

BULGARIAN ENVIRONMENTAL ATTITUDES AND  
BEHAVIOURS IN THE RAZLOG BASIN: RESULTS FROM A  
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## INTRODUCTION

This paper explores certain dimensions of the transformation in attitudes towards the environment in one largely rural locality of Southwestern Bulgaria. While there has been much attention paid to general and national-scale issues in postcommunist environmental reconstruction (e.g. Carter, Turnock, 2002; Petersen, 1993), relatively little research exists that examines the specifically *local* impacts of broader postcommunist transformational processes. Environmental issues especially have tended to be treated at the national scale and through the lenses of either policy reform (Moldan, Klarer, 1997), overall environmental quality assessment (Stanners, Bourdeau, 1995) or general ‘environmental culture’ (Mirovitskaya, 1998; Oldfield, 2006). Still less has been said –outside of Anthropology (e.g. Cellarius, 2004; Burawoy, Verdery, 1999; Bridger, Pine, 1998)– about how environmental attitudes and behaviours are changing in *rural* localities; those out of the way places usually neglected by analysts interested in plumbing the “national mood“ or metropolitan cultures. In periods of economic turmoil – and Bulgaria has experienced much of that since 1989 – these interactions tend towards direct expropriation of the “use values” from local hinterlands (e.g. firewood, hunting, etc.) and also the “exchange values” inherent in items like mushrooms and commercial timber for ready cash, often on the black market. Coupled with this is a more “utilitarian” attitude towards nature, seeing it as a larder to be plundered more or less at will and according to need. There is however also an abiding “nature love” within Bulgaria which expresses itself in a resilient celebration of nature (especially as “*priroda*” rather than the more technical “*okolna sreda*”) in poetry, music and popular attitudes and practices towards the natural world (e.g. celebrations for St Pantaleimon at woodland shrines). Thus there is something of a paradox apparent in rural attitudes to the environment: on the one hand nakedly expropriative whilst simultaneously deeply concerned and celebratory on the other.

Exploration of this apparent paradox is the primary objective of this paper. We present preliminary findings from a decennial survey initiative focusing on

environmental attitudes and behaviours in a mountainous Bulgarian locality. Results from 1999 and 2011 are presented side by side with a view to identifying temporal and (local) geographical trends related to both convergence and divergence of views, attitudes, opinions and behaviours. Other papers have reported on the 1999 survey (Staddon, 2001a; Staddon, Turnock, 2001) and on a similar survey conducted in 1999 in Poland with colleagues from Wroclaw University (Staddon, Grykiewicz, 2009; 2007). One of the unique features of this survey is that it does not set out to characterise larger “national“ populations or other macro-sociological attitudes or opinions. Instead it is embedded in a long-term study of socio-environmental transformations in one region of southwestern Bulgaria and seeks to contribute to a growing dataset that also includes a large repository of interviews, statistical data, case studies and ethnographic and historical material.

The 2011 survey contained 36 separate questions organized under the following headings:

- Basic Respondent Characteristics (gender, age, location)
- Local Economic Conditions and the Environment
- Governance, Community and the Environment
- Local Environmental Issues
- Socio-economic Status

In both 1999 and 2011 survey-takers were employed to take the surveys directly door to door. Standard Western European sampling methodologies (e.g. randomized selections from local telephone directories) were inappropriate in this region and so survey-takers used a combination of random selection of households in face blocks and snow-ball sampling according to an overall sampling frame designed to ensure proportional representation of the four largest settlements in the Razlog Basin: Razlog, Bansko, Dobrinishte and Banya. Surveying was done in late summer in order to take advantage of the longer days and the greater ease of travel around a region that can be more difficult to negotiate in wintertime. A total of 120 completed surveys were returned in both 1999 and 2011, comprising something like 0.5% of total local population.

