

From Pasture-Lands to Wilderness: How Velebit Became the Ultimate Place of Wilderness and Adventure



Od pašnikov do divjine: kako je Velebit postal
popoln kraj divjine in pustolovščine

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ABSTRACT

The article deals with the Velebit mountain range and how it has become established within wilderness discourse. For the sake of tourism, it is today presented as “wild”, as a place of adventure and wilderness; however, Velebit mountain was for centuries a place where herders and their families coexisted with the Velebit landscape. This article discusses the dominant wilderness narrative of Velebit mountain range in the context of adventure tourism. The discourse on Velebit has changed in the past ten to fifteen years, ever since tourism in Croatia has been taken in a new direction with the goal of becoming a destination for active holidays. Based on ethnographic and archival work, online content, blogs and travel literature analysis, the paper describes this switch in the cultural meaning of Velebit.

KEYWORDS: wilderness, adventure, tourism, commodification, Velebit mountain range

IZVLEČEK

Članek obravnava gorovje Velebit in njegovo umestitev v diskurz o divjini. Čeprav je Velebit že stoletja kraj, kjer sobivajo pastirji, njihove družine in velebitska pokrajina, pa je danes zaradi turizma območje predstavljeno kot »divje«, kot kraj pustolovščin in divjine. Članek se ukvarja s prevladujočim diskurzom o divjini velebitskega gorovja v kontekstu pustolovskega turizma. Diskurz o Velebitu se je spremenil v zadnjih desetih do petnajstih letih, odkar je cilj turizma na Hrvaškem postati destinacija za aktivne počitnice. Prispevek na pod-

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lagi etnografskega in arhivskega dela, spletnih vsebin, blogov in analize potopisne literature ponuja vpogled v to spremembo kulturnega pomena Velebita.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: divjina, pustolovščina, turizem, poblagovljanje, gorovje Velebit

INTRODUCTION

In the holidays and travel columns of daily newspapers or internet portals in Croatia, we often come across texts that suggest visiting or booking some of the activities on Velebit. If you are a foreign tourist in Croatia and want to have an active holiday, again you will be offered “wild” and “dramatic” Velebit experiences. Enticing titles will convince you that “[t]his dramatic mountain chain, right on the Adriatic coast in Croatia, is one of the wildest areas of the whole Mediterranean” (Rewilding Europe 2023). The “[w]ild Velebit” is described as “a mythical Croatian mountain where bears, wolves and lynx still meet” (Croexpress 2018). Similarly, another website proclaims that the “[u]ntouched parts of Nature in National parks Northern Velebit and Paklenica are the ideal places to experience a Medditerean from a different angle” (Highlander 2023). These are just some of the numerous titles that today, as in the last ten to fifteen years, construct how the Velebit mountain range is talked about and imagined.

Wilderness has been shaped through multiple shifting discourses. Traced back to the 12th century, the word once described spaces where wild animals roamed, places defined not by human absence but by non-human presence. By the 19th century, Romanticism and colonial imaginaries began to recast wilderness as a space of purity, increasingly tied to ideas of untouched landscapes – an absence not just of people, but of specific people. In the Croatian context today, traces of these layered histories persist in how wilderness is invoked, sometimes gesturing toward preservation, sometimes toward the exclusion of local people and their past. While I do not map these histories in full here, I focus on the dominant framing of wilderness as land relatively untouched by large-scale human development, used among other things as a place for adventure tourism. Velebit is often presented in public narratives in that sense: as a home to wild animals and as a place where humans are absent. But Velebit is far from being an “untouched wilderness”. It was inhabited for centuries, a place where herders, their families, and the mountain coexisted. Every meadow, every small piece of land along the one-hundred-and-fifty-kilometer rocky mountain range was used by people as pastures, gardens, or children’s playgrounds. Velebit was teeming with life. Today only old records, photographs and piles of stacked stones that were once the homes, stanovi, of herders and their families remain to tell us about it,¹ while public discourses construct it

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A few old documentaries and photos testify to this rich life in the past. I would especially like to mention the documentary *Mali svijet – Velebit je velika planina* [Small world – Velebit is a big mountain] directed by Željko Belić in 1970. The documentary presents children’s everyday lives on the Tulove grede part of the mountain during the herding of cattle to the pastures on Velebit. In the past, children often spent their summers looking after the livestock. Two other documentaries on the topic of herding worth mentioning are *Tragom Bukovičkih stočara* [In the footsteps of the Bukovica herders] directed by Andrija Stojanović in 1970, and the silent film *Velebit* by Kamilo Brössler from 1932. Many photos featuring herding and life on Velebit were taken by Radivoj Simonović (and are published in Šekarić 2019).

