

# The New Thracian Gold

natural grazing, organic agriculture and ecotourism in  
the Eastern Rhodopes





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With the help of the National Postcode Lottery we can make a difference...

"The New Thracian Gold", a project of ARK Nature and the Avalon Foundation, was awarded funding from the Dutch National Postcode Lottery Extra draw in 2009. Thanks to this grant, the project will be able to spend nearly € 3 million in the Eastern Rhodopes between 2009 and 2014.

Please visit [www.ark.eu](http://www.ark.eu) and [www.avalon.nl](http://www.avalon.nl) for project news.



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## The New Thracian Gold

### Natural grazing, organic agriculture and ecotourism in the Rhodope Mountains

Once the home of the Thracian goldsmiths and their artistic creations, the Eastern Rhodopes now harbour the greatest natural treasures of Europe. The region's unique history and geography have brought together thousands of plant and animal species in a beautiful, picturesque landscape, where Bulgarians, Turks and Pomaks (Bulgarian Muslims) tended their herds for centuries. But for how much longer?

Modern Europe has no place for old pastoral cultures. As a result, the forest-shrubland-meadow mosaic landscape is increasingly losing its open spaces to forest, leaving unique European plant and animal species on the brink of extinction. Local nature conservation organisations are ringing alarm bells, and have asked ARK and Avalon to help set up an alternative economy based on natural grazing, organic agriculture and ecotourism. ARK's proven approach to grazing projects in the Netherlands and Latvia, and Avalon's extensive experience with sustainable rural development in Eastern Europe, are sure to lead to success in Bulgaria. With its incredible biodiversity, magnificent landscapes and rich cultural heritage, the Rhodopes region has the potential to become a major tourist destination.

During the last four years ARK has started various demonstration projects together with Bulgarian colleagues, and the first results are very promising. Recently, Avalon has opened a branch office in the city of Plovdiv to support and increase its activities in Bulgaria. The time is ripe to expand our joint activities in the region, and that is why we sought support from the National Postcode Lottery. Within five years one of Europe's most important natural areas can be preserved and become a classic example of sustainable rural development that will inspire other parts of the Balkan and Europe.



## **1. Background**

### **The changing European landscape**

The European landscape is first and foremost defined by agriculture and forestry. The reason is simple: these land uses cover 85% of Europe's land surface.

Therefore, changes in agricultural and forestry practices have an immediate effect on our landscapes and ecosystems.

According to the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR), 60 to 90 million hectares of agricultural land will be taken out of production as a result of EU agricultural policy. Most of the fertile land will be kept in production and be used more intensively, which will affect landscapes and ecosystems. Some of the fertile land and most of the poorer soils will be abandoned and become overgrown. These changes will greatly affect landscapes and ecosystems, as well as European citizens.

In large parts of Europe these changes are already taking place. Latvian arable land is lying fallow, Croatian river valleys are becoming completely overgrown, and young Bulgarians are leaving the hills and mountains in hope of a better life in the cities.

Large parts of Europe still have a rich flora and fauna. The key ecological process involved is grazing. While most of the wild grazers have long since disappeared, domestic livestock have been around for centuries. In areas where livestock were grazed extensively (as opposed to intensively), species-rich ecosystems have developed.

The changing land use in Europe offers great opportunities to preserve these rich ecosystems and landscapes, particularly on marginal lands. Projects should focus on developing a new, more diversified economy that not only depends on the (withering) agricultural sector, but also has other 'economic motors'.

### **New opportunities**

For several years now, ARK has been involved in various nature conservation and nature development projects on former agricultural land in the Netherlands, Latvia, Croatia, Romania and Bulgaria. Without exception, these projects show that the reintroduction of large grazers positively affects landscapes and ecosystems. And unexpectedly, these projects have also benefited local economies.

For example, in the Dutch Millingerwaard (Gelderse Poort) a limited number of jobs were lost when agricultural land was given back to nature. However, as hundreds of thousands of tourists discovered the new nature area, in less than fifteen years' time more than 60 new jobs have been created in the local catering and recreation industry.

The projects in Latvia are another case in point. Large-scale grazing areas managed by nature conservation organisations draw tens of thousands of visitors per year, and they contribute significantly to the local economy. On a smaller scale, ARK works together with private parties to introduce grazing on private land, develop bed & breakfast accommodations for tourists, and sell local products such as honey and 'wilderness meat.' This new approach to rural development is the core of the 'Letlands' project in Latvia, which received funding from the National Postcode Lottery in 2005.