For the purposes of this paper analysis of results obtained in 2011 has taken two forms. Firstly, we seek to provide as detailed and structured a statistical presentation of results as possible, generally in direct comparison with the 1999 survey, which was in most respects identical. Side-by-side bar charts (Fig. 1 – 6) are used extensively to provide an easily appreciated and comparative presentation of results. We also undertake a limited amount of correlation analysis (particularly with respect to probing the relationships between age and socio-economic status and expressed attitudes and behaviors), using Spearman’s rank correlation coefficient. Cross tabulations and pivot tables are used to further explore the relations between response patterns to different questions. Secondly we interpret our results contextually, with reference to our deep knowledge of the region’s social, economic, cultural and political history as recorded in interviews, media reviews, previous publications, etc.

## ENVIRONMENTAL ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS – 1992 TO 2011

The survey was completed during the middle fortnight in September 2011 at a time when the weather was reasonably clement and there was still daylight up to about 8.00 pm, giving the survey takers lots of opportunity to catch different sorts of respondents at home. The 120 respondents from whom complete surveys were taken had an average age of 34, with a high of 64 and a low of 17. There was an almost perfect split between men and women, and the stratification of the sample meant that the four settlements surveyed were surveyed proportionally to their contribution to local population. This compares with a sample in 1999 which was 40% male, had an average age of 39 and was also sampled proportionally to local population; in other words, the two samples are fairly close in age, sex and specific geographical location.

As noted elsewhere (Staddon et al., 1998; Grykien, Staddon, 2007), low cash income levels are partly mitigated by extensive appropriation of products from local forests and a high level of small scale agriculture (aided by the agricultural land restitution of the 1990s). It is however the case that direct appropriations from the local hinterland have decreased since 1999, as can be seen in Fig. 1. In the previous section we discussed the background to direct expropriation of energy sources (firewood) and foodstuffs (fish, meat, herbs) from local forests, role of the small parcels of agricultural land in the 1990s and the specific contribution of mushroom collection (especially of Boletes and Chanterelles) to household “consumption funds” (to use the anthropological term). One implication of these findings is that a high proportion of respondents of all ages find themselves physically *in* local forests and fields on a fairly regular basis. This sort of first-hand familiarity is a strong

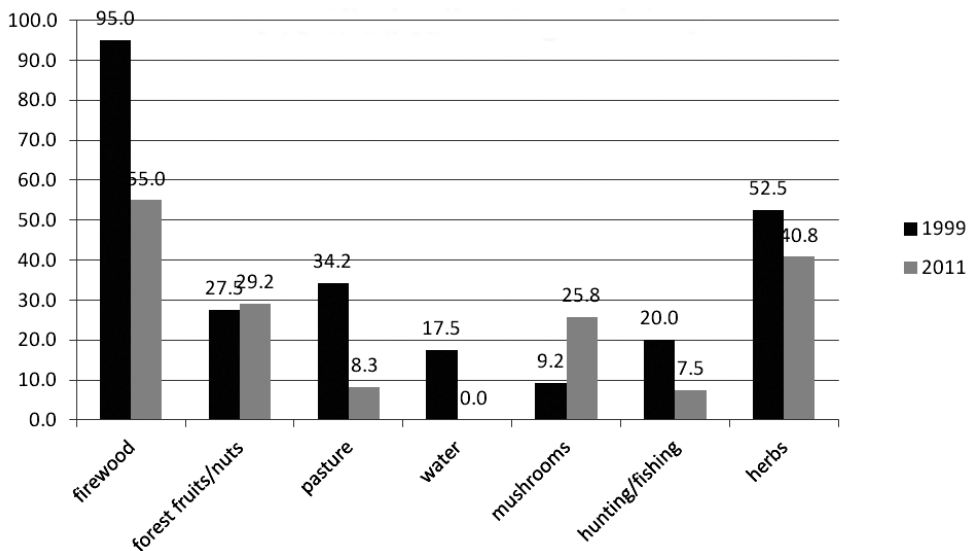


Fig. 1. Percentage of Households which engage the specified collecting activities

determinant of what we described in the introduction as the quality of “nature love” manifest in all our research, qualitative as well as quantitative, since the early 1990s. Local people really do feel that these forests and fields are *their* forests and fields by virtue of their direct personal relationships with them and this clearly drives their valuation of them. As we have seen elsewhere (e.g. in earlier studies of illegal logging), direct connections to local environments offers not just what might be called “place intimacy” (built up through numerous interactions over time) but also a way of legitimating actions which are technically illegal as “licit”.