in a different way. Spatial meanings are culturally constructed (Rodman 1992) and Velebit is not an exception – its meanings and the way it is represented have changed through time. For the last ten to fifteen years, Velebit has become increasingly popular as a tourist destination. The recent popularisation of outdoor activities and active tourism in Croatia have created narratives in which Velebit is a place of wilderness, adventure, and contemplation. These narratives are creating an imaginary of an untouched, “virgin”, untamed Velebit wilderness that attracts an increasing number of outdoor enthusiasts. Wilderness, then, comes into focus as an attractive niche for travel agencies and the tourism business. In my conception of tourism, I follow Matilde Córdoba Azcárate:

Tourism's centrality to the organization of contemporary life makes it a force that extends well beyond the economic realm. Tourism also pervades the sociocultural, political, and ecological arenas. The tourist industry is one of the leading producers of global imaginaries. It is a powerful form of meaning-making: narratives of the self and other, conceptions of the past and the future, and dreams of natural and cultural encounters are produced by tourism through desire, anticipation, and memorabilia. [...] Over the last decades, the tourist industry has massively reorganized and repurposed the physicality of places to fit those dreams and imaginaries, recreating the untouched tropical island, the primitive native village, the pristine natural reserve, the authentic past. It has done so through specially curated built environments and infrastructures that aim to foster consumption – the oceanfront all-inclusive resort, the restored colonial building, the scenic highway, the theme park – and through discourses of contemplation, cultural encounter, heritage preservation, cultural remediation, indigenous empowerment, civic engagement, or sustainable participation. (Córdoba Azcárate 2020: 5–6)

Since my research on the impact of tourism on Velebit, or more precisely the municipality of Starigrad and the Paklenica National Park, is still ongoing, I will not be able to present all the infrastructural and discursive means with which the tourist industry influences the organisation of contemporary life in Velebit and its foothills in this article, but I will point out some of the challenges that have come to the fore through my research to date. So far, the impact of adventure tourism on the protected areas of Croatia has not been problematised.

This paper is based on archival work and ethnographic research conducted among residents of the Velebit foothills, outdoor enthusiasts, adventure tour guides, and adventure sports practitioners in Croatia. In the two years that I have been working on this topic, I have spoken to more than fifty people. Some of my research has been conducted using semi-structured interviews, and some through informal, incidental conversations. I see incidental conversations as equally important as any other interview. Casual conversation conveys a part of the atmosphere of how Velebit is experienced, interpreted or made visible by its visitors. According to Senka Božić-Vrbanić, incidental conversations provide a “broader social atmosphere – an atmosphere which made it natural” (Božić-Vrbanić 2023) that Velebit is presented and perceived as a wilderness today.

In addition to formal and informal conversations, I have analysed online content, blogs and travel literature related to the Velebit mountain to deconstruct the construction of Velebit as a wilderness. Furthermore, I have gained a great deal of information and numerous insights into the assumptions and conclusions presented in this paper by reading

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and analysing travel literature about Velebit,² mountaineers' diaries, and old issues of the magazines *Hrvatski planinar* [Croatian Mountaineer] and *Naše planine* [Our Mountains].

Since I myself am engaged in outdoor activities and have been part of the outdoor community in Croatia in my private life for more than twenty years, apart from an ethic, I dare say that I also have an emic insight into the topics I am talking about here. My own experience as an outdoor practitioner means many years of immersion in the outdoor scene in Croatia, from being involved with the first outdoor online portals, the first outdoor adventure programs and their organisers, to the initial problems they encountered in trying to make Croatia a destination for active tourism. Furthermore, the practice of outdoor activities has allowed me to conduct my field research in a very relaxed atmosphere, to talk with outdoor practitioners and locals in circumstances where associations, ideas and answers related to the topic they talked about (and which was also the subject of my research) flowed very spontaneously, in a relaxed way and without restraint. In addition, I worked in tourism for more than a decade as a student. In the early 2000s, I worked in several diving centres on the coast, where I came into direct contact with the national policies related to active tourism. I also worked for large tourist agencies. All of these personal experiences and involvement have made me extra cautious regarding my research questions and conclusions. It is also important to keep in mind the advantages and disadvantages of each method. In this sense, I agree with John Law and John Urry (2004), who believe that no research method is innocent because all methods are performative, so it is important to be aware of your research position and how you will present the results of your research.

