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e-mail: [pascal.george@student.uaic.ro](mailto:pascal.george@student.uaic.ro), <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4611-5828>***THE LOWER PRUT FLOODPLAIN – A GEOGRAPHICAL SPACE OF CONVERGENCE  
AND CROSS-BORDER TOURISM COOPERATION**

This study explores the essential role of cultural values in the conservation and sustainable development of the *Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park* (PNLJPI). Through the analysis of tangible heritage elements—such as vernacular architecture—and intangible aspects including local traditions, customs, and traditional fishing practices, the research illustrates how cultural components shape and reinforce the park's distinctive identity.

Employing documentary analysis, field observations, and surveys conducted among residents from neighboring Romanian and Moldovan communities, the study emphasizes the need to integrate cultural dimensions into the management of protected natural areas. The findings indicate that overlooking cultural heritage can lead to the erosion of community values and the weakening of local identity. Therefore, the paper advocates for an integrated management framework that fosters active community participation, the valorization of cultural resources, and the development of sustainable tourism. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that the inclusion of cultural values not only strengthens environmental protection but also promotes social cohesion and regional cooperation, providing a holistic model for natural park governance in cross-border contexts.

**Keywords:** *cultural landscape, Lower Prut Floodplain, cross-border cooperation, sustainable tourism, community participation, ethnography.*

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**Introduction.** From a cultural-geographical perspective, ethnographic landscapes represent key markers of identity, authenticity, and cultural individuality. They preserve the traditional technical and artistic achievements transmitted across generations, functioning as sources of ethnicity and cohesion that unite local communities and maintain intergenerational continuity. In their environmental dimension, ethnographic landscapes express not only traditional ecological knowledge but also the techniques, practices, and belief systems that regulate resource use and land management, ensuring harmony between people and their environment (Onică, 2019).

Within this framework, the *Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park* emerges as a representative area where natural and cultural elements coexist and interact, forming a landscape of convergence between Romania, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine. The local communities surrounding the park play a crucial role in the sustainable use of natural resources, being both custodians and beneficiaries of this heritage. Their involvement in conservation, education, and tourism activities strengthens the link between ecological protection and cultural identity.

The region's cultural landscape provides multiple opportunities for cross-border economic and social cooperation. Through the promotion of cultural and ecotourism, the encouragement of local entrepreneurship, and the revitalization of traditional crafts, the Lower Prut area demonstrates how cultural values can drive sustainable rural development. At the same time, traditional

ecological practices offer viable models for environmental management and adaptive resource use in trans-boundary contexts.

Several initiatives developed within the *Lower Danube Euroregion* exemplify this dynamic. Projects such as “*Promotion of Intangible Heritage and National Culture in Romania and the Republic of Moldova*” (2025), “*Green Tourism in the Cahul–Galați–Reni Cross-Border Region*” (2023), “*Cross-Border Cooperation for the Valorization of Cultural Heritage in Galați, Romania, and Hîncești, Republic of Moldova*” (2022), and “*The Village Museum – Traditional Household*” (2008) have supported European integration and local socio-economic growth. These programs highlight how cultural and natural resources can be jointly valued through responsible tourism, generating economic benefits for communities while minimizing ecological and cultural impacts.

Ultimately, the Lower Prut Floodplain stands as a geographical space of convergence — an area where cross-border cooperation, cultural heritage, and environmental sustainability intersect, offering a model of integrated development in the borderlands of Eastern Europe (Fig. 1).

**Physical-Geographical features.** The Prut River basin (Fig. 2), in its lower section located within Galați County (Fig. 3), is part of the Moldavian Plateau geomorphological unit, specifically the Bârlad Plateau sub-unit with its Covurlui Platform sector, which is further subdivided into the Covurlui Hills and Covurlui Plain. To the south, over a length of 12 km, the Lower Prut





Fig. 1. The "Lower Danube" Euroregion. Polarization centers, 2. River ports, 3. River-sea ports, 4. Sea ports, 5. Airport, 6. Cross-border connections, 7. Borders, 8. Administrative boundaries.  
Source: Stanca R., 2011

