

From living practices to institutional knowledge: Biocultural heritage and sustainability in Strandzha Mountain (Bulgaria)

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Abstract. The Strandzha Mountain region represents one of the most significant biocultural landscapes in Southeastern Europe, where traditional ecological knowledge, local biocultural heritage, and institutional practices intersect. The area enjoys high biodiversity and cultural richness, yet it faces social and demographic transformations that reshape human-nature relations. This study examines how living heritage practices and people's biocultural knowledge negotiate with the ecological expertise of institutional frameworks, including Strandzha Nature Park, community cultural centers (chitalishta), local NGOs, and the administration. The research integrates qualitative observations, ethnobotanical recording, and long-term anthropological fieldwork conducted between 2008 and 2025 in the villages of Bulgari, Kosti, Brodilovo, and Brashlyan. Plant-use patterns, habitat contexts, and community narratives were analysed alongside institutional documents and cultural events. Strandzha's biocultural landscape illustrates that sustainable ecosystems depend not only on ecological integrity but also on the participation of residents, the transmission of heritage, and collaboration with institutions. Integrating traditional ecological knowledge into the safeguarding and transmission of cultural heritage may enhance biodiversity protection.

Key words: biocultural heritage, traditional ecological knowledge, Strandzha Mountain, ethnobotany, sustainability.

Introduction

The Strandzha Mountain region in southeast Bulgaria comprises a mosaic of oak forests, riparian habitats, meadows, coastal zones, and relict plant communities, characteristic of the Euxinian-Colchic biogeographical province. The rivers and the Black Sea are essential elements of the natural and cultural landscapes. Its high biodiversity – combined with rich ritual, architectural, and settlement traditions – makes it one of the most prominent biocultural landscapes in the Balkans (Strandzha Nature Park official site). Many of its habitats fall within the EU Natura 2000 network (BG0001007, BG0002040), which underlines their ecological importance.

Over the past decade, scholarship on biocultural diversity (Maffi, 2005; Pretty et al., 2009;

Rozzi et al., 2015) and community-based environmental management has highlighted the importance of local knowledge for conserving biodiversity. These approaches argue that ecosystem sustainability relies on the cultural practices and social relationships through which people perceive and manage their environments. Strandzha Nature Park, Bulgaria's largest protected area and one of its most depopulated (border) regions, serves as a place where natural, cultural, and memory layers converge - a living archive where forest, rivers, settlements, sea, living cultural practices, historical narratives, rituals, folklore, and memories coexist. By examining both aspects of the protected area's ecosystem - namely, the conservation regimes and depopulation, along with efforts to preserve cultural heritage - this

article explores the region as a space where local ecological knowledge, ritual practices, daily subsistence strategies, and institutional protection measures intersect. These intersections create connection points between ecocultural and biocultural knowledge. Our research questions are: 1) How are community practices of inhabiting protected areas preserved in individual and collective memory? 2) How are they passed down as cultural heritage? 3) How do local knowledge systems interact with institutional frameworks? 4) What types of biocultural knowledge are recognized as eco-cultural heritage and incorporated into protection and preservation efforts?

By integrating anthropological insights with ecological reasoning, the study advances ongoing debates on biocultural sustainability in the Balkans by examining the Nature Park Strandzha as a model. Our aim is to demonstrate how living cultural and ecological practices develop into institutional knowledge and shape what we can call biocultural sustainability in a depopulated rural and mountain landscape. We explore how biocultural knowledge - traditionally rooted in daily life, ritual practices, written local histories, oral narratives, and memory - is transformed when incorporated into formal structures such as conservation policies, cultural institutions, and (informal) educational programs. In essence, we highlight the dialogue between living heritage, local histories, narratives, and everyday environmental practices on one side, and the institutional frameworks of conservation and cultural policy on the other (Berkes, 2012; Maffi, 2005; Pretty et al., 2009). We also analyze how this dialogue supports sustainability by examining its historical development.