Sometimes this attachment to nature works in apparently perverse ways however. Earlier work (Staddon, 2009; Cellarius and Staddon, 2002) explored the patterns and underlying logic of illicit uses of the forest, especially tree theft. Through the middle of the first decade of the new century the tree theft in the region was described by locals and government authorities alike in terms of a new “Eldorado”. Trees were being taken, entirely outside official regulatory mechanisms, for at least three purposes:

- Firewood
- Sales of raw or semi-processed timber into the construction industry (which experienced a boom until the economic crash of 2008)
- Charcoal making (mostly by Roma “Tsigani” who established production camps deep inside the forest).

Although any given household’s taking would be, in and of themselves, small, the cumulative effect of numerous households taking firewood or mushrooms outside of official limits and license controls could be significant.<sup>1</sup>

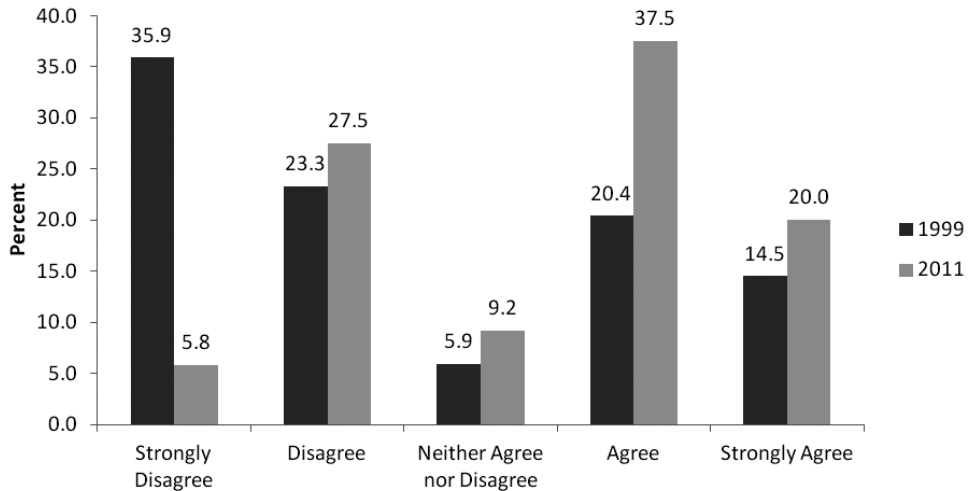


Fig. 2. “I am optimistic about the economic outlook for my community“

<sup>1</sup> There is a complex and ongoing debate in the conservation literature about the cumulative effects of numerous such acts, but the matter is as yet unresolved, particularly for mushrooms.

Interestingly, notwithstanding the difficult economic circumstances, as in 1999 respondents declined two separate opportunities built into the survey to support the view that the environment was a “luxury“ which would need to be “sacrificed” in the form of higher timber exploitation rates in order to improve local economic conditions. As noted above with respect to illegal and illicit tree theft activities local attitudes to the natural environment are much more complex than the simplistic idea that economic pressure leads to less support for conservation. As Fig. 3 shows, support for the idea that “nature tourism is the key to local economic development“ actually rose between 1999 and 2011. Similarly, respondents’ reactions to statements like:

- “Local industry unwisely exploits the natural resources of my area”
- “National Park Pirin is economically good for the community”
- “Too much emphasis is already placed on protecting local forest resources”.

were consistent with a sustained high level of support for the natural environment and even for conservation measures which might actually hamper local income generation. This finding, suggesting a strong desire to conserve and protect local environments, has been replicated in many other opinion surveys around the world. While there is a tendency in the literature to interpret this finding in terms of the cognitive dissonance between pro-conservationist values and anti-conservationist behaviors we do not see the Bulgarian results in this light at all. We argue instead that in the context within which residents of rural areas like the Razlog Basin find themselves it is *not* necessarily inconsistent to both treasure the natural environment and to exploit it in multiple and potentially impactful ways (e.g. over-hunting or destruction of mushroom habitat).