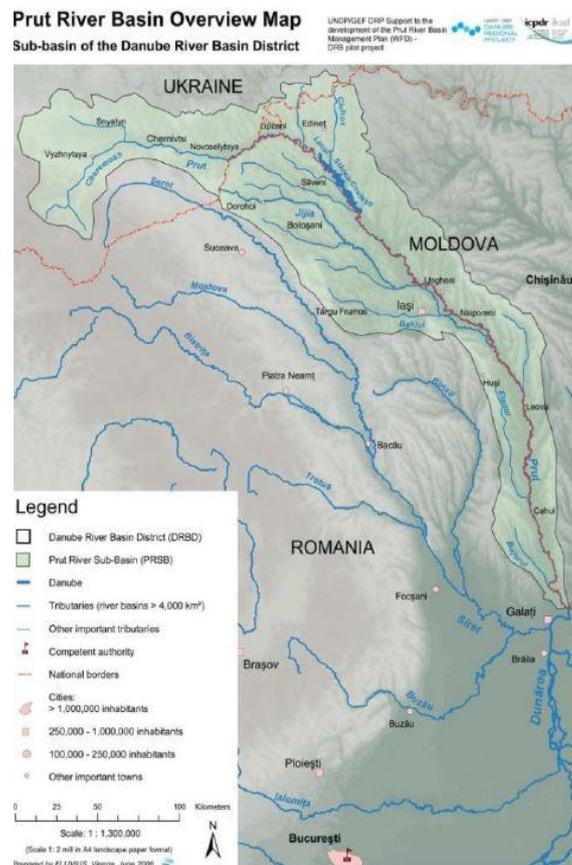
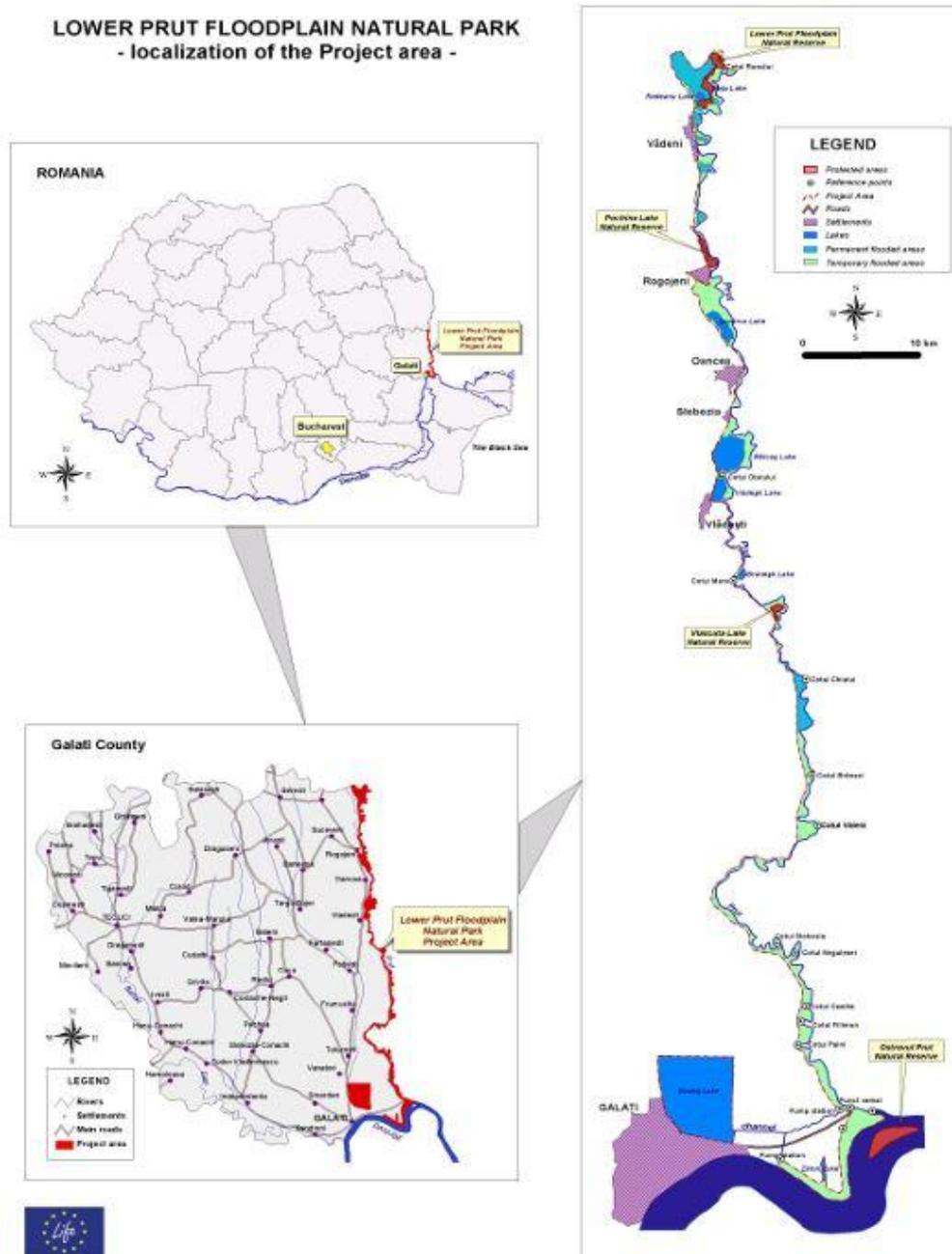


