract rural, agritourism, and culinary tourism segments. As Kircheva (2018) suggests, the region's appeal is closely tied to a living landscape shaped by pastoral rhythms, traditional breeds, and emblematic wildlife, which together form an "authentic" experiential resource for both domestic and international audiences.

Natural and Cultural Capital as a Foundation for Sustainable Tourism Development

Natural and cultural heritage of the Eastern Rhodopes

Tourism is widely recognised as a key pathway for regional economic growth in the Eastern Rhodopes, provided that the destination offers a high-quality product and implements effective promotion (Project Development Team, 2013). A prominent institutional example is the inter-municipal collaboration project "The Eastern World of the Rhodope Mountains", developed by Momchilgrad Municipality in partnership with Kardzhali and Krumovgrad. According to reported project outputs, the partners established a tourism network and developed twelve tourism routes and twenty-eight sample packages structured into three thematic products, including "The Millennial History and Culture of a Mystical People", focused on megaliths, myths, legends, and local lifeways.

Geographic and landscape context

The Eastern Rhodopes extend eastward from the Western Rhodopes and south of the Upper Thracian Plain and the Maritsa Valley. The region includes mountain ridges and saddles such as Tri Kamaka, the Gyumyurdzhinski Snezhnik massif, and areas descending toward the Makaza Pass. Along the headwaters of the Kăzalach River, remnants of fortresses and villages (e.g., Chakalarovo, Shumnatitsa, Kirkovo, Drangovo) contribute to a landscape historically associated with hunting and rural livelihoods.

Beyond Makaza Pass, the Măglenik Range (including Vetren Peak) features megalithic monuments near Gugutka and the medieval fortress “Byalo Kale” near Beli Dol. Archaeological finds, including coins dated to the era of Alexander the Great, have been reported from the area (Ivanova, 2024). Such sites illustrate how heritage resources are spatially embedded within distinctive geomorphology and rural settlement patterns.

Thematic tourism products and heritage clusters

The Eastern Rhodopes offer a strong basis for themed tourism development due to the intersection of hydrological networks, geological formations, and archaeological density. Specialised thematic routes have been designed, including “Palette of Living Landscapes and Sounds” and “Journey by Water”, reflecting attempts to package experiences for niche markets.

Archaeological resources include Thracian burial mounds, medieval necropolises, and dolmens in the Hambardere area. The Byala River Valley provides scenic landscapes, while Stramni Rid preserves Thracian remnants such as fortifications and sacred sites. The Sanctuary of Orpheus near Tatul is among the most prominent sites (Ivanova, 2024).

Ecological assets include the easternmost natural occurrence of black pine (*Pinus nigra*) in Bulgaria (Borovets Reserve) and geological phenomena such as the “Petrified Forest”, bearing resemblance to the Pobiti Kamani formation. The area also includes rock-cut tombs, the Asar fortress, and Thracian rock niches, supporting interpretation and heritage education.

Tourism infrastructure, stakeholder engagement, and events

Sites such as Momchil Hut near Momchilgrad provide panoramic viewpoints and access to forested landscapes and protected fauna. Archaeological features, including Thracian sanctuaries near Potonitsa, contribute to a multi-layered attraction base.

The region has also pursued destination marketing through participation in major tourism fairs (London, Berlin, Moscow, Istanbul) and through familiarisation trips for journalists, reflecting a strategy of visibility-building and network formation with tour operators. Such efforts are consistent with contemporary destination management practices that combine product development, communication, and stakeholder coordination.

Spa and wellness potential

A notable milestone in late 2024 was the opening of Dzhebel's first mineral-water swimming pool. Dzhebel Municipality is positioned as a potential balneotherapy destination, supported by initial infrastructure investments, including a hot mineral water pipeline network designed to enable further public investment and development phases.

“Water route” development and landscape rehabilitation tensions

The Madzharovo Gorge area, Irantpe Ridge, and the Krumovitsa valley contain multiple archaeological remnants (settlements, cult sites, fortifications, churches) and provide strong conditions for adventure and nature tourism, including waterfalls and caves such as Martina Cave near Oreshari. The Ivaylovgrad Reservoir functions as a major attraction and anchors complementary products (angling, hiking, heritage visitation).