In 2011 Razlog respondents seemed more positive about the overall health of the local environment than they were in 1999, and a great deal more positive than Bulgarians from the eastern Burgas region surveyed in 1992 and 1993. Fig. 4 shows that opinion on the quality of the local forest environment has swung nearly 180

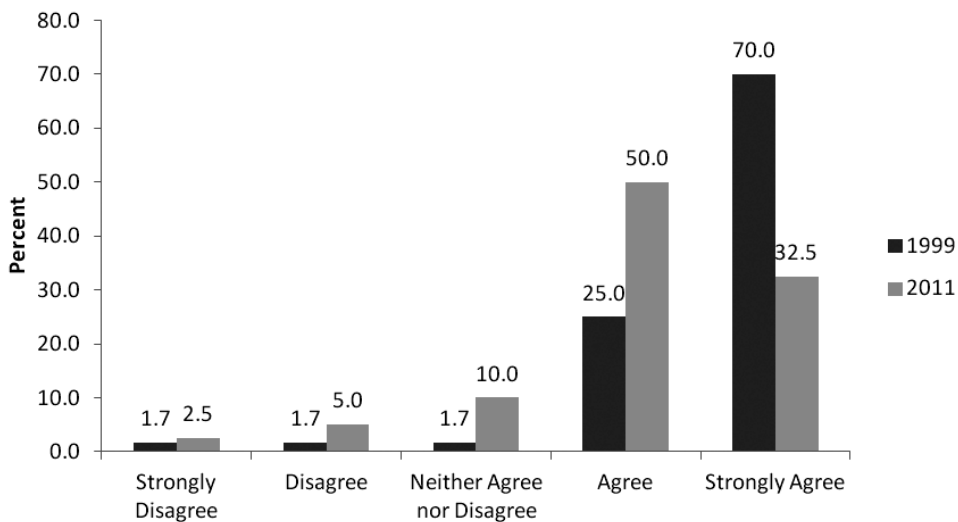


Fig. 3. “Nature tourism is the key to local economic development“

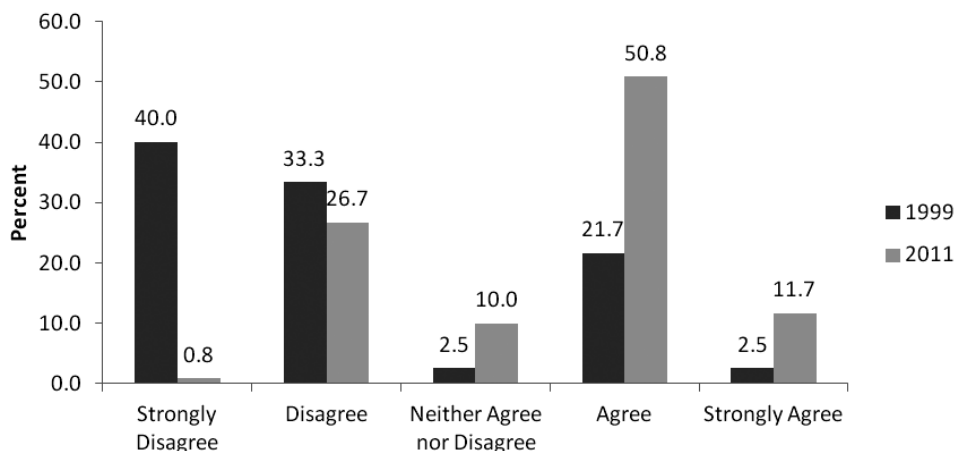


Fig. 4. “Forests in my area in good condition“

degrees, from 73% mildly or strongly negative to 62 % mildly or strongly positive. In other questions too respondents were always more optimistic in 2011 than they were in 1999. What’s more, 1999 respondents were themselves more optimistic than Bulgarians from the Burgas region surveyed in 1992 and 1993. Overall we contend that whilst environmental conditions may well have improved since 1989, other factors too are responsible for these transformations in perception. Starting in the 1990s Bulgarians began to receive a great deal of information about environmental conditions (previously available only through samizdat and émigré publications). Initially this appears to have caused a general downturn in popular perceptions of environmental quality, but more recently the greater availability of relatively reliable information about the environment, especially that available from non-Bulgarian official sources such as the EC and foreign scientific institutes, seems to have helped support more balanced popular assessments (E u r o b a r o m e t e r, 2011).