Fig. 2. Location of the Prut River Basin, between Romania, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine  
Source: <http://www.icpdr.org/main/publications/focusing-prut-river-basin>



**Fig. 3. Map of the Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park**

Source: Project “Ecological Restoration of the Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park” LIFE05NAT/RO/000155

Floodplain Natural Park encompasses the Danube Valley. From the relief fragmentation, four geomorphological units have been distinguished: plateaus, tributary valleys, the Prut Floodplain and the Danube Floodplain.

The floodplain relief is generally flat, with a continuous slope from north to south, giving the impression of a wide depression. The microrelief is characterized by accumulation forms — such as ridges — and negative forms, including former lakes, oxbow lakes, channels, and marshes. Within the floodplain, outer ridges can be identified, notably the main Prut ridge, which is composed of coarse to medium-textured sediments. The remaining ridges, or inner ridges/inter-ridges, formed along former levees, are composed predominantly of fine-textured sediments, with medium textures occurring

less frequently.

Relief altitude varies from 3 m in the Lower Prut Floodplain at the confluence with the Danube to 209.4 m at Cocos Hill. In the Prut floodplain, average altitudes range from 10–20 m in the northern part (north of Oancea) to below 10 m near its discharge into the Danube (Fig. 4).

**Biological Environment.** The lower Prut basin represents a wetland area of great ornithological interest, both for Romania and southeastern Europe. The Prut River valley lies on the migratory routes of birds breeding across the Eurasian continent. Many species of aquatic and wading birds find here resting and refuge areas, food, and favorable conditions for nesting, making it one of the most important protected areas in the South-

East development region. The proximity of the Danube Delta gives the area particular significance, as it marks the entrance to the Delta itself.

Based on literature and the LIFE05NAT/RO/000155 project, 834 taxa were invento-

ried within the Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park (PNLJPI), including 321 species and 81 taxa newly recorded for the area. The flora reflects a strong influence of Pontic and adjacent biogeographic elements due to the park's proximity to the Black Sea.



**Fig. 4. View of the floodplain landscape from the village of Văleni, Republic of Moldova towards the Natural Park**

Source: <https://complexvaleni.com/rezervatia-biosferei-unesco-prutul-de-jos/>

However, the presence of 40 invasive species — such as *Amorpha fruticosa* and *Acer negundo* — poses significant ecological challenges, with some species actively transforming natural habitats. The vegetation structure is dominated by aquatic and marsh species, although terrestrial habitats have been altered by agriculture and grazing. The park hosts 49 plant associations, with communities shaped by hydrophilic and mesothermic species adapted to the temperate climate influenced

by Mediterranean and Pontic elements. Forest ecosystems, mostly planted and affected by flood management and forestry activities, remain crucial for ecosystem stability, facilitating nutrient and energy exchange within terrestrial and aquatic habitats.