Strandzha can be seen as a "biocultural landscape" - a term highlighting the coexistence and mutual dependence of ecological and cultural systems. It is a place of dense forests, small rivers, sacred springs, and scattered mountain settlements. The idea of a biocultural landscape includes a vibrant, living environment created through long-term interactions between people and nature, representing both physical land-use patterns and intangible knowledge, meanings, and practices that communities use to inhabit and interpret their surroundings (UNESCO, 1992; Ingold, 2000; Maffi & Woodley, 2010). However, it is also a cultural landscape characterized by national pride, depopulation, and hopes for the preserva-

tion of nature and sustainability. Depopulation has changed the region's demographics: many villages today have fewer than 50 residents, and some of them exist seasonally only. The process of building local identity in Strandzha after the creation of Strandzha Nature Park in 1995 has been carefully studied by Krassimira Krastanova (2009). She shows how various aspects of cultural and natural heritage began to be expressed, combined, and strategically used by local administrations, people, the Nature Park, and NGOs. According to her, the "protected label" linked to Strandzha, includes Strandzha honeydew honey, the fire-dancing ritual Nestinarstvo, the endemic *Rhododendron ponticum* (zelenika), the symbolic link between sea and mountain, the region's churches and murals, and the unique wooden and stone architecture of villages. Using Krastanova's analytical approach, we examine the results, improvements, and growth of these early efforts, where local practices, landscape meanings, and ecological resources were incorporated into strategic planning documents, management frameworks, and development plans for the area.

On the other hand, the symbolic importance of the characteristics of Strandzha mentioned above has grown. One of the most striking examples is the fire-dancing ritual Nestinarstvo performed in the village of Bulgari and inscribed on UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2009). This ritual connects spirituality, ecology, and community memory (Lazova, 2017). It is both a sacred act and an ecological narrative, embodying what we call environmental memory: the landscape's ability to preserve human experience. Even though the inscribed element is a village fest (panagyr), the mountain landscape and the springs (Ayazmi) are of great importance to the nestinari, local communities, and tourists. The Nestinars' community follows a festive calendar, and through the ritual, they connect the five villages to a particular place, a holy spring (Golyamata Ayazma) in the Strandzha Mountain.

Strandzha embodies the entanglement of natural, cultural, and mnemonic layers; it is a living archive where ecological processes and human histories co-shape the landscape. Undoubtedly, the villages and small towns are an indispensable part of this protected area.

Materials and methods

Study area

The study is based on long-term ethnographic and ethnobotanical fieldwork conducted between 2008 and 2025 in the municipalities of Tsarevo and Malko Tarnovo, focusing on the following field sites: the towns of Tsarevo and Ahtopol, as well as the villages Brodilovo, Kosti, Bulgari, located along the Veleka River, and the villages Brashlyan and Stoilovo. These sites exemplify living tangible and intangible cultural heritage and represent different habitat contexts - oak forests, transitional woodlands, and semi-open cultural landscapes shaped by historical livestock grazing, small-scale horticulture, and seasonal resource gathering.

Ethnographic and ethnobotanical methods

Our methods of collecting information included observation, 30 semi-structured and narrative interviews, expert interviews with residents, administrative representatives, park staff, teachers, and NGO members. In addition, we used free-form conversations and visual anthropological photo and video documentation to map meaningful landscape features, including springs, meadows, forest patches, and sacred sites.

Another aspect of the study is ethnobotanical recording of plant use (culinary, medicinal, and ritual). Species were documented qualitatively, with particular attention to frequently used taxa such as *Hypericum perforatum*, *Origanum vulgare*, *Mentha spicata*, *Urtica dioica*, *Rhododendron ponticum*, *Inula helenium*, and several wild fruits (including *Mespilus germanica*).

Throughout the period, we conducted online ethnographic research to document informal heritage initiatives. We also analysed administrative and policy documents, including management plans for the Strandzha Nature Park, municipal cultural strategies, and NGO projects related to ecological and intangible heritage. This combination of field observation and documentary research allows us to trace how the local ecological experience is reframed as heritage and how environmental policies adapt local symbolic language. As for the methods of analysis, we applied both content and interpretative analysis. Documents analysed include institutional sources: Strandzha Nature Park's official papers and website; Natura 2000 habitat and species inventories; NGOs'

educational materials; Chitalishta's (community centers') cultural programs.