The third theme of the survey probed respondents’ views about the respective roles of government, civil society and individuals in nature conservation and resource management. Overall in 2011 we found respondents more positively inclined towards organizations like the “Forests Inspectorate” (45% felt it was doing a good or great job) and “government” in general. Local government (the “obshtina” or municipal council) especially was more favourably viewed in 2011 than in 1999. There was a markedly higher level of disagreement with negatively framed questions (Fig. 4) while simultaneously there appears now to be a more pragmatic view about both the responsibilities of government and its actual capacities. Respondents still tend to the view, especially in hard economic times, that it is the responsibility of government to ensure a basic living standard for citizens (the social welfare function), though this view seems to be leavened with a recognition that other actors too, including private business, civil society and individuals all have a role to play in good governance.<sup>2</sup> In

<sup>2</sup> In some ways our Bulgarian respondents are not so different from British citizens, many of whom have taken refuge in the argument about the “social welfare function“ of government during the current economic crisis.

this sense the Bulgarians surveyed in 2011 appear more like the Poles surveyed in 1999, at least as regards their attitudes and values regarding the responsibilities and actual capacities of government. 22 years and several governments after the regime change initiated in November of 1989 Bulgarians living in the Razlog Basin are clear that one of the main priorities of government is social provision, but also have a more pragmatic understanding that governments may be relatively willing or unwilling and relatively able or unable to do so. Both our survey and the *2011 Eurobarometer* suggests that these attitudes have “hardened“ relative to other Europeans, perhaps in response to the protracted economic crisis pervading Europe currently.

## DETERMINANTS OF ENVIRONMENTAL ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOURS

In this section we explore further the apparent contradiction introduced in the first section of the paper: to what extent are local people committed to *both* environmental protection and environmental exploitation and how is the apparent cognitive dissonance so generated managed by respondents? In the interests of simplicity, we have chosen initially to explore the apparent contradiction using 8 questions from the survey which asked after perceptions of natural environmental quality (3.1) , the respective roles of citizens, local government and community groups in environmental management (2.2, 2.5, 3.5) and the relations between exploitation versus conservation and job growth (1.2, 1.5, 1.6, 2.10, 3.5). These questions are listed in the table below. They were chosen because there appeared to be some differentiation of responses across the spectrum implied by the Likert scale, because they offered potentially cross-cutting approaches the research question and because they were asked in both 1999 and 2011.

- 1.2 “Local industry unwisely exploits the natural resources of my area“
- 1.5 “National Park Pirin is economically good for the community“
- 1.6 “Local natural resources must be exploited more actively to improve the economy“
- 2.2 “Citizens must not question the decisions of those they elect to public office“
- 2.5 “Nature Protection Groups have a critical role in environmental management“
- 2.10 “Too much emphasis is already placed on protecting local forest resources“
- 3.1 “Forests in my area are in good condition“
- 3.5 “Nature conservation efforts are harming economic development prospects“

With respect to questions about the local economy, it is clear that men are inclined to be slightly more pessimistic about local economic prospects, although both men and women are equally pessimistic about getting a job, the importance of foreign investment to local economic regeneration and the particular difficulties experienced by young people, and prioritizing economic investment, jobs and development as National Government priorities. Interviews with business owners, residents and civic