The Avalon Foundation has been involved in Central and Eastern Europe for more than fifteen years, working on organic agriculture and agri-environmental policy. During these fifteen years this region has gone through tremendous changes.

The transition from communism to a democratic free market economy has been particularly difficult for rural communities. Many socio-economic problems originating from the collapse of communist farming systems have yet to be solved: the privatisation and fragmentation of collective farms; the collapse of infrastructure no longer maintained by the state; the destabilization and disintegration of rural communities; the massive unemployment; and the lack of economic development alternatives.

There are no immediate solutions for these problems nor is there a blueprint for sustainable rural development in Central and Eastern Europe; but there are choices that can be made. Experiences gained in a large number of countries indicate that there is a growing interest in organic agriculture as a tool for sustainable rural development. Organic agriculture has shown to have many positive effects on the environment and on socio-economic conditions. Organic agriculture makes farmers more independent and self-sufficient, stimulates sustainable use of natural resources, creates jobs, contributes to biodiversity, and produces healthy food.



## **"Letlands" project results**

In 2005 the ARK project "Letlands" was awarded nearly €1 million from the Dutch National Postcode Lottery Extra draw of 2004. Three years after the start of the project, significant achievements have been made:

In Dviete, a Natura 2000 area, the introduction of wild cattle and Konik horses has given name and fame to the area, which now gets thousands of visitors every year. In Dviete and elsewhere field biology classes have been set up for primary school students.



Smaller-scale grazing projects on private land also attract more and more tourists. For example, a natural grazing project on land owned by the new Jaunievina guesthouse has been visited by more than 6000 tourists, and more than 400 visitors have stayed at the guesthouse. Ecotourism has become a significant source of income for this area.

Regular Latvian media attention has led to a growing demand for grazing projects, from private individuals as well as Latvian nature conservation organisations. In 2006 and 2007 various horse and cattle transports were organised to meet part of the demand. These transports received national media attention in Latvia as well as the Netherlands.

A press trip held for Dutch journalists resulted in excellent articles in various Dutch national and regional newspapers and the nature magazine *Grasduinen*.

The Latvian authorities have been following the grazing projects with interest, and have now started to develop supporting policies.



and ethnic Albanians. In this part of Bulgaria, the orthodox Bulgarians are in fact a minority.



### **Biodiversity**

The Rhodopes are home to an astonishing number of plant and animal species. Nowhere else in Europe is the flora so rich, and nowhere else is the amphibian and reptile diversity higher. Of the 38 European birds of prey, 36 species live in the Eastern Rhodopes. The region's astounding diversity of insects, which come in all shapes and sizes and include some very rare species, attracts laypersons and specialists alike. This great biodiversity results from an extraordinary concurrence of circumstances:

- Due to its geographic position, the Eastern Rhodopes are a convergence of species from the Balkan, Anatolia (Asia Minor), and the Mediterranean region.
- Although the Rhodopes cover a relatively small area, they include a great diversity of biotopes. Rugged mountaintops, gorges, gravel riverbeds, stream valleys, mountain slopes, and widely varying soil types can all be found within short distances. The Greek side of the Eastern Rhodopes includes river deltas and coastal ecosystems.
- As a border region, the Rhodopes has a long history of conflict: between Greeks, Bulgarians and Turks; between Christians and Muslims; and between communists and non-communists. As a result, the Rhodopes were never densely populated, and this has saved its forests from destruction. It is now one of the few Mediterranean regions with intact forests, particularly near the border and on the Greek side.
- Extensive livestock farming has always been the main land use in the region, and it still is today. Therefore the region's flora and fauna are fairly representative of the original ecosystems that were grazed by wild herbivores.

- The mining operations of the central government are now largely abandoned, and many people have left the region.

### **Changes**

Many farmers in the region are struggling to survive. The traditional pastoral culture is dwindling and people are moving to better lands, or further away, to the big cities. Rural depopulation is a self-reinforcing process: increasingly fewer people are left to support village schools or shops; and when schools and shops are closing down people are forced to move elsewhere.



Already, many small villages – often with beautiful homes – have become deserted and run-down. The ecological and landscape quality of the region is affected as trees are taking over and open spaces are becoming overgrown. Around the village of Madzharovo this process has already been taking place for more than 50 years, starting in the communist era when many herdsmen were forced to work in the mines. Rural depopulation will increase even further if EU policy puts a stop to agricultural subsidies for tobacco, the region’s most important – and heavily subsidized – crop.