The mixed-methodology allows us to examine how ecological knowledge circulates among households, institutions, and public initiatives. During our fieldwork, we worked together with Stoyka Penkova and Elitza Stoilova, and in some cases with a documentary movie team, who visualized our findings and added additional video and photo data.

Results and Discussion

Local ecological knowledge and (green) plants used in the cuisine

As part of the ethnographic component of the study, we documented the annual calendar of rural and culinary festivals throughout the Strandzha region, paying special attention to the role of local plant biodiversity in shaping seasonal food practices (Zlatkova & Parusheva, 2025). The function of local culinary traditions and festivals is to promote biodiversity within local socio-cultural contexts (Stoilova, 2021, 2023). In early spring, a "green pie" (zelnik) festival is held in Kosti Village. It demonstrates people's ability to use "green plants" in various combinations depending on their local availability during springtime. Green pies are a key part of the food served to visitors during all the village festivals we observed. This way, they showcase local biodiversity through recipes, each featuring fillings made from three to five species of wild or semi-wild leafy plants, reflecting nuanced, place-specific ecological knowledge. These observations align with the findings of Dessislava Dimitrova, Teodora Ivanova, and their colleagues, who discuss local expertise in identifying, gathering, and preparing edible wild greens in Bulgaria as embodied ecological knowledge and cultural memory (Ivanova et al., 2021, 2023a,b). In Strandzha, this zelnik typically includes two dominant species of dock (*Rumex* spp.), green onions (*Allium fistulosum*), and a variable mix of aromatic herbs drawn from local biodiversity.

Strandzhanska zelenika (*Rhododendron ponticum*) as a biocultural model of conservation

The historical and modern uses of *Rhododendron ponticum*, known locally as zelenika, demonstrate how cultural practices can evolve into official methods of plant protection. Until the 1970s,

zelenika was used in some Strandzha villages to mark May 24th - the Day of St. Cyril and Methodius, which Bulgarians celebrate as a holiday honoring the alphabet, education, and culture, as well as Slavic literature. The evergreen branches of zelenika were woven into wreaths for schoolchildren, symbolizing vitality and learning. In the early 21st century, this tradition has been reinterpreted through the Festival of the Zelenika, organized annually by Strandzha Nature Park in partnership with local communities, municipalities, cultural centers, and NGOs. By transforming a traditional festive plant-use practice into an informal educational and conservation event that involves only observation and photo documentation, institutions actively incorporate local ecological knowledge into biodiversity conservation efforts. The festival integrates cultural memory into conservation initiatives. It exemplifies a hybrid model of community-based and institutional biocultural understanding, where heritage practices promote awareness of species protection and habitat resilience.

Institutionalization of Enyovden/Yanovden (Midsummer Day, 24th June) as a celebration of medicinal plants

A second example of this transformation is the institutionalization of Enyovden (Midsummer Day, June 24th). Traditionally celebrated in Strandzha with rituals of divination and fortune-telling for young women, this holiday underwent a significant shift in the 1980s. During that time, community cultural centers (chitalishta) shifted the festivities toward a folklore fest, emphasizing medicinal plants rather than religious symbols. This reinterpretation was later incorporated into the environmental education strategies of the Strandzha Nature Park, which now presents Enyovden as both a community celebration and an opportunity for experts to introduce visitors, including tourists, to the region's unique herb diversity. In this context, local beliefs and ritual practices were transformed into cultural folklore in the 1980s. Their institutional organization by the chitalishta kept the ritual alive as a heritage. In the late 1990s, with the support of Nature Park Strandzha's formal ecological education efforts, institutional narratives reinforced the cultural importance of plant species and seasonal cycles.