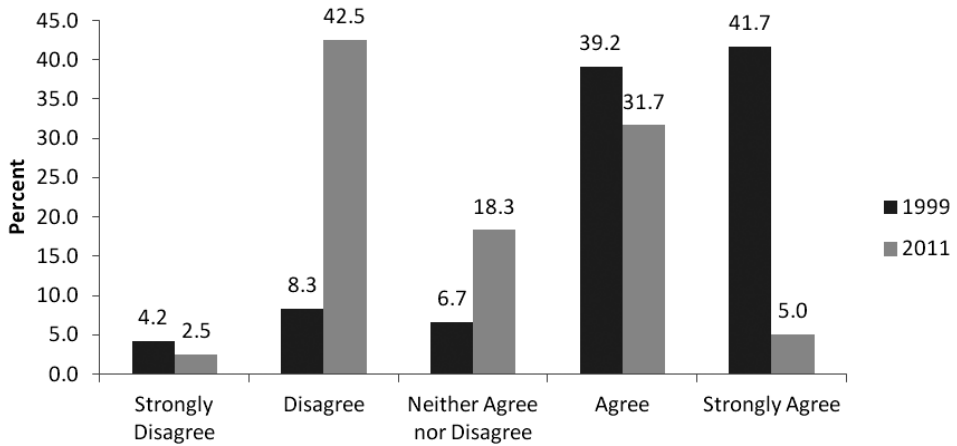


Fig. 5. “Obshtina councils cannot properly manage the environment”

figures in the region have shown that there is a general view that little investment is coming to the region from central or regional government, and that the investment that is happening (especially in and around the Bansko ski resort) is the result of crooked business deals.

There is a modest tendency, especially amongst women, to interpret the responsibilities of local government in terms of immediate local issues, such as local nature protection, schools, etc. although both men and women are strongly supportive of National Park Pirin. Both men and women are however also supportive of the idea that “Local natural resources must be exploited more actively to improve the economy” and yet also manage to largely *disagree* that there is “too much protection of the environment”. Whilst seemingly contradictory, we would argue that the key issue is just *who* is seen to be doing the managing and *who* is seen to be doing the exploiting. In line with findings elsewhere (e.g. *Staddon, 2001a, Muth, Bowe, 1998; Assenov, 2010*) what people seem to be saying is that they want more commercial exploitation of the local environment, but only if it generates long term local economic benefits and, ideally, is locally-controlled.

As regards SES, we note that household wages have been low in both 1999 and 2011, at no greater than 60 % of the national average. In 2011 the modal household wage in the Razlog Basin was 800-1000 levs/month, equivalent to about GB£340-440 per month per household. This is, by any standard, a relatively low household wage, although there were households that received much more (28 % of households) or much less (46 % of households). Even so it is difficult for several reasons to interpret money wages as a straightforward measure of wellbeing, as one might in the US or the UK. Not only is there a considerable “gray” economy which would of course not be captured in most censuses or surveys, but we already know that many local households supply some part of their domestic consumption needs through self-supply mechanisms such as small-scale agriculture and hunting and gathering activities local forests. Having said that, it appears that the number of households with persons engaging in hunting and gathering activities has declined since 1999. For



example only 55% collect firewood, compared with 95% in 1999 and the number collecting herbs has fallen from 53% to 41%. The only counter-trend is the rise in households collecting mushrooms (especially chanterelles, morels and cepes) from 10% to 26%, no doubt as a function of the thriving gray economy in such fresh comestibles. Elsewhere interview respondents have told us that mushroom and herb (more limited) collection are relatively easy and enjoyable ways to make much-needed cash. Simultaneously, the old subsistence modes of production seem to be falling by the wayside inasmuch as, for example, more local residents are supplying their firewood needs through middlemen.

We feel that better measures of SES can be found in the professional status of respondents and in their actual purchasing behaviours, both of which we asked about in 1999 and 2011. In 2011 20% of respondents self-identified as professional persons, civil servants or private business persons, with 16% identifying as unemployed. There were few retirees in the sample not least because the highest age of a respondent in 2011 was 64 years. As regards purchases, we note that in general 2011 respondents are better off than in 1999, with more than a third purchasing, in the last twelve months, white goods, 10% a new TV system and the number traveling outside Bulgarian going up by 4 times to 7%.<sup>3</sup> There is however a generalized trend towards those making the higher value purchases being those in the upper income brackets and having the highest levels of education.