However, not all ethnic groups are equally likely to leave. The Muslim minority is relatively young and more or less self-sufficient, and is therefore less likely to leave the area, despite the economic setbacks. Clearly, this makes them a key group to involve in natural grazing and organic agriculture projects.

### **New opportunities**

Based on the present natural resources and together with the present inhabitants of the region, we can build a new sustainable economy that harmonizes with – and in fact may reinforce – the region’s unique ecology. We will elaborate this idea in the next few pages, in terms of landscape and nature development, agriculture and ecotourism.

## A GLANCE INTO THE FUTURE

In 2020, the village of Madzharovo, located in the heart of the Eastern Rhodopes, will be prospering. The local economy will be based on organic agriculture, sustainable wild harvesting and ecotourism.

From near and far, from Bulgarian cities and a crowded Western Europe, visitors will be drawn to this region, for its peace and quiet and clean air, its inspiring cultural heritage, and its unspoilt wilderness.

The hills surrounding the village will be grazed by wild herds of cattle, deer and horses. Nearly every member of the European flora and fauna can be found here, from the smallest insects to bears and wolves. Vultures will circle the sky, symbolizing the restored circle of life.

By now, the Madzharovo people will be well educated and speak foreign languages; ecotourism will be a well-developed sector. The Madzharovo people will work as tourist guides and run guesthouses where local, organic products are served for meals. They will have faith in the future, for themselves and their children.



### **3. Opportunities for nature, landscape and agriculture**

The landscape of the Eastern Rhodopes is a mosaic of forests, flowery meadows and shrubland. For centuries the hills have been used for herded grazing and the valleys for arable farming, near the villages. The forests have always provided enough wood for local use. The complete absence of barbed wire fences is an additional asset to this beautiful landscape.

#### **Land use**

The Rhodopes have always been grazed extensively. The region used to be grazed by wild herbivores such as aurochs (prehistoric cattle, now extinct), wisents (European bison) and tarpans (Eurasian wild horse). It is only a century ago that large populations of red deer were grazing here. Their role was taken over by herded livestock. Like other regions of Southeastern Europe, large parts of the Rhodopes are still being grazed by sheep, goats and cattle, and a few horses and donkeys – but the number of herds is visibly declining.

Still, every morning herdsman will take their animals from the villages into the hills, and bring them home in the evening. This way, the animals are kept safe from wolves at night. The grazing lands are partly owned by local councils, and partly owned by other government authorities such as the national forest service.



#### **Forest-meadow-shrubland mosaic landscapes**

The 'half-open' landscape of the Eastern Rhodopes is a mosaic of forests, meadows and shrublands, with exceptionally rich floras and faunas. Local differences in light exposure, soil type and grazing level have created a large variety of vegetation types. Natural streams and river valleys further add to this habitat diversity. Not many other regions in Europe can boast having the same

diversity of plants, fungi and insects as the Rhodopes, and nowhere else you will find so many different reptiles and amphibians.

Wild herbivores from the forest – mostly boar, and a small deer population – graze the open spaces. Predators – wolves, jackals, lynx and eagles – use the open spaces as their hunting territory. Unique in Bulgaria, the Eastern Rhodopes are also the home of three vulture species. These vultures used to clean up the carcasses of wild grazers, but nowadays they feed mostly on dead livestock. However, as the amount of available carrion is decreasing the vulture populations are declining. Therefore, the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB) is providing carrion at special vulture feeding sites, known as vulture restaurants.



### **Changes**

As mentioned before, many farmers and herdsmen in the Eastern Rhodopes have already quitted. And more are sure to follow as a result of European agricultural policy. The abandoned lands will become overgrown with shrubs and trees, and eventually turn into forest. The increased forest cover will weaken the mosaic character of the landscape and lead to a significant loss of habitat, species diversity and landscape quality.

The pastoral culture might survive on European subsidies, but this is not a viable option or sustainable solution. Moreover, herdsmanhip is not popular with young people, because herdsmen live isolated lives and – particularly on the Greek side of the Rhodopes – have low social standing. Young Bulgarians are still willing to become farmers, but they prefer farming the more productive lands.