VELEBIT: FROM PASTURE-LANDS TO WILDERNESS

As mentioned in the introduction, place and its meaning are not simply given, they are “politicized social and cultural construct[s]” (Rodman 1992: 640, cf. Campbell 2005; Repić 2018). Apart from Petar Zoranić's pastoral-allegorical novel *Planine* [Mountains]³ from the 16th century, where Velebit was mentioned for the first time in written form and adored as a mythical place, the mountain range entered public discourse at the end of the 19th century. This is the period when it became scientifically interesting. In this sense, if we exclude the local population, the first visitors of mountains and mountaineers in Croatia were mostly university professors of the natural sciences, geologists, botanists, biologists, and writers.⁴ This is how the discursive production on Velebit started. Although they perceived Velebit as

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Among the titles, see Birtić (2016), Forenbacher (2000), Majerović-Stilinić (2020), Popović (2013), Popović and Vukušić (2018), Rac (2010), and Šavorić (2021).

3

The novel was written in 1536 and published in 1569 in Venice.

4

The Croatian Mountaineering Association was founded in 1874 on the initiative of Johannes Frischauf (1837–1924), a mathematics professor at the University of Graz. During his visit to Mount Klek in April 1874, he met the writer Buda Budisavljević (1843–1919) and the son of Ban Mažuranić, Vladimir Mažuranić (1845–1928), in Ogulin, and suggested a mountaineering society be established in Croatia. This society, like similar societies in other European countries at time, was research-oriented (Poljak 2004).

an instance of wilderness, their purpose was, as we learn from the first issue of the *Hrvatski planinar* magazine (1898), to learn about and research its biological, geographical, hydrographical and other specificities.⁵

However, well before Velebit attracted the interest of researchers, the local communities along the Adriatic coast lived alongside and relied on the mountain for its fertile meadows (see Photo 1). Pasturing took various forms on Velebit, from alpine to transhumance (Belaj 2004; cf. Černicki and Forenbacher 2016; Lemić 2023; Vinšćak 1989). Alpine livestock farming is specific in that during the winter, the families lived together with their livestock in the lowlands, along the coast where the climate is warmer. In the summer, entire families would relocate to modest stone houses called *stanovi* in the higher mountain regions, where they lived alongside their livestock until the autumn. This seasonal migration was driven by the need for better grazing opportunities, more fertile land for crops and vegetables, and the harvesting of grass for winter cattle feed. The decline of herding life on



Photo 1: Libinje, a fertile plateau with gardens and *stanovi* in the interior of southern Velebit, photo by Radivoj Simonović, 1910. Source: the photography collection of the Museum of Vojvodina in Novi Sad, no. 524 (IEF photo 20615).

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As Foucault (1961) noted, since the second half of the 18th century, European thought has been preoccupied with categorisations and systematisations, the “great tidying up” that determines and assigns a place, a position in the social order to every object, every living and non-living being. Mountaineering societies were created to carry out this task in the natural, biological, and geological world. If we take this into account, mountaineering also marks the entry of mountains, nature, plants, and animals into the processes of listing, categorising, and structuring in order to make nature easier to monitor and manage. Furthermore, nature also served a function in nation-building projects (Gissibl, Hohler and Kupper 2012).

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Velebit began in the 1950s, when the Adriatic coast at the base of the mountain began gaining recognition as a tourist destination due to the clean sea waters and pleasant summer weather (Vukonić 2005; Duda 2014).

In Starigrad Paklenica, where I have been conducting my fieldwork, tourism and the decline of the traditional ways of living and herding likewise began in the 1950s. In the words of one of my interlocutors: “The government at that time encouraged the local population to abandon cattle breeding and mountain life in favour of tourism” (Marin, 60).⁶ The shift from cattle breeding to tourism significantly impacted the local population. In 1949, the southern part of Velebit was designated a national park, called National Park Paklenica, further attracting tourists and altering traditional ways of life. One interlocutor told me that “goat breeding has been banned in the region since goats consumed excessive vegetation, hindering the park’s natural regeneration” (Ivica, 72).

On the other hand, the locals knew nothing about tourism and the customs of foreign tourists coming to their coastal villages every summer: “These [the locals] were uneducated people. They didn’t know what *wiener schnitzel* was, they learned how to prepare it, how to cook, they learned to do what the tourists asked for from scratch” (Marin, 60). At the same time, tourism also had a positive impact. It “open[ed] up unexpected collaborations, spaces of hope, and opportunities for well-being that previously did not exist” (Córdoba Azcárate 2020: 3). In the words of my interlocutor:

You know, for locals Velebit isn’t something nice. It is a reminder of a harsh life, suffering, poverty. The sea and tourism saved them from it. They don’t see the beauty of Paklenica in the way we younger generations see it. They don’t understand why someone would go for a walk on Velebit. (Dunja, 38)

Although tourism has initiated numerous social and cultural changes in the Starigrad Paklenica municipality, as well as on the Croatian coast in general (Gračan and Lucić 2022; Mariam et al. 2023; Soldić Frleta, Đurkin Badurina and Dwyer 2020), my intention here is not to dwell on the disappearance of the traditional way of life in the region. I introduced a few examples here as a counter-narrative to the dominant narrative of Velebit as wild. I will now focus on the last fifteen years, on the period when active or outdoor tourism became popular in Croatia. This has also taken place in the Paklenica National Park and its surroundings, and in the following chapters I will point out some of its problematic aspects.