Are attitudes to the economy and the environment linked to gender or age? In fact there is very little correlation between gender and the subset of questions selected for further analysis. There was a *slight* tendency for men to be more optimistic about environmental quality than women ( $r = 0.2$ ), but nothing very strong. As regards age, there was a measurable tendency for older people to disagree that that local industry unwisely exploits the environment and to disagree that "National Park Pirin is good for the economy" ( $r$  of between  $-0.2$  and  $-0.1$ ). This perhaps goes with the slight tendency for older people to think that the environment must be exploited more ( $r = 0.15$ ) and the slight tendency ( $r = -0.15$ ) to rate the quality of resources higher if you are younger. None of these correlations provide very much explanatory power however.

Correlations between SES, measured by either income or purchase history, and responses to the above subset of survey questions were hardly more encouraging, with "income" only yielding a  $r$  of  $-0.31$  against 2.2, suggesting, though not very strongly, that the better off tend to be less quiescent about government.

The correlation between 1.2 and 1.6 is poor ( $r = 0.17$ ) and in the wrong direction indicating a certain confusion and/or complexity of attitudes to the environment. One might have expected response patterns to be roughly inversely correlated with one another, yet we discovered a positive, albeit weak, relationship between the two. Respondents also disagreed with 3.5 less strongly than with 2.10, though concordance of responses was better than average ( $r = 0.25$ ) suggesting that there is a core of attitudes which are not gender, age or SES specific, which would like to see more active exploitation of natural resources and which worries about the constricting effects of nature protection.

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<sup>3</sup> Somewhat contradictorily the only person to claim to have purchased a new automobile also claimed to be unemployed.

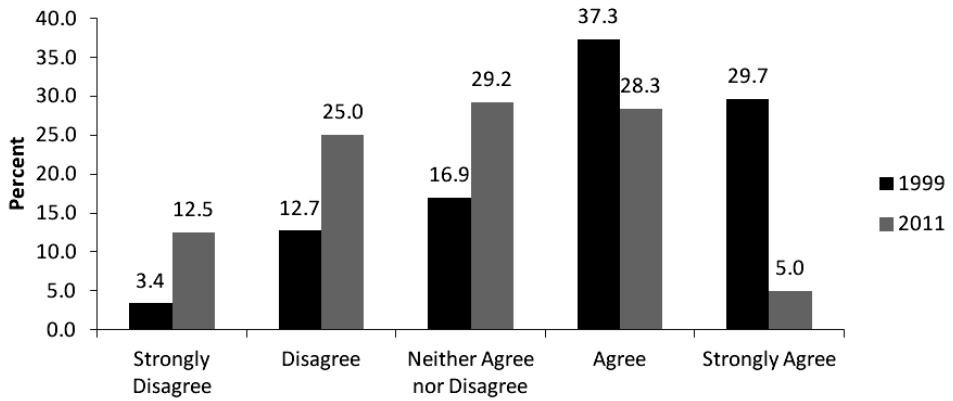


Fig. 6. “Nature Protection Groups have a critical role in environmental management”

As regards the central contradiction we sought to examine in this paper, between “nature love” and “nature exploitation” we have seen that there is a slight tendency for older women to be less sentimental about the local environment and that better off, better educated, households are more sanguine about the environment, government and local economic prospects. However the absence of strong correlations (defined as  $r$  values greater than  $\pm 0.5$ ) suggests that sentimental and utilitarian impulses are manifest in most of our respondents and are not easily explained by age, gender, or any of several measures of SES. Previous ethnographic research in the locality supports this view, suggesting that local respondents deploy different specific attitudes to the environment “tactically” or “situationally”. Consequently, given purely abstract statements (e.g. “National Park Pirin is good for the local economy”) to react to, respondents find it easy to agree strongly, even if they also agree strongly with statements like “Nature conservation efforts are harming economic development prospects”. In interviews the apparent contradiction is resolved by interviewees explaining different specific circumstances in which both statements may be worthy of support.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The general objective of this paper was to present the preliminary outlines of a comparative analysis of recent survey results exploring community-environment relations in a single locality in the uplands of southwestern Bulgaria. Though the most recent survey of environmental attitudes and values was only completed in September 2011 we have been able to quickly identify a number of key findings:

- Respondents are more optimistic about the role of government than they were in 1999 or 1992.
- Respondents are more positive about the health of the natural environment than they were in 1999 or 1992.

