

TOURIST SIGNIFICANCE OF PELISTER NATIONAL PARK

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Abstract

Pelister National Park, located in the southwestern part of North Macedonia, represents one of the country's most valuable natural assets. Its tourism potential is based on unique natural and cultural heritage, making it an attractive destination for nature lovers, hikers, and all those seeking to connect with nature and enjoy its beauty.

Pelister is renowned for its rich biodiversity, which includes many rare and endemic species of flora and fauna, as well as its impressive mountain peaks, clear waters, crystalline lakes, and dense forest areas. The park's natural beauty is complemented by the region's rich cultural heritage, including traditional villages, historical monuments, and unique architectural landmarks.

Tourism in Pelister offers a wide range of activities, from hiking and excursions to visits to mountain lakes and walking trails. The national park significantly contributes to local economic development by creating employment opportunities, promoting traditional products, and encouraging sustainable tourism activities. Sustainable tourism is crucial for preserving Pelister's natural and cultural value and ensuring its long-term utilization. Ultimately, Pelister National Park is not only a natural reserve but also a tourism hub that attracts numerous visitors.

Keywords: Pelister National Park; sustainable tourism; biodiversity; natural heritage; cultural heritage; ecotourism; local economic development; hiking; North Macedonia; protected areas.

INTRODUCTION

National parks are important not only for nature conservation but also for maintaining biodiversity and supporting tourism development in the regions where they are located (Miller 2008, 102).

Pelister National Park, situated in the southwestern part of North Macedonia, is one of the oldest and most significant national parks in the country. With its outstanding natural beauty, biodiversity, and cultural heritage, Pelister represents an important tourism resource attracting visitors from around the world. Established in 1948, the park is home to numerous endemic species of flora and fauna, impressive mountain peaks, picturesque lakes, and dense forest cover.

In addition to its natural attractions, Pelister is an important cultural and historical area, encompassing traditional villages, monuments, and local customs that enrich its touristic significance. The park's status is particularly linked to the five-needle pine (*Pinus peuce*, locally known as Molika), discovered by Austrian botanist August Grisebach in 1839 (<https://park-pelister.com/about/>).

Through tourism development, Pelister not only preserves its natural heritage but also actively contributes to the economic development of the local community. Tourism activities include hiking, nature exploration, photography, and walks along historical

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trails. The park has the potential to become a global ecotourism destination, focusing on sustainability and conservation for future generations.

In this context, the aim of this research is to examine the tourist significance of Pelister National Park, highlight its natural and cultural values, and propose strategies for further tourism development aligned with the principles of sustainability and environmental conservation.

1. PELISTER NATIONAL PARK

Pelister National Park represents an area endowed with exceptional natural values, giving it significant national importance. However, most national parks worldwide possess a value that extends beyond national borders, attracting interest from visitors around the globe depending on their ecological, cultural, or recreational significance.

Pelister National Park falls into this category due to its complexity and the diversity of its attractive features. These include recreational, aesthetic, and curiosity-driven attributes, along with some anthropogenic attractions. Together, these features constitute a category of values that are studied by various researchers and attract a significant number of tourists.

The urgent need to protect specific areas of the Earth from human impact became particularly apparent during the Industrial Revolution when many natural resources were exploited for industrial purposes. During this period, intensive urbanization and environmental pollution triggered a fundamental instinct in humans to preserve certain spaces, leading to the establishment of protected areas to maintain their original structure and appearance.

Pelister National Park encompasses the greater area of Mount Pelister and the high-mountain section of Baba Mountain. The park covers a total area of 17,150 hectares, with an elevation ranging from 927 to 2,601 meters above sea level. Its maximum length along a northwest-southeast axis, from Gjavato to Bojadziev Peak (2,329 m), is 25 km, while its maximum width along the west-east axis is 15 km. The park is rich in unique natural resources and serves as a habitat for rare and endemic species of flora and fauna.