DISCURSIVE PRODUCTION OF WILDERNESS AND ADVENTURE (FOR THE SAKE OF TOURISM)

Adventure culture is discursively produced (Lynch, Moore and Minchington 2012; Nerlich 1987) and many scholars today agree that people are looking for adventure as a counter-

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Statistics confirm this. In the period from 1952 to 1960, Croatia recorded a growth rate of 21.1 percent in total overnight stays, 31.4 percent in foreign overnight stays, and 19.1 percent in domestic overnight stays (Vukonić 2005: 136).

point to the boring, predictable and repetitive everyday existence of urban life (Bradburd 2006; Burušić Barčan, Fletko and Rudanović 2019; De Knop and Van Hoecke 2003; Poljak Istenič and Kozorog 2013). There are many definitions of adventure (Beames, Mackie and Atenico 2019; Bell 2016; Buckley 2010; D'Amassa 2009; Lynch, Moore and Minchington 2012; Nerlich 1987; Simmel 1911), but common to all of them is that adventure is an exception to the everyday, that it includes excitement and risk, and is a subjective and relative term (Beames, Mackie and Atenico 2019: 4; Buckley 2006: 7). Beames, Mackie and Atenico (2019) state that the common characteristics of adventure are: elements of challenge, excitement and (in most cases) risk; they take place in demanding natural or artificially created environments; they are much more relaxed in their organisation than popular mainstream sports; they represent freedom from or opposition to the dominant sports culture; they are individualistic but tend to build a group or a subculture.

Although we can say that eagerness for adventure is a global phenomenon today, the meaning of adventure is also created locally by narratives in adventure magazines and books, by digital media, local stories and travelogues (Miles and Wattchow 2015: 17), by tourist brochures and travel blogs which add additional value to particular places, making them tourist (or/and adventure) destinations (Bertoša, Muhvić-Dimanovski and Skelin Horvat 2012: 167; Han, Lovett and Law 2022). This is especially true for national and nature parks, which due to their biodiversity already have special value in national contexts. Since adventure is positioned as a counterpoint to urban life, it is often consumed in non-urban areas, in national or nature parks which are *per se* defined as wilderness (Cronon 1995). We can say that adventure has been commodified and has become a “sticky word” as Sara Ahmed (2004) would put it. It is sticky in the sense that adventure as the feeling of excitement is positioned as an object of our desire, something we strive for, about which we feel emotional. In that sense it becomes good bait for marketing certain destinations or products that we consume or enjoy (MacCannell 2011: 53) in our free time. Following the industrial revolution and romanticism, mountain landscapes were discursively constructed as special places, places of wilderness and adventure (Macfarlane 2004; Smith 1984). What Henry David Thoreau and John Muir began in America in the latter half of the 19th century by describing inaccessible territories as paradise-like wilderness later transferred to Europe, where wilderness and the sublime beauty of nature have been used to shape the national consciousness and foster patriotism (Barnard 2006; Campbell 2005; Duda 2012; Mikša and Urban 2013; Šaver 2005). Natural beauty began to be seen as a national asset, leading to the establishment of the first national parks alongside the formation of nation-states. Mountains, nature and protected areas became crucial to a country's valuation (Smith 1984), opening the space for its commodification as an “adventurescape” (Poljak Istenič and Kozorog 2013). At that time, both in Europe and North America, the first tourists, then members of the upper class, encouraged the development of various services in mountain landscapes, from equipment carriers to tourist carriers, from carriage drivers to the owners of restaurants and overnight stays (Bartoluci and Čavlek 2007; Cronon 1995; Duda 2012). Members of the middle class also soon became consumers of nature. Doing outdoor leisure activities was the reaction to

industrialisation and urbanization. These were mainly young white men who saw nature as the opposite of the urban, contributing to the growing movement of outdoor lifestyle and adventure culture, to which wilderness is essential. According to Robert Macfarlane, the commodification of mountains started in the Romantic period, soon after the intellectual and civic elite discovered excitement and fear as feelings that enable deep self-knowledge (Macfarlane 2004). In addition, during this period, mountains were comprehended as places where we are closer to God, and can evoke contemplative feelings (Cronon 1995; Macfarlane 2004). However, not all of these meanings and sentiments regarding mountains can be readily applied to Croatia.