Within this evolving framework, the Enyovden wreath (Enyovdensky venetz) and the bouquets (Enyova kitka) assembled for the holiday serve as tangible expressions of biocultural knowledge, in which ritual practice, seasonality, and local vegetation are closely intertwined. These plant arrangements are made from herbs harvested near the villages, including lady's bedstraw (*Galium verum*, Enyovche), a symbolically significant plant. The practice also highlights the clear impacts of climate change: when *Galium verum* has finished flowering around the settlement, women and local gatherers intentionally travel to higher or more shaded mountain areas where the plant is still in bloom. This adaptive strategy not only sustains the ritual but also acts as a cultural record of the plant's growth cycles, preserving detailed knowledge of microclimates, phenological variation, and ecological dynamics within the Strandzha landscape.

Pamukliyka (Inula helenium) as an example of reverse flow: from institutional to everyday knowledge

Over the past decade, one particular herb - Pamukliyka (identified as *Inula helenium*) - has become emblematic of an inverse process in which institutional ecological knowledge flows back into everyday community practices. Pamukliyka is included in the expert presentations and lectures during the Enyovden fest. Initially emphasized in park-led campaigns highlighting its ecological and medicinal value, Pamukliyka has gradually become part of local identity work, household remedies, and festive displays. Its role in enhancing the quality of honey, dairy, and meat through its use by bees and grazing animals, has contributed to the marketing of local products and strengthened the symbolic connection between biodiversity and sustainable livelihoods. This demonstrates how conservation messaging can revitalize traditional plant-based knowledge and integrate it into new forms of economic and cultural expression and economic activities.

Manov med oak woodlands, honeydew production, and the Festival of Strandzha honeydew honey

The ancient oak forests of Strandzha dominated by Strandzha oak (*Quercus hartwissiana*), Turkey oak (*Quercus cerris*, locally gorun), and

downy oak (*Quercus pubescens*, locally tser), form the ecological foundation for producing Strandzhanski manov med, or “Strandzha Oak Honeydew Honey” (PDO). Its protected designation (European Commission, 2022) formalizes local biocultural knowledge by publicly recognizing how honeydew honey depends on the health of oak ecosystems. Through festival markets, producer networks, and small-scale trade (Krastanova, 2009), this ecological knowledge is continually shared. The inherited and increasingly hybridized beekeeping expertise, transmitted through family lines, informal mentorship, training courses, and social media, is part of a broader pattern of knowledge acquisition examined by Stoyka Penkova, Elitsa Stoilova, and Milena Tasheva (2025) in their study of modern beekeeping pathways in Bulgaria. The Festival of Strandzha Honeydew Honey is held at the beginning of August in the town of Tzarevo. It features presentations by local beekeepers and a scientific conference. Taking place during the peak tourist season, the festival attracts a large audience.

Fig (*Ficus carica*) and medlar (*Mespilus germanica*) at culinary festivals and home-made products: institutionalizing seasonal fruits and transmitting the biocultural knowledge

An additional instance of institutionalized biocultural knowledge is the inclusion of fig (*Ficus carica*) in modern culinary festivals. In the coastal town of Ahtopol, figs are a popular autumn ingredient and are prominently featured at local food events that highlight seasonal, region-specific products. Medlar (*Mespilus germanica*), the fruit that ripens last in the region and grows only in the wild within the protected forests of Strandzha Nature Park, has also been incorporated into homemade gastronomy through fermented beverages (locally called “wine”) and pickled dishes. These practices - supported by municipal authorities, cultural institutions, and environmental experts - formalize the use of local fruit as part of biocultural heritage, while also raising awareness of habitat specificity and the ecological importance of Strandzha’s forest ecosystems.

Landscape meanings and custodianship

Landscape features - springs, chapels, forest paths and roads, old oaks, pastures, and gardens - hold strong cultural significance. Most residents

in villages and on the mountains promote ecological awareness and support low-impact tourism by guiding visitors and sharing stories. Another type of archive for the biocultural landscape includes local village histories, memoirs, folklore songs, storytelling, old photo albums, and, more recently, digital collections from social media groups and video-sharing platforms. The biocultural and ecocultural knowledge of local people is increasingly less inherited and more learned from experts and internet sources.

Role of institutions: mediators and networks

The local actors we identified as mediators translate local ecological knowledge and experience into formalized safeguarding strategies and public cultural initiatives such as festivals, exhibitions, and seasonal community events. Table 1 represents them with their assigned roles.