Regarding the composition of trees stand by species, as described in the forest management plans, the proportion of species in the forested area is as follows:

Table 1

**Composition of Tree Stands by Species**

Species in the forested area	Area (ha)	Percent
Pure white poplar stands	2.0	0.16%
Pure black poplar stands	23.3	1.85%
Pure Euro-American poplar stands	68.0	5.38%
Pure willow stands	1117.8	88.52%
Mixed willow and Euro-American poplar stands	5.4	0.43%
Mixed white and black poplar stands	12.3	0.97%
Mixed black poplar and ash stands	1.6	0.13%
Mixed American ash and white poplar stands	0.6	0.05%
Mixed willow and white poplar stands	28.4	2.25%
Mixed willow and black poplar stands	3.4	0.27%

Significant anthropogenic impacts, including embankments, drainage, and monoculture plantations, have substantially altered the natural floodplain dynamics, reduced biodiversity and altered habitat continuity. Long-term monitoring and management of invasive species and habitat restoration are essential to preserve the ecological integrity of PNLJPI.

In the last 50 years, studies on the ichthyofauna of this area have been very few and brief due to its status as

a border river.

Among the species without economic value, the following have been reported in the Lower Prut: bleak (*Alburnus alburnus*), spined loach (*Cobitis taenia*), weather fish (*Misgurnus fossilis*), and bitterling (*Rhodeus amarus*). The list of potentially present fish species in the Prut River includes 105 species mentioned in literature over time; this list is presented in Annex 6 of the Management Plan. Some of these species have never

lived in the Prut, having been misidentified, while others have disappeared from the river due to changing living conditions. Thus, the number of fish species captured in the Prut River during summer 2008 was 41.

It should be noted that the bigmouth buffalo (*Ictiobus cyprinellus*), smallmouth buffalo (*Ictiobus bubalus*), black buffalo (*Ictiobus niger*), black carp (*Mylopharyngodon piceus*), and the East Asian carp (*Cyprinus carpio rubrofasciatus*), introduced in the 1970s, have disappeared.

Studies show that human impact results in the replacement of valuable species by economically worthless but environmentally resilient species. The diversity and specific character of the Prut ichthyofauna is influenced by its geographic location between three major river basins: the Danube, the Tisza, and the Dniester.

Flooded areas are characteristic of where water enters in spring and recedes by late summer. Between the main channel and these temporary waters – under natural conditions – there is permanent fish exchange. However,

the lateral connectivity of the river with its floodplain has mostly been interrupted by embankments.

The hydrographic basin of the Prut River remains a wetland of significant ornithological interest, both for Romania and for southeastern Europe. The Prut Valley serves as an important migratory route for birds, providing critical stopover and nesting habitats for numerous aquatic, wading, raptor, and forest-dwelling bird species.

In total, 239 bird species have been recorded in the Lower Prut area. Of these, 76 species are listed in Annex I of the EU Birds Directive, warranting special conservation measures to ensure their survival and reproduction within their natural range.

The alternation between periods of flooding and drought has influenced the representativeness of mammals in the territory of the Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park. So far, a total of 15 mammal species has been identified.



**Fig. 5. Great egrets (large white birds), little egrets (small white birds), glossy ibises (reddish-black birds), and a grey heron (second from the right, with an extended neck) on Lake Beleu, Republic of Moldova**  
Photo by Roman Friptuleac; Source: <https://luncaprutuluidejos.md/>

Table 2

**Bird Species of Conservation Interest in the Lower Prut River Basin**

Category	No. of Species	Examples (Scientific Name)
I. Globally Threatened Species	10	Phalacrocorax pygmeus, Pelecanus crispus, Anser erythropus, Branta ruficollis, Aythya nyroca, Haliaeetus albicilla, Aquila clanga, Crex crex, Gallinago media, Numenius tenuirostris
II. Species with Restricted Range in Europe	11	Anser albifrons, Aythya marila, Pluvialis squatarola, Calidris minuta, Tringa erythropus, Phalaropus lobatus, Podiceps auritus, Mergus albellus, Tringa nebularia, Fringilla montifringilla
III. Gregarious Species (esp. during passage)	86	Observed in large flocks during migration periods
IV. Vulnerable Species in Europe	68	Botaurus stellaris, Ixobrychus minutus, Ardea purpurea, Ciconia nigra, Falco vespertinus, Recurvirostra avosetta, Chlidonias hybridus, Streptopelia turtur, Alcedo atthis, Merops apiaster, Coracias garrulus, Picus canus, Riparia riparia, Phoenicurus phoenicurus, Lanius collurio, Emberiza hortulana
V. Species Concentrated in Europe	49	Philomachus pugnax, Recurvirostra avosetta, Pluvialis apricaria, Larus fuscus, Cygnus cygnus, Turdus pilaris, Turdus viscivorus, Regulus regulus, Carduelis spinus