Although Croatia had its own mountaineering society and its own intellectual elite that frequented the mountains by the end of the 19th century, adventure was initially seen as neither attractive nor acceptable to the mountaineers of the time. As Poljak (2004: 60) argued, mountain climbing was considered too risky and foolish. At that time in Croatia, mountaineering was defined in the dominant discourses in the sense of hiking, not climbing steep cliffs. One report of the Croatian Mountaineering Association (Hrvatski Planinarski Savez – HPD) assembly from 1891 states: “We do not believe that it is the task of mountaineers to promote tourist sport, and to endanger human life by climbing steep inaccessible cliffs just to satisfy personal ambition” (cited in Poljak 2004: 50).⁷

Throughout the second half of the 20th century, not too many Croats were interested in wilderness and looking for adventure either. Mountaineering existed mostly as a social activity, but it was not widespread.⁸ I haven’t found any statistics on the number of mountaineers over the years in Croatia, but many of my interlocutors agreed that outdoor activities were in general unpopular. As one of them said in 2020:

Unlike many other countries, starting with Slovenia, Austria, France, England, Americans, who are real outdoor nations, we Croats are not exactly an outdoor nation longing for wilderness. We are a nation that historically lived in the harsh nature, but it was a harsh life and survival, nature was your partner and enemy, depending on the situation. But in this outdoor sense, we are not an outdoor nation. We are a shopping nation, although that is changing now, luckily. Not long ago but recently, maybe in the last ten years, there has been some kind of boom or growth that is still not like in Slovenia, where I think that ninety percent of the people are engaged in some kind of outdoor activity over the weekend, going somewhere. And in our country it is fifteen to twenty

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Despite this dominant narrative, individuals interested in steep mountain climbing also existed, but they were in the minority. The division between mountaineers at the beginning of the 20th century was class-based. While academics and the social elite practised hiking in mountain landscapes, individuals from the middle and working classes were eager to undertake serious climbing endeavors. Since the Croatian Mountaineering Association shied away from “acrobatic” (Poljak 2004: 60) rock climbing and hindered the development of mountain climbing, this created constant turmoil among mountaineers in Croatia. In 1923, the rebel mountaineers founded the Croatian Tourist Club “Sljeme”, and made the first climbing ascents in the Swiss Alps, paving the way for mountain climbing (Poljak 2004: 50).

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Throughout the second half of the 20th century, hiking was the most popular outdoor activity in Croatia, but the total number of hikers in Croatia was small. There is no statistical data on the number of hikers over the years, although there were, for example, 32,776 registered members of the Croatian Mountaineering Association in 2018 (which in addition to hikers also includes alpinists, speleologists, and sport climbers), which is 7.65 percent of the total population of the Republic of Croatia. However, these days, interest in participating in mountaineering schools is constantly growing.

percent in this boom, and before that it was two to five percent, if at all ... So, in that sense, the outdoors did not exist in our country. We have a tradition in the Mountaineering Association, it is the only institution that has been keeping up with the times. (Danijel, 59)

It was not until recently that the attitude towards outdoor activities and hiking changed significantly. The reasons why this change happened have been written about extensively. As already mentioned, some authors think that going outdoors and looking for adventure is compensation for what a person lacks in everyday life, which is an active life and excitement or adventure (Burušić Barčan, Fletko and Rudanović 2019; De Knop and Van Hoecke 2003). Some think that the change was driven by economic, environmental, migrant and other crises of today (Božić-Vrbančić and Đurin 2021; Salecl 2011), by social media and the development of digital technologies, the use of smartphones, smartwatches, and applications; by the opening of large retail chains of sports equipment at affordable prices (such as Decathlon in 2014); by new forms of sports facilities such as running schools or guided hiking tours which create new forms of sociability and build new subcultures (Markić, Bijakšić and Bevanda 2018; Đurin 2022). Here I will focus in more detail on the changes that have occurred in terms of tourism policy. It is important to pay attention to the new legislation regulating active or adventure tourism⁹ in Croatia because it has turned mountains and other natural landscapes into “adventurescapes”, i.e. into commodities that can be experienced or consumed.