– Respondents are still relatively passive and non-committed in terms of their own personal involvement in environmental governance or indeed in officially sanctioned “green” behaviours such as recycling.

– Although respondents value them, there is some cynicism about the effectiveness of environmental NGOs “on the ground” in the Razlog Basin.

– Difficult economic conditions have meant that there is still a strong reliance on directly collected foodstuffs and fuelwood from local forests and agricultural holdings.

Overall we judge that Bulgarian attitudes are to a significant degree “Europeanising” rather than “globalizing” (though the distinction between the two might be hard to perceive), but are doing so in a uniquely national, and even sub-national, way. General environmental attitudes are clearly inflected through local perceptions and behaviours to create a situation whereby there is in some cases a significant “distance” between *overall* environmental attitudes and *local* environmental attitudes. A key area where the Europeanisation (rather than globalization) of attitudes is apparent is in the strong adherence to a more social democratic model of state-society relations than implied by the global (neoliberal) consensus. Bulgarians, at least in the Razlog basin, want their government to intervene in their lives, but to intervene in a way that promotes local development and economic health. This does not signal a desire to return to the centrally-planned economy, but rather to at least offer more resistance to the neoliberal globalization of the regional economy.

A related objective was to explore the apparent contradiction between “nature-loving” and “nature-exploitative” attitudes amongst residents of the Razlog Basin. So far we have found that this contradiction exists across gender, age and SES class divides. It therefore cannot be said that particular attitudes adhere to particular identifiable subsets of the local population. Instead we are inclined to the view that both views, though apparently contradictory, exist in the minds of the majority of our respondents and are deployed contextually. Thus, an over-arching sense of “nature-love” can be displaced by the view that local forest resources ought to be exploited more ruthlessly in order to generate needed employment. Conversely, those with an abiding sense of “nature-utilitarianism” can and do express more strongly conservationist attitudes when local natural resources are at stake, as for example during the expansion of the Bansko ski resort in the early 2000s. Ultimately we suggest that the paradox with which we started is not really a paradox at all, but merely part of the irreducible complexity of environmental attitudes and values manifest in our study population. Put another way: our respondents do not hold only one view on issues such as local development or nature protection. Rather, they hold a range of views which, when seen in isolation, can seem contradictory, but which are more coherent when seen holistically. Thus, the potential for cognitive dissonance, so apparent to social researchers, often does not even arise for respondents themselves. The paradox may not be a paradox after all.

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## ЕКОЛОГИЧНО ОТНОШЕНИЕ И ПОВЕДЕНИЕ НА БЪЛГАРСКОТО НАСЕЛЕНИЕ ОТ РАЗЛОЖКАТА КОТЛОВИНА КЪМ ОКОЛНАТА СРЕДА: РЕЗУЛТАТИ ОТ 10-ГОДИШНО ИЗСЛЕДВАНЕ

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(Резюме)

Статията изследва някои измерения в отношението към околната среда на населението от един класически планински район на Югозападна България – Разложката котловина. В периода на икономическа трансформация към пазарно стопанство (след 1989 г.) се изострят тенденциите към пряко изземване на природни ресурси от прилежащите към близките населени места територии (чрез дърводобив, лов, гъбарство и т.н.). Авторите разглеждат очевидния парадокс между традиционно изразената в българския фолклор любов към природата, от една страна, и утилитарния подход към природните ресурси на съвременното местно население, от друга. Те представят предварителните изводи от над десетгодишен период на изследване, насочено към екологичните нагласи и поведение на населението от Разложката котловина. Резултатите от 1999 и 2011 г. са представени паралелно с цел да се определят времеви и (местни) географски тенденции, свързани както със сближаването, така и с различията на гледни точки, нагласи, мнения и поведение сред представителите на местното население. Основна цел на тази статия е да се направи предварителен сравнителен анализ на последните резултати от проучването на общността в този район.