*Conservation Status of Mammal Species in the Lower Prut River Basin*

No.	Scientific Name	Common Name	EGO 57/2007 Annex	Directive 92/43/EEC Annex	Bern Convention Annex
1	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	Wild boar	Annex 5B	-	-
2	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	Roe deer	Annex 5B	-	-
3	<i>Felis silvestris</i>	Wildcat	Annex 3	Annex IV	Annex 2
4	<i>Nyctereutes procyonoides</i>	Raccoon dog	Annex 5B	-	-
5	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	European hare	Annex 5B	-	Annex 3
6	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Red fox	Annex 5B	-	-
7	<i>Martes martes</i>	Pine marten	Annex 5A	-	Annex 3
8	<i>Ondatra zibethicus</i>	Muskrat	Annex 5B	-	-
9	<i>Sicista subtilis</i>	Steppe birch mouse	Annex 2	-	Annex 2
10	<i>Lutra lutra</i>	Otter	Annex 3	Annex II, IV	Annex 2
11	<i>Cricetus cricetus</i>	European hamster	Annex 4A	Annex IV	Annex 2
12	<i>Canis lupus</i>	Wolf	Annex 3, 4A	Annex II, IV, V	Annex 2
13	<i>Spermophilus citellus</i>	European ground squirrel	Annex 3, 4A	Annex II	Annex 2
14	<i>Canis aureus</i>	Golden jackal	Annex 5A	Annex V	-
15	<i>Mustela lutreola</i>	European mink	Annex 3, 4A	Annex II	Annex 2

**Theoretical and conceptual background.** At the beginning of the 20th century, Otto Schlüter introduced the concept of the *cultural landscape*, later developed and systematized by Carl Sauer. Sauer emphasized that “the cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a cultural group. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape is the result.” This perspective initially implied a unidirectional process of anthropization, in which human activity transforms the natural environment into a cultural one. However, contemporary interpretations expand this view to emphasize the reciprocal and inseparable relationship between people and their environment. The cultural landscape thus reflects a continuous interaction — a dialogue between human agency and the natural setting — requiring the integration of environmental management into the broader cultural dimension. This holistic understanding supports the protection not only of ecosystems but also of local communities and their traditional ways of life (Fowler, 2002).

Local culture represents a network of social relations developed within specific territories, where distinct systems of meaning, communication, and representation are formed (Featherstone, 1993). As Albagli (2004) observes, the sense of belonging and the behaviors associated with a defined geographical space underpin the notion of *territoriality*, in which social relations and local specificity exist in dynamic interdependence, reinforcing community identity.

In this conceptual framework, the *Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park* stands as more than an ecologi-

cal reserve — it is also a living cultural landscape. Here, collective memory, traditional practices, and local customs imbue the territory with meaning, anchoring the inhabitants to their environment and sustaining the social cohesion necessary for long-term, sustainable development.

**Ethnographic Landscapes and Traditional Occupations in the Lower Prut Floodplain.** The localities situated within the *Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park* display a predominantly agricultural and fishing occupational profile (Fig. 6; 7). The extensive reed beds in the area are traditionally used for weaving mats—once indispensable household items employed to cover clay floors or to provide shade during fieldwork. Reeds are also used to craft domestic objects, the most common being wicker baskets (Fig. 8), which were historically used to carry food to the fields in clay pots, often covered with handwoven towels (Fig. 9). These towels held both practical and symbolic value, being integral to various life-cycle events such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals (Fig. 10).

Traditional craftsmanship in the region is particularly associated with the production of wicker objects, as well as items made from wool and flax—such as handwoven carpets, embroidered blouses, and other textiles. Woodcraft also remains an important cultural expression, encompassing the making of furniture, carved decorations, and everyday utensils, all of which reflect the community’s creativity and adaptation to local resources.