COMMODYING NATURAL HERITAGE IN CROATIA

After World War II and especially in the late 1970s in the Western world, and in Croatia in the late 1990s, mass tourism became popular as a practice and a sign of social progress (Duda 2014; Mowforth and Munt 2015). That period was based on the logic of the 3S tourism model of sun, sea, and sand. In the late 1990s the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) created new trends in tourism, where the 3S model was replaced by the 4H model of history, heritage, handicrafts, and habitat (Smith 1996). This reversal and change of focus opened up the possibility for the commodification of cultural and natural heritage and the creation of destination tourism, including the promotion of active tourism (Huddart and Stott 2020). As Córdoba Azcárate puts it: “Once ordered under the tourist gaze as locations one can escape to and/or where one can encounter nature or other cultures, places and people become in practice ‘positional goods’: goods whose value derives from their spatial position in socioeconomic fields of meaning and practice” (2020: 14). In this sense, tourism became “one of the most efficient capitalist technologies, thanks to its almost unmatched capacity to advance production and consumption through the seemingly endless creation of new zones of commodification” (Córdoba Azcárate 2020: 14–15).

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Active and adventure tourism are used as synonyms in the Croatian legislature, and often in the language itself also. In spoken language, it was a very common occurrence that my interlocutors were talking about outdoor activities, but they were actually thinking of adventure activities. This is why I use the terms here without distinction as well.

In 2017 the UN declared the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development, which presented tourism as “a catalyst for effective development because it enhances natural conservation and ‘resource efficiency’, reverses colonial inequalities, empowers marginalized indigenous people, and builds cross-cultural ‘corporate empathy’ and ‘global prosperity’” (Córdoba Azcárate 2020: 5). A corresponding program proved to be crucial for active tourism in Croatia. In the same year, the Croatian Parliament passed the Act on the Provision of Tourism Services.¹⁰ This Act, among other things, regulates the tourist offer based on the 4H model, which for the first time regulates the tourist services in nautical tourism, health tourism, congress tourism, services of fishing tourism, services on agricultural farms, aquatic organism breeding grounds, hunting, rent-a-car services, diving services and services of active and adventure tourism in Croatia. Although active and adventure tourism services, which by their nature imply numerous risky and life-threatening situations for users, existed before 2017, regulations in this type of tourism only developed slowly. But once it was legally regulated in 2017, the offer of active and adventure tourism content grew exponentially, turning Croatia into an active tourism destination. According to Grand View Research, the adventure tourism market in Europe accounted for a revenue share of around thirty-seven percent of global revenue in 2024, and Croatia is recognised as one of the destinations that increasingly boosts that growth: “countries like France, Austria, and Croatia further bolster the market with their wide array of adventure offerings, including water sports, paragliding, and alpine trekking” (Grand View Research 2024).

However, as Croatia is a small country whose economy is largely based on tourism, concerns about the future directions of tourism development are justified.¹¹ Among the protected areas, there are eight national parks and twelve nature parks, and another one is currently in the process of being declared.¹² Although the task of such areas is to care for the preservation of biodiversity, destination tourism makes these areas particularly attractive to tourists, and the growth in attendance threatens their basic function. The number of visitors to Croatia’s national parks has almost doubled from 2009 to 2019,¹³ and the numbers are still growing.

Numerous researchers warn that the very policies of biodiversity and protection also create numerous problematic spots, and I have already mentioned some of them in the second section. For example, Ben Campbell emphasizes that “[a]ttempts to protect nature by control of human intervention in areas demarcated for biodiversity have given rise to difficult questions of practicality and social justice” (2005: 280). The first signs of concern

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Zakon o pružanju usluga u turizmu. *Narodne novine* 130/2017, issued on 27 December 2017.

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There are 409 protected areas in Croatia, covering a total of 817,383.34 hectares, which makes up 9.3 percent of the total territory of the Republic of Croatia (Ministarstvo gospodarstva n.d.).

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If declared, this park will encompass Ivanščica, Strahinjčica, Maceljaska and Ravna gora in the Varaždin and Krapina-Zagorje counties. It will cover thirty-one thousand hectares in fourteen cities and municipalities.

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In 2009 there were a total of 2,060,353, and in 2019 there were 3,876,152 visitors.

for the environment can be interpreted as a response to the effects of industrial and extractive capitalism. The ghettoisation of nature in the form of national parks was intended to maintain the bio-authenticity freed from human intervention. Campbell believes that such solutions led to territorial divisions between nature and society, but did not reduce profitability through ecological degradation (2005: 283). Stanley Stevens (1997) warned of the negative impacts that the establishment of national parks has on the indigenous population. The establishment of parks based on the ideals of wilderness in America has disrupted traditional ways of life and displaced the inhabitants who had shaped and preserved local ecosystems for centuries. Although new types of parks and protected areas under consideration today are based on partnerships with indigenous peoples, the question is to what extent they can contribute to such protection when different interests within indigenous communities come into conflict with each other. In the remainder of this paper, I will mention some examples of these problems in the context of Velebit.