## **New land uses**

A different land use in the Eastern Rhodopes will open up new ways of generating income, and will benefit the ecology and quality of the landscape:

### *Natural Grazing*

The best way to preserve the mosaic landscape is year-round, large-scale grazing by hardy cattle and horses. Every year, a limited number of animals can be harvested sustainably. In 2002, ARK started its first grazing project in the Eastern Rhodopes, using Rhodopi Shorthorn cattle, a local breed threatened with extinction. In 2007 the herd that grazed the Madzharovo hills year-round had grown to about 100 head, and half of these were transferred to two new grazing areas in the Rhodopes.

Local nature conservation organisations as well as private individuals are very eager to continue with large-scale natural grazing projects, but they lack the means to purchase large herds. Using the Herd Fund, ARK intends to provide several herds as soon as possible, to allow a flying start for what is to become one of Europe's largest naturally grazed areas.



### **THE HERD FUND**

Many countries lack the money to buy large grazers. Therefore, ARK has launched a 'herd fund', which instead of money lends out herds of large grazers. After 5 years, the borrowing party must return a herd of at least the same size and quality. As during these 5 years the herd will have grown (doubled at least), the borrowing party should have enough animals left to start a new herd. The herd that is returned to ARK can be lent out again and again.

### *Organic agriculture*

The Rhodopes are a favourable environment for organic agriculture. Sustainable land use – organic agriculture, nature conservation and sustainable tourism – will help to preserve the region's unique character. Organic products are grown in harmony with people, animals, plants and the environment. Organic crop production is safe for the immediate and greater environment of the farm. Organic farmers do not use conventional chemical pesticides, fertilizers or additives to livestock feed, and take care of their natural surroundings.

Ideally, organic farms are 'closed systems' in which the amounts of nutrients, water and other resources remain constant and farmers are largely independent of external inputs. Organic farms are usually mixed farms with livestock and crop production. Livestock feed is produced on farm and livestock manure is used to fertilize the crops, closing the nutrient cycle. Because of the value of organic

products, organic farmers usually receive better prices for their crops.

The pleasant rural surroundings of organic farms are a natural magnet for tourists. Therefore organic farms are in an excellent position to develop on-farm tourist accommodations, farm shops, tea gardens, or other agrotourism activities that generate additional income for the farmers' families. An additional advantage of organic farming is that its combination of modern and traditional production methods helps to preserve the landscape.

Organic farming in the Rhodopes will create jobs, increase the standard of living, and help to halt rural depopulation. This can be achieved by investing primarily in knowledge exchange, for instance through training, workshops, and demonstration farms. The entire organic production chain must be considered, including potential customers, marketing, and value-adding processing of organic products. Other important issues to consider are collaboration between farmers and possibly the formation of an organic cooperative.



#### *Harvesting wild fruit, mushrooms, herbs and meat*

The forests and grasslands of the Eastern Rhodopes offer a wide variety of edible and harvestable plants and mushrooms. Large quantities of wild mushrooms are harvested every year and sold on the international market. As long as the mushrooms are harvested sustainably, this activity can be continued forever.

In addition to mushrooms, people could start collecting other abundant forest resources, such as forest fruit, wood and herbs; they might even harvest some

'wilderness meat' from the wild Rhodopi cattle and other large grazers. This would provide a harvest activity for every season: wild fruit in late spring, herbs in summer, and mushrooms in autumn.

Harvested fruits and herbs can be processed regionally, and be marketed internationally. These activities will require training as well as market research. The harvesting of wood from the Eastern Rhodope forests should aim to be certified to the standards of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). This is entirely feasible: in the Western Rhodopes FSC-standards have already been applied successfully. Monotonous forest plantations should however be avoided. In naturally grazed nature areas, enough tree seedlings will be able to grow into mature, harvestable trees. There is really no need to spend money on expensive, subsidy-requiring forest plantations.

#### *Production of regional food specialities*

High-quality organic products, certified harvests of wild fruits, mushrooms, herbs and 'wilderness meat', and local production of dairy and wine, together offer a unique opportunity to establish a regional product line and regional brand, and to serve healthy local meals in guesthouses and restaurants. These activities will increase local incomes and promote the development of ecotourism.

Investments will be needed to set up dairies (cheese production), vineyards (wine production) and drying houses for fruits and mushrooms. In addition, funds are needed for knowledge transfer and market research, to make strategic choices and improve local living standards.