A proposed “Trail of Waterfalls” route illustrates both opportunity and challenge: it builds on high aesthetic value and seasonal appeal (e.g., Madzharovo Waterfall) while revealing traces of industrial legacy, such as mine tailings infrastructure, that may visually conflict with the destination image. This tension underscores the need to integrate landscape rehabilitation and interpretation into sustainable tourism planning, rather than relying solely on promotional narratives.

Built heritage and flagship sites

Ivaylovgrad's Villa Armira is a key cultural asset, described as a Roman estate complex of approximately 2,200 m², dated to the 1st–3rd centuries CE and recognised as an exceptional example of Roman-era private architecture in Bulgarian territories. It is included on UNESCO's Tentative List and has benefited from recent investments (e.g., observation tower restoration and visitor infrastructure). Such interventions indicate a shift toward experience-oriented heritage management, combining conservation with visitor services.

Around Kardzhali, archaeological resources span prehistoric, Thracian, Roman, Byzantine, medieval Bulgarian, and Ottoman periods. Perperikon stands out as a heavily visited landmark and is widely presented as a major megalithic complex with strong symbolic value and interpretive potential.

Cultural landscape integration: heritage, geology, and identity

The Kardzhali region exemplifies the integration of archaeological monuments with geological attractions, including Stone Mushrooms, Stone Wedding, Rock Window, and the Utroba cave sanctuary. Medieval fortifications (e.g., Monyak fortress and related defensive structures) complement this heritage landscape, while festivals such as the Thracian Festival, the Ethno-Festival “Kardzhali: Capital of Tolerance”, and the “Terlika” festival strengthen cultural calendar-based tourism. Together, these assets support a destination identity rooted in both natural processes and historical continuity.

The density of archaeological sites is further illustrated by the Thracian beehive tomb near Mezek (4th century BCE), the medieval “Kaletó” fortress (11th – 12th centuries), and the Thracian cult complex “Gluhite Kamani”, featuring more than 200 carved niches. These sites collectively support both scholarly interest and cultural tourism development, provided that conservation standards and visitor management are maintained.

Sustainable Tourism Initiatives and Economic Benefits

Sustainable tourism initiatives in the Eastern Rhodopes are closely tied to informational and promotional production, cultural calendar development, festival organisation, and tourism infrastructure (e.g., trails, eco-trails, facilities in protected areas, and accessibility improvements). Municipalities also signal intentions for broader economic development measures, although some initiatives remain insufficiently specified in terms of implementation mechanisms and expected outcomes.

Infrastructure upgrading appears as a primary priority, alongside measures intended to improve the attractiveness of the region for professionals, including healthcare workers. Economically, the region retains traditional activities in light industry (footwear and textiles) and small-scale food production (bakery and meat products). Commerce is frequently reported as a dominant sector in municipal economies; for example, Krumovgrad is described as hosting 179 commercial enterprises, with commerce accounting for a substantial share of local value creation. Hospitality and transport also contribute significantly.

Despite gradual adaptation of private businesses and the emergence of specialised sectors (vegetables, fruit cultivation, footwear and apparel), these remain

dependent on effective municipal and regional support. Household economic activities provide stability but are generally characterised by low productivity and limited income potential. Services show steady growth and modest wage increases.

Tourism contributes meaningfully to local budgets, reportedly generating around one-third of municipal revenues in parts of the region, despite limitations in accommodation capacity and quality. To strengthen destination competitiveness, several initiatives have been pursued:

1. Tourist routes and modular packages.

A core instrument for structuring the tourism offer in the Eastern Rhodopes is the development of tourist routes and modular tourism packages. These packages are designed as integrated products that combine itinerary descriptions, duration, key attractions, services, accommodation options, pricing, supplementary activities, and connections to other thematic routes within the region. Such a structure allows for both coherence and flexibility, enabling tourists to experience the destination as an interconnected system rather than as isolated attractions. The modular design responds directly to contemporary tourism demand, where visitors increasingly seek personalised and experience-based travel rather than rigid, pre-defined programmes. At the same time, modularity supports tour operators and local service providers by facilitating the adaptation of packages to specific client preferences, seasonal conditions, and market segments, while reducing organisational and transactional costs.