Velebit is often considered Croatia's most awe-inspiring mountain range. In addition to being interesting to researchers due to its biodiversity and geological specificities, Velebit attracts poets, writers and other artists who seek inspiration from it but also create the imagery of Velebit as a mythical, magical mountain. Today, the mountain range encompasses two national parks (NP North Velebit and NP Paklenica) and one nature park (PP Velebit), is part of the European Natura 2000 network, and a UNESCO world heritage site.¹⁴

All this opens Velebit up to many different users and different (and sometimes conflicting) interpretations. For some, it is a place of contemplation and solitude. Some of my interlocutors choose to spend their leisure time on Velebit to get "away from civilisation", as a response to a busy work week, or due to the feelings of anger and helplessness regarding social and political life in general. And some are going "into the wild" because they believe this is necessary in order to stay physically and mentally healthy. Many of them mentioned that they go to the mountains because they "feel alive" in nature, because by staying in the mountains they are "charging their batteries". A multi-day mountain hiking trip is a deviation from the predictability of everyday life and a boring nine-to-five workday.

But not all these people will go to Velebit on their own. Some lack the skills and knowledge to do it on their own, as one interlocutor explained to me:

It's not so much the fear of sleeping outside, but the feeling. [In organised mass events] you have people around you, you're not alone if something goes wrong. And you don't know the area, you don't know where you'll be able to sleep, you don't know the terrain, you don't know anything. And I said, we'll go like that [on a mass tour organised by a tourist agency] and we'll see everything, so next time we can do it by ourselves alone. (Viktorija, 48)

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The beech forests of Paklenica National Park and Northern Velebit National Park were entered onto the UNESCO World Heritage List on 7 July 2017, and together with the beech forests of Albania, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Italy, Germany, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Ukraine comprise the whole of the "Ancient and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe". Two sites were selected for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List as the Croatian representatives of primeval beech forests, one within the boundaries of Paklenica NP (Suva draga-Klimenta and Oglavinovac-Javornik) and the other within the borders of Northern Velebit NP (Rožanski and Hajdučki kukovi) (Paklenica National Park n.d.).

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Therefore, many people take organised and mass tours of Velebit. Such tours enable them to overcome their fears and insecurities stemming from a lack of the necessary knowledge and skills.

Moreover, logistical challenges are often the reason for participating in the organised tours, as well as financial rationale:

Look, this was our problem: we want it [to go hiking on Velebit], but our problem is logistics. Transportation was expensive, you have transportation to Baške Oštarije and back which is four hundred Croatian Kuna [fifty-three Euro] per person, that was expensive for us. There is no way to put together a team to share these expenses with ... And that's been a problem for years, because we couldn't get the team together. Furthermore, if we went alone, we wouldn't know where to spend the night, and you're a little scared, okay, you're scared. You don't know where to spend the night, you'd never been there. (Ines, 45)

The next important point is that you get water at check points, they bring you cooked food, you get stew, they bring you beer ... It would have cost us a lot more if we had gone alone. [...] They made it so that anyone directly from an armchair at home has the possibility to come to Velebit, but such people have no idea what they are getting into, these people give up. When we were there, a bunch of them gave up. (Viktorija, 48)

As we can see from these examples, today, due to the entire infrastructure of guides and agencies that have developed around the commodification of natural heritage, people who lack the basic knowledge of how to hike on their own are hiking on Velebit. They generally haven't got any experience of multi-day hiking and they did not go through any kind of training. In other words, they are not independent hikers. But because of its huge popularisation, my interlocutors were somehow allured by this kind of adventure despite the many fears and worries they had.

Since the popularisation of Velebit as an active tourism destination is largely happening through photo and video materials, Velebit has also become attractive in a photogenic sense and some go to Velebit to make memories in the sense of attractive photographs or videos (see Božić-Vrbančić 2025; Bajič 2025). Memories as photographs are an additional way that various commercial programs, ranging from trail and trekking races to mass hiking events, motor rallies and quad tours, attract people to buy their services.

All the various events and different visitors also mean different and conflicting interests and relations between all the agents involved. As a result, the unregulated commodification is leaving a significant ecological footprint on the mountain. According to the information I currently have, there are no restrictions on the number of visitors or the maximum number of participants per event. As one interlocutor mentioned:

I think all these ministries are not communicating with each other at all. It's not like we've sat down at a table to discuss what to do with this Velebit of ours. For instance, we could decide there will be no vehicles here, no concessions, nothing. Instead, it's left unchecked ... so that nobody knows what's happening. That's the problem. If they don't consider the future of Velebit in the next twenty, thirty, or forty years and come to a joint decision about it, it won't end well. (Marin, 60)



Photo 2: Organised quad tours from Starigrad Paklenica to Velebit. Source: the author's private collection.



Photo 3: An organised quad tour on Velebit, with quad rides venturing off the established paths in a protected area. Source: Pelago n.d.