To experience the full beauty of Baba Mountain and Pelister, numerous hiking trails are available, including the Children's Trail, the Historical Trail, and the Kamenjar Trail. No special physical condition is required—only enthusiasm and willingness to explore.

A hallmark of Pelister is its pristine spring waters, where visitors can observe the Pelister and Pelagonia trout. The park is also renowned for its waterfalls and mountain lakes, including seasonal lakes and the two glacial lakes—Big Lake and Small Lake, also known as the "Eyes of Pelister." The park is organized into several zones to regulate activities in different areas.

Within Pelister National Park, three distinct zones are recognized:

- a. Strict Protection Zone – 1,523 ha
- b. Tourist-Recreational Zone – Big Meadow (589 ha), Nizhepole (1,782 ha)
- c. Rehabilitation Zone – 6,976 ha

Pelister represents a top tourist destination in this part of Europe, offering unforgettable experiences. It is ideal for lovers of hiking, winter sports, beautiful landscapes, and pristine ecological environments.

The park's glacial landforms, such as cirques, and fluvial forms, including stone rivers, attract the attention of numerous visitors, enhancing Pelister's reputation as a unique natural and recreational destination.

2. TOURISM AND RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES IN BABA MOUNTAIN AND PELISTER NATIONAL PARK

National parks are vital not only for nature conservation but also for maintaining biodiversity and fostering tourism development in the regions they encompass (Miller, 2008, p. 102).

The origins of tourism and recreational activities on Baba Mountain and Pelister can be traced back to the early 20th century. Today, Pelister National Park represents an important destination for recreation enthusiasts and tourists from the Pelagonia region, across Macedonia, and neighboring countries, particularly Albania and Greece. The park features over 50 designated excursion areas and hiking trails, maintained by the park administration, attracting thousands of visitors throughout the year.

Pelister National Park is home to numerous endemic species of flora and fauna, and its cultural heritage makes it one of the most significant tourist destinations in the country (Pelister National Park, n.d., 3).

The largest number of visitors are residents of Bitola, for whom the park forms an essential part of their local identity. Although precise visitor statistics are not available, estimates indicate that the park experiences peak visitation during spring and summer, weekends, public holidays, and periods of wild fruit and mushroom gathering. Winter tourism is also significant, particularly around the Kopanki ski slopes and Begova Česhma area.

The most frequently visited locations within the park include:

- The Kopanki Mountain Hut
- The Children’s Resort Hotel “Molika”
- The Begova Česhma Ski Center
- The Great Meadow (Golema Livada) excursion area

The hotel and ski facilities are connected to Bitola by a modern asphalt road, extending 12 km. The infrastructure, including the cable car, ski slope, ski lift, and the Kopanki Mountain Hut, is situated near the hotel at an initial elevation of 1,420 meters, with the Kopanki Hut at 1,610 meters and the start of the ski slope at 1,800 meters above sea level. This location offers panoramic views covering approximately one-third of the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia.

The proximity of all facilities makes Pelister National Park a comprehensive tourist and recreational destination suitable for all categories of visitors. Guests can stay within the park’s most attractive tourist-recreational zone and obtain information about the park’s infrastructure from the Information Center, which operates under the Pelister National Park Public Institution. The center oversees the preservation of natural resources and, together with the marketing department of Hotel Molika, promotes tourism and provides guidance to visitors.

Table 1. Key Features and Tourist Infrastructure of Pelister National Park (<https://park-pelister.com/about/>)

Feature	Description / Details	Altitude / Size	Tourist Significance
Total Area	National Park Pelister	17,150 ha	National and international tourist attraction
Elevation Range	–	927 – 2,601 m	Diverse mountain landscapes suitable for hiking and recreation
Maximum Length	–	25 km (NW-SE: Gjavato – Bojadziev Peak)	Scenic mountain routes for tourists