2. Marketing plan.

To support the effective positioning of these tourism products, a comprehensive marketing plan has been developed as a strategic framework guiding destination promotion. The plan defines a core marketing strategy aligned with clearly articulated objectives related to visibility, differentiation, and market penetration. It also incorporates contingency measures, including alternative strategic scenarios and repositioning options, designed to address uncertainty arising from external economic fluctuations, changing tourist behaviour, or geopolitical factors. Communication policy constitutes a central component of the marketing plan, emphasising consistent messaging, coherent visual identity, and coordinated use of promotional channels. In addition, loyalty-building measures are envisaged to encourage repeat visitation and long-term engagement with the destination, contributing to the consolidation of an integrated destination brand for the Eastern Rhodopes.

3. Promotional and informational materials.

The implementation of the marketing strategy is supported by a broad range of promotional and informational materials. These include catalogues, thematic guides, illustrated maps, children's brochures, flyers, and concise promotional

leaflets, as well as audiovisual content such as promotional films and short advertising clips. Informational signage, poster maps, and branded souvenirs further enhance on-site interpretation and destination recognition. All materials are produced in multiple languages in order to address diverse international target markets. Digital marketing plays an increasingly important role, with targeted campaigns conducted through social media platforms and search engines, complemented by media outreach and feature publications. This diversified communication mix aims to maximise reach across different geographic markets and tourist segments.

4. Participation in tourism exhibitions.

Active participation in international tourism exhibitions, such as the World Travel Market (WTM) in London, as well as regional forums including the Black Sea Tourism Forum, represents a key mechanism for enhancing destination visibility and competitiveness. These events provide opportunities for networking with tour operators, investors, and institutional partners, facilitating knowledge exchange and the establishment of distribution channels for tourism products from the Eastern Rhodopes.

5. Press and familiarisation tours.

Press and familiarisation tours constitute an additional promotional instrument, offering journalists and tour operator representatives first-hand experience of the destination. By exposing key stakeholders to local attractions, thematic routes, and tourism services, these initiatives support credible media coverage and strengthen distribution partnerships, particularly in the field of incentive, cultural, and alternative tourism.

These initiatives align with the region's broader development profile: a peripheral location combined with unique natural and historical assets, a warm transitional Mediterranean climate, and substantial water resources. While soil limitations constrain certain agricultural trajectories, they may indirectly support alternative development paths through forestry, hunting, and tourism. Sustainable tourism, therefore, emerges as a plausible strategic sector, provided that product quality, infrastructure, conservation, and governance are integrated.

Conclusion

The Eastern Rhodopes constitute a region of outstanding natural and cultural-historical heritage with significant potential to act as a long-term economic driver. The destination's competitiveness is grounded in the combination of diverse landscapes, ecological richness, and high-density archaeological and cultural assets, ranging from megalithic complexes and Thracian sanctuaries to Roman heritage sites and medieval fortifications. These characteristics create strong op-

portunities for tourism diversification, research-based visitation, and experience-oriented cultural and nature tourism.

However, the economic benefits of tourism are conditional on the effective protection and management of natural and cultural capital. Conservation is not merely a cultural obligation but a core economic strategy, as the degradation of heritage assets would directly undermine the tourism product. The region's current development trajectory highlights the importance of integrated planning: infrastructure investment, coherent destination marketing, quality improvements in accommodation and services, and visitor management that respects ecological limits and cultural authenticity.

By aligning heritage conservation with entrepreneurship support and destination governance, the Eastern Rhodopes can strengthen sustainable tourism as a pathway for inclusive regional development. Such a model would balance economic utilisation with long-term stewardship, ensuring that the region's environmental and cultural assets continue to generate value for local communities and future generations.

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