The findings assert that biocultural knowledge is embedded in everyday practices, festive life, narratives, and community habits of inhabiting the territory and utilizing resources. The Strandzha region shows how ecocultural knowledge can align with conservation goals and protection policies. The declining population also does not help nature protection, as demographic imbalances in some villages lead to unequal involvement in conservation activities. This process, started after the Second World War, has been observed in other European biocultural landscapes, including Bulgaria and the Balkans.

Integrating biocultural knowledge and cultural heritage with institutional conservation and safeguarding frameworks requires recognizing communities as co-managers of the landscape. However, local communities face significant demographic imbalances and unequal territorial representation. This aligns with broader research on ecosystem services (Daily, 1997; Heal, 2000; Bennett et al., 2015), nature’s contributions to people, and community-based conservation (Ostrom, 1990). The Strandzha case highlights that biocultural heritage offers not only cultural but also ecological functions - protecting and promoting habitat-friendly tourism as discussed by Petrova et al. (2024), Penkova et al. (2025), Zlatkova & Parusheva (2025).

Table 1. Key actors in the biocultural knowledge network of Strandzha.

Actor / Institution	Role in Biocultural Stewardship	Illustrative Examples / Notes
Strandzha Nature Park Administration	Develops ecological trails; integrates local narratives and ethnobotanical knowledge into educational programs; mediates conservation policy.	Expert-led hikes, interpretive materials, and biodiversity monitoring.
Chitalishta (Community Cultural Centres)	Maintain community archives; host seasonal celebrations linked to environmental cycles; serve as cultural and educational centres for people's gatherings.	Only 8 out of 25 settlements maintain active chitalishta.
Museums, small businesses, farmers, and local NGOs	Conduct biodiversity monitoring, youth environmental education, and habitat restoration; link scientific and community knowledge.	Small regional museums, ecological NGOs, small businesses, and farmers are collaborating with municipalities and the Strandzha Nature Park.
Individual Knowledge Holders/Heritage Bearers	Transmit local ecological knowledge across generations; maintain specialized expertise.	Herbalists, beekeepers, forestry professionals, local historians, storytellers.
Heirs, Seasonal Residents, and "Summer Grandchildren"	Revitalize village life; bridge personal memory and institutional heritage; organize festivals and clean-ups.	Heritage projects, community events, and environmental volunteerism.
Tourists	Reinforce local ecological knowledge by valuing place-based experiences; stimulate heritage articulation.	

Conclusions

The Strandzha Mountain region demonstrates that biocultural sustainability emerges through the continuous negotiation between ecological processes, cultural practices, and institutional frameworks. Despite the disrupted and disproportionate demographic structure of many rural settlements, local communities in Strandzha maintain adaptive strategies that allow for stable and meaningful inhabitation of the protected territory. These strategies, rooted in plant-use knowledge, ritual calendars, vernacular custodianship, and community-led initiatives, reflect a broader anthropological pattern in which landscapes are sustained through social relations, memory, and everyday environmental practice.

We observed new forms of eco- and cultural tourism focused on the mountain's interior, which increasingly support these practices by providing visibility and cultural legitimacy to local custodians and heritage projects, and by raising awareness of the protected areas as both natural and cultural landscapes. At the same time, new participants - return migrants, seasonal residents,

heritage-minded families, and newcomers pursuing counter-urbanization - are becoming part of the region's evolving social scene. However, they still don't change the region's demographic structure. By investing in old houses, participating in community events, or using local ecological knowledge, they help preserve biocultural heritage and expand the networks of custodianship.

Taken together, these dynamics show that sustainability in Strandzha is not just an ecological condition but also a social and cultural achievement. It is built through the interactions of long-term residents, institutions, NGOs, newcomers, and visitors, whose collective efforts are influenced by the state's (bio)politics, including national programs designed to attract new populations or grant privileges to locals. Strandzha thus stands as a strong example of how protected areas can remain vibrant, meaningful, and resilient landscapes through active participation by diverse communities, but also how depopulation of the region can affect the care for nature and sustainable living.

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