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From the conversations I had with the organisers of some mass events, such as the Highlander hiking program, it appears that even though they sometimes follow the ethics of “leave no trace”, they are not fully aware of the impact these events have on the environment. The same goes for the organisers of motor rally races, quad adventures, and concert organisers (Zadarski.hr 2024). Some organisers believe that the biggest threat posed by such events is the garbage left behind by the participants, so they have put in place strict measures in this regard. However, biologists and ornithologists have observed more insidious effects, such as the reduction of plant and animal populations and the disappearance of birds due to the increasing human presence or noise. The organisers of mass outdoor events often do not recognise this as a problem. Therefore, the major challenge is balancing the demands of visitors with the protection of biodiversity, since protected areas face numerous problems including noise that scares the wildlife, crowding, parking problems, air pollution, inconsiderate visitors, trail erosion, visible human waste, wildlife fleeing their habitats, disturbed vegetation, damaged trails and the like (Lindley, Blevins and Williams 2018).¹⁵

Ultimately, the decision of what to care about and protect is not neutral; not everyone has the power to define what needs protection and care, nor are decisions about what is worth protecting completely innocent or disinterested (Domínguez Rubio 2023). It is therefore crucial to question what we want to preserve and what we do not, to consider the interests involved, and to contemplate the consequences of our decisions.

CONCLUSION

Over the past ten to fifteen years, wilderness exploration and adventure activities have become immensely popular in Croatia. This trend has significantly influenced how Velebit mountain is perceived and integrated into the lives of Croatian residents as well as other visitors. While older generations made Velebit their home from June until October, today's visitors perceive it as an undiscovered wilderness.

The shift happened as adventure tourism started to develop, and as the intertwining of economy and culture is becoming more pronounced in Croatia. In the outdoor adventure framework, mountains represent a space where individuals push their limits, confront their fears and weaknesses, and embark on personal adventures, which makes them attractive places for leisure and adventure activities. The tourism industry is co-constructing this imaginary in order to use it in the commodification of the Velebit mountain range, thereby threatening the area with the irreversible destruction of biodiversity. Protected natural destinations are nowadays becoming increasingly attractive locations for outdoor recreation. Year after year, this leads to an increasing number of visitors and a wider variety of activi-

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Some events contribute to the destruction of cultural heritage without significant repercussions. For instance, the Premužić trail (North Velebit) and Majstorska cesta (South Velebit), both protected cultural monuments, are under threat. One Velebit enthusiast sarcastically commented on several instances of vandalism on the hiking trails on his Facebook profile, noting the lack of action taken in response by the Northern Velebit Park Management. In the case of Majstorska cesta, the lack of regulation in such protected areas has even led to motor rally events taking place there.

ties in these sensitive landscapes. This work has merely scratched the surface of the numerous problematic locations in Croatia that are being exposed to the commodification of its natural resources and the development of adventure tourism, a field of research that requires further in-depth exploration.

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Članek na podlagi postavke Margaret Rodman, da prostori in njihovi pomeni niso enostavno dani, temveč so dejansko »politizirani družbeni in kulturni konstrukt[i]«, ter misli Matilde Córdoba Azcárate o turizmu kot močni silnici, ki »na osnovi željá, pričakovanj in spominkov« konstruira pomene, obravnava oblikovanje zgodbe o Velebitu kot divjini in izpostavlja njegovo preobrazbo v privlačno lokacijo za aktivni turizem. Opisuje spremembe v predstavitvah Velebita v zadnjih desetih do petnajstih letih, ko se je Hrvaška pomikala v smeri popularizacije aktivnega/pustolovskega turizma in si prizadevala prodreti na turistični trg kot destinacija za tovrstni turizem. Velebit se nenadoma prikazuje kot neokrnjena divjina, kar je nasprotno njegovi hitro pozabljeni zgodovinski stvarnosti, ki jo je zaznamoval živahen soobstoj gorá, pastirjev in njihovih družin.

Prispevek začne z opisom razvoja znanstvenega zanimanja za Velebit v 19. stoletju in pojava planinarjenja na Hrvaškem. Planinci so bili takrat osredotočeni na hidrološke, geološke, biološke in druge značilnosti Velebita. V nadaljevanju članek predstavi diskurzivno produkcijo pustolovstva in njegove povezave z gorami kot prostorom divjine ter opiše, kako se je na Hrvaškem razvijalo zanimanje za pustolovske dejavnosti. Četrty del obravnava sodobne razmere, poblagovljanje narodnih in naravnih parkov na Hrvaškem v okviru aktivnega turizma ter opozarja na številne težave, ki jih porajajo ti procesi.