Maximum Width	–	15 km (W-E)	Easy access to different zones of the park
Protected Zones	Strictly Protected Zone	1,523 ha	Preservation of rare flora and fauna
Tourist & Recreational Zones	Great Livada & Nizepole	589 ha & 1,782 ha	Hiking, leisure, and tourism infrastructure
Meliorative Zone	–	6,976 ha	Sustainable land use and recreation
Main Trails	Children's Trail, Historical Trail, Kameniar Trail	–	Accessible to all visitors; promotes eco-tourism
Lakes	Great Lake, Small Lake (Pelister Eyes)	–	Key natural attractions; popular for sightseeing
Special Features	Glacial formations, waterfalls, clear springs	–	Enhances aesthetic and recreational value
Tourist Facilities	H		

According to records from recent years, Pelister National Park has received approximately 33,000 to 35,000 visitors annually. The majority of these visitors are domestic, particularly from Bitola and its surrounding areas, while around 15% are international tourists, primarily visiting during the summer season. Most foreign visitors come from the Netherlands, Israel, Germany, Italy, Poland, and the Czech Republic, with tourists from Finland appearing in more recent years. Additionally, there is a significant number of visitors from Australia, the United States, and Canada—many of whom are Macedonian expatriates returning to their homeland—as well as visitors from neighboring countries including Albania, Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, Slovenia, and Croatia.

Table 2. Accommodation facilities

Accommodation	Type / Description	Location / Altitude	Notes / Features
Hotel Molika	Family and tourist hotel	1,420 m	Central hub for recreational and tourism activities; near ski and hiking trails
Kopanki Hiking Lodge	Mountain lodge / Hiking base	1,610 m	Starting point for multiple hiking trails; suitable for eco-tourists and hikers
Ski Center Begova Chesma	Ski resort / Lodging available	1,800 m	Close to ski slopes and lifts; peak visitor season during winter
Children's Resort (Hotel Molika)	Family-friendly resort	1,420 m	Designed for educational and recreational programs; safe for children
Picnic & Day-Use Areas	Open recreational spaces	Various locations	Used for short-term visits; connected to trails and natural attractions

Numerous well-marked hiking trails wind serpentine up the slopes of Pelister, weaving through dense forests of Molika pine and shaded by thick green canopies, providing a true challenge for both hikers and recreational tourists exploring this mountainous gem. Within the national park, the marked trails are organized by the park authorities according to visitor interest, allowing guests to discover and experience the park's natural values and scenic beauty.

The Children’s Trail, which leads from the Children’s Resort to the area of Golema Livada, is specifically designed for young visitors to become familiar with the basic characteristics of local flora and fauna. Along this trail, educational panels with images and texts adapted to the age of primary school students are installed. An integral part of the trail is also an outdoor classroom, which enables teaching and learning activities to take place directly in the natural environment.

3. MARKED TRAILS IN PELISTER NATIONAL PARK

- *First World War Trail (Historical Trail)* – This trail provides historiographical insights into the surrounding area. Along the route, visitors can see reconstructed trenches, bridges, artillery positions, and a command headquarters, accompanied by informational panels rich with details about the First World War, which left a significant impact on this region.

- *Stone Path Trail (Educational Trail)* – An educational trail that guides visitors through one of the most attractive areas of Pelister National Park, featuring diverse natural landscapes. Along this trail, visitors encounter extensive Molika pine forests, rare and endemic plant species, and various geological formations, providing an enriching experience of the park’s natural heritage.

- *Archaeological Trail* – The archaeological landmarks of Pelister National Park are as significant as its natural features. This trail allows visitors to walk along preserved sections of the **Via Egnatia**, historically traversed by Roman legions, Byzantine emperors, and knights. Numerous archaeological sites from the Iron Age and medieval period are located near the park, enhancing its tourism potential. The beauty and mystique of this trail lie in the hidden historical testimonies embedded in the landscape.

- *Equestrian Trail* – This 5 km trail is marked for horseback riding, starting from the village of Melovište. It follows a circular route, offering visitors the opportunity to explore this section of the national park on horseback.