#### **Rhodopi cattle breed**

The Rhodopi cattle breed, which originates from the Rhodopes, will be used in the natural grazing projects. Rhodopi cattle have grazed this part of Bulgaria for centuries – from the Middle Ages most likely. It is a hardy breed that is very well adapted to local conditions and living in the wilderness. It has a stocky build, small udders and strong hoofs. An additional advantage is that Rhodopi cattle take relatively long to reach reproductive age, and that the cows all calve together in early spring. They are well adapted to mountainous terrain, and are able to survive winter temperatures of minus 20 degrees as well as summer temperatures of plus 40 degrees, shedding their coats four times a year.

#### **4. Opportunities for ecotourism**

Had the Rhodopes been located in Western Europe, they would undoubtedly have been one of the most heavily visited mountain and natural areas. But the Rhodopes are on Europe's periphery, and they have only recently become accessible. Unknown makes unloved, although as many as 5,000 visitors (10% from Western Europe) have already visited the Madzharovo Visitor Centre. As Bulgaria gradually integrates into the EU, the country is expected to become more readily accessible. And the Rhodopes have all the necessary ingredients to become an ecotourism hotspot: stunning landscapes, exceptional plant and animal diversity, a rich cultural heritage, and likely encounters with wildlife such as wild cattle, wolves and vultures. The vast, readily accessible landscapes of the Rhodopes are an oasis of space, clean air, and peace and quiet, and offer real wilderness experiences.



#### **Changes**

Visitors to the Eastern Rhodopes are able to witness what the country looked like several centuries ago, with traditional agriculture in the valleys and herdsmen taking cattle herds from various owners into the mountains. While they will notice the effects of rural depopulation – derelict buildings, deserted villages and overgrown fields –, visitors will also discover the many new private initiatives, such as traditional farms offering bed & breakfast, horse riding, a visitor centre, a new hotel, and tourist-friendly cafés and restaurants.

Due to the socio-economic changes within Bulgaria, the number of national and international visitors is expected to increase significantly within the next ten years. Since the fall of communism Bulgaria has become more accessible, and slowly but surely tourist accommodations are brought up to western European standards.

In the Eastern Rhodopes, tourism is vital for the preservation of local communities. In addition to income from organic farming, profits from tourism will compensate for the loss of traditional agricultural income.

### **New opportunities**

Developing sustainable tourism is a major economic opportunity for the region. Local people can develop business initiatives geared towards tourists. But they should aim for high quality and sustainability, rather than mass-tourism developments such as seen across the border in the Greek town of Dadiá, where large apartment buildings have washed away the traditional village character.

### *Bed & Breakfasts*

The Eastern Rhodopes offer plenty of opportunities to develop new B&Bs. Recently two private families have started B&Bs, and they have welcomed their first guests. But there is room for many more B&B facilities. B&Bs and organic farms go well together: the B&Bs generate additional income for farmers, and the organic farms provide tourists with pleasant rural surroundings and opportunities to learn about and contribute to farm activities. Selling local products to tourists and serving them local specialities in the local restaurants are additional opportunities waiting to be explored.



### *Hiking maps*

Large nature reserves are inaccessible to visitors if reliable, good-quality hiking maps are lacking. Hiking maps for the Eastern Rhodopes can be developed at low cost, and may also be used for communication and education purposes. ARK has good experience with developing 'maps for wandering' through various natural areas in the Netherlands.

### *Long-distance footpaths*

In various regions of Europe, long-distance footpaths have shown to be an excellent trigger of tourism. For example, the creation of Turkey's first long-distance footpath ten years ago has led to the spontaneous development of countless accommodations, cafés and restaurants along the route. In the Netherlands, similar developments have occurred along the Pieterpad. Together with Bulgarian organisations, ARK and Avalon can develop, mark and map a Bulgarian long-distance footpath.



### *Visitor centre and excursions*

Madzharovo has a visitor centre run by the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB). The centre focuses entirely on the rare vulture species living in the area. With additional funding the centre could provide broader information on other ecological and cultural aspects of the area.

In addition to the visitor centre's vulture excursions, new excursions can be developed. A recent private initiative now offers horse-riding excursions through the hills. The natural streams and rivers offer excellent opportunities for spectacular canoe trips and encounters with black stork and bee-eater colonies. The region still fosters a rich culture of traditional song, dance and costume, and has delicious regional food specialities that taste even better when served at a

campfire or near an ancient oak tree. In other words, the region has virtually countless opportunities to offer tourists an unforgettable combination of natural and cultural experiences.









## **Colophon**

"The new Thracian Gold" project has been initiated by ARK Nature and Avalon.

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