- *Religious Sites Trail* – A trail designed to connect visitors with the sacred religious sites within the park. These trails are ideal for organized groups, especially children, who can explore the park under the guidance of a professional guide. They can also participate in summer schools in nature and educational horseback riding programs.

The primary objectives of these trails are to promote healthy outdoor activities such as walking and riding, to familiarize visitors with the park’s natural and cultural treasures, and to raise ecological awareness regarding the importance of environmental conservation.

Table 3. The marked trails in Pelister National Park

Trail Name	Type	Length	Purpose	Main Attractions
First World War Trail (Historical Trail)	Historical / Educational	Variable (reconstructed sections)	To educate visitors about the First World War events in the area	Reconstructed trenches, bridges, artillery positions, command headquarters, informational panels
Stone Path Trail (Educational Trail)	Educational / Nature	Approx. 2–3 km	To provide environmental education and	Molika pine forests, endemic flora, geological formations,

				showcase natural diversity	diverse landscapes
Archaeological Trail	Historical Cultural	/	Approx. 3–4 km	To explore archaeological sites and historical routes	Sections of Via Egnatia, Iron Age and medieval sites, historical monuments
Equestrian Trail	Recreational Adventure	/	5 km	Horseback riding and exploration of natural landscapes	Circular route through forests and valleys starting from Melovište
Religious Trail	Sites Cultural Recreational	/	Variable	Visiting sacred religious sites, promoting outdoor learning	Churches, monasteries, guided tours, summer schools, educational horseback riding

4. TOURIST VALUES OF PELISTER NATIONAL PARK

Pelister National Park, with its natural beauty and cultural heritage, offers a wide range of tourist activities. The diversity of landscapes, rich biodiversity, and historical monuments create unique opportunities for the development of various forms of tourism. The main types of tourism in Pelister include:

1. **Eco-tourism** – Eco-tourism in Pelister is one of the most popular and practiced forms of tourism, focusing on natural heritage and environmental protection. Visitors can explore pristine mountain trails, observe unique flora and fauna—including endemic species such as *Pinus peuce* (“Molika pine”)—and participate in activities that minimize environmental impact.
2. **Hiking and Mountaineering** – Pelister is an ideal destination for hiking and mountaineering enthusiasts. The park offers numerous trails leading to some of the highest peaks of the mountain, such as Baba Peak (2,601 m). Hikers can enjoy mountain ascents, engage with nature, and take in breathtaking panoramic views.
3. **Cultural-Historical Tourism** – Pelister holds significant cultural and historical value. Visitors can explore traditional villages such as Brusnik, which have preserved their authentic character. The park also features historical monuments, monasteries, churches, and opportunities to learn about the traditional lifestyle of local communities.
4. **Photo-tourism** – Pelister is one of the most photogenic destinations in North Macedonia. Photographers can capture natural landscapes, wildlife, mountain lakes, and unique geological formations. Photo-tourism is increasingly popular and attracts visitors seeking to document the region’s natural beauty.
5. **Winter Tourism** – During the winter months, Pelister offers opportunities for snow-based activities such as skiing, snowboarding, and other winter sports. While the park does not have a large ski resort, it provides informal trails and natural conditions suitable for winter recreation.
6. **Sustainable Tourism** – Sustainable tourism is defined as tourism that meets the needs of tourists and host communities without compromising the natural and cultural heritage of the destination or endangering resources for future generations. It is based on three key pillars: environmental, economic, and social sustainability.
7. **Health and Wellness Tourism** – The natural beauty and clean air of Pelister create excellent conditions for health and wellness tourism. Visitors seeking relaxation

can enjoy the natural environment, practice yoga, unwind in the forested areas, or visit nearby wellness centers.

8. Adventure Tourism – Pelister attracts adventure tourism enthusiasts with its unspoiled terrain and undeveloped trails. Activities such as mountain biking, trekking on diverse terrains, and exploring mountain valleys make the park appealing for tourists seeking more intense and challenging experiences.

9. Special Interest Tourism – Pelister National Park is a destination offering a broad spectrum of tourist activities, each emphasizing the unique natural and cultural features of the area. The development of these tourism types contributes to the economic growth of the region, while emphasizing the importance of sustainability and nature conservation.

Table 4. The tourist offer of the Pelister National Park

Type of Tourism	Main Attractions	Activities
Eco-tourism	Pristine mountain trails, endemic flora and fauna (<i>Pinus peuce</i>)	Nature exploration, wildlife observation, environmental education
Hiking & Mountaineering	High peaks (Baba Peak 2,601 m), panoramic views	Hiking, mountain climbing, trekking
Cultural-Historical Tourism	Traditional villages (e.g., Brusnik), monasteries, churches, historical monuments	Cultural tours, village visits, historical exploration
Photo-tourism	Scenic landscapes, mountain lakes, unique geological formations	Photography, guided nature walks
Winter Tourism	Snow-covered trails, informal slopes	Skiing, snowboarding, winter hiking
Sustainable Tourism	Protected natural and cultural heritage	Eco-friendly travel, sustainable outdoor activities
Health & Wellness Tourism	Clean air, serene natural environment	Yoga, relaxation, wellness retreats, forest bathing
Adventure Tourism	Undeveloped trails, rugged terrain	Mountain biking, trekking, valley exploration
Special Interest Tourism	Unique natural and cultural features of the park	Birdwatching, botanical tours, educational tours

CONCLUSION

We are witnessing an era of rapid urban and industrial development, which makes it essential to understand the need for protecting natural resources, particularly the conservation of specific areas of outstanding natural beauty in our country. Considering this, the *Pelister National Park* must continue to intensively protect and promote both its natural and cultural capital.

Pelister National Park plays a crucial role in the tourism development of North Macedonia due to its natural beauty, biodiversity, and cultural heritage. Its natural resources — including mountain peaks, glacial lakes, forests, and endemic species — make it a unique destination for nature lovers and mountaineers. Alongside these natural attractions, the cultural context of the region, with its traditional villages and historical monuments, further enriches the park's tourism potential.

Tourism development in this region has a significant economic impact on the local community, creating employment opportunities and encouraging sustainable practices that preserve the park's natural and cultural assets. However, to ensure long-term success, it is necessary to implement sustainable tourism strategies that respect the park's ecological and environmental values.

In the future, *Pelister National Park* has the potential to become a major eco-tourism hub in the Balkans, attracting visitors who value nature conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. With appropriate protection and management, Pelister will continue to be not only a natural and cultural landmark but also an essential driver of tourism development in North Macedonia.

The park management team faces a serious challenge in the coming years — to further research and document the full scope of Pelister's biodiversity and geodiversity (the non-living nature), while valorizing the already identified endemic species that make the park one of a kind in the Balkans and beyond. As John Muir beautifully stated, "*The mountains are calling, and I must go*" (Muir, 1901, p.147), nature calls upon us to explore and cherish it.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN PELISTER NATIONAL PARK

1. Development of Tourism Infrastructure – Improving road access, hiking trails, and visitor information centers to ensure safety and enhance visitor experience.
2. Sustainable Tourism and Nature Protection – Promoting eco-friendly tourism activities such as hiking, photography, and environmental education programs.
3. Promotion and Marketing – Expanding international promotion through digital campaigns, tourism fairs, and collaboration with travel agencies.
4. Development of Alternative Tourism Products – Introducing new activities such as cycling, yoga retreats, cultural tours, and traditional product tasting.
5. Support for the Local Community – Investing tourism income in improving the local standard of living and supporting small local businesses.
6. Education and Training for Tour Guides – Developing programs for professional training of guides who will represent Pelister's natural and cultural heritage.
7. Monitoring Tourism Impact on the Ecosystem – Establishing regular monitoring of the ecological footprint of tourism and implementing mitigation measures when necessary.

By implementing these recommendations, *Pelister National Park* can fully realize its tourism potential while preserving its natural and cultural heritage for future generations.

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