The importance of these traditional cultural and civilizational resources for contemporary life is well empha-

sized by Mihaela Hărmănescu, who observes that “knowledge of traditional building culture reflects sustainable principles established over time through a continuous process; thus, the vernacular built heritage is in constant evolution and presents varied characteristics

and forms, adapted to local climatic conditions, available materials, and ways of living. Some of these features can be developed or reproduced, others are no longer applicable today but offer solutions for the development of sustainability strategies in the rural landscape.”



**Fig. 6. Fishing on Manta Lake, Republic of Moldova**  
Source: <https://visitcahul.md/turism/destinatii-turistice/lacul-manta>



**Fig. 7: Fishing on Prut River, Republic of Moldova**  
Source: <https://complexvaleni.com/rezervatia-biosferei-unesco-prutul-de-jos/>



**Fig. 8. Baskets or creels made of willow**  
Source: Personal archive



**Fig. 9. Hand-woven carpets**  
Source: Personal archive



**Fig. 10. Traditional towel with floral motifs**  
Source: Personal archive

Applying the concept of sustainability to the ethnographic landscape highlights the continuous process of cultural transmission through which the forms, meanings, and values of traditional practices are preserved and adapted across generations. The succession of generations introduces new models and transformations, yet the understanding of structural, visual, symbolic, and value shifts within ethnographic landscapes allows for the maintenance of both material and spiritual continuity. This dynamic process also supports the re-evaluation of local resources, providing viable pathways for addressing the complex social, cultural, and environmental challenges faced by contemporary communities (Härmănescu, 2015).

#### **Vernacular Architecture and Intangible Heritage**

**in the Lower Prut Floodplain.** The villages within the Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park are part of two ethnographic subzones. The Covurlui–South subzone, extending from Tulucești to Vlădești, continues beyond the Prut River into the Cahul District, highlighting the cross-border continuity of local cultural traditions, and **Covurlui–North**, from Oancea to Cavadinești (Stanciu, 2023). The defining feature of peasant households in the southern half of the park is the *blind stove* with a back room where the fire was lit in a hearth—an architectural element continuing the cultural tradition of the Bărăgan Plain. The overall structure reflects the influence of the *Lower Danube regional typology*, with a functional yet symbolic organization of domestic space (Fig. 11).



**Fig. 11. Room interior from the Covurlui-South ethnographic subzone**  
Source: Personal archive

In contrast, the northern part of the Natural Park preserves a distinctly Moldavian style of rural architecture (Fig. 12). Houses are typically built from adobes and structured around a hallway and a main room divided into two sections. Behind the main room is the *iatac* (or *etac*), a smaller chamber separated by a partition wall that also serves as the stove, providing heat and a space for cooking. The region's settlements — many of which trace their origins to medieval Moldavia and were founded by *răzeși* (freeholding peasants) — retain valuable ethnographic features. Among these are traditional dwellings constructed from interwoven twigs supported by forked posts embedded in the ground, then thickly plastered with clay mixed with straw or chaff, revealing both technical ingenuity and adaptation to environmental conditions.

The domestic industry of spinning and weaving wool, flax, cotton, and silk (*borangic*) have a long tradi-

tion in these communities. Hemp, for instance, was sown in early spring and processed through a detailed series of steps—pulling, bundling, soaking, drying, and bleaching with lye and ashes—before being spun into thread. Women also produced silk, an ancient craft practiced across Romanian regions, and used it to weave towels, shirts, sashes, and decorative fabrics. Spinning was primarily a winter activity, carried out during social gatherings known as *șezători*, from Saint Andrew's Day (marking the beginning of winter in Romanian tradition) until spring, when fieldwork resumed. These gatherings were not only productive but also social and educational spaces, where older women taught younger generations traditional techniques (Fig. 13). Natural dyes extracted from plant bark, roots, and leaves completed the production process, adding aesthetic and ecological value to the finished textiles.



**Fig. 12. House with a thatched roof and a wicker fence, typical of the Covurlui-North ethnographic subzone**  
 Source: <https://Galatcityapp.ro>



**Fig. 13. Traditional women's gathering for crafts and socializing**  
 Source: Personal archive

In this context, the valorization of both tangible and intangible heritage within the Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park represents a key pillar of sustainable rural development. Promoting cultural tourism, organizing traditional craft workshops, and reconstructing agricultural and architectural practices can simultaneously support local economies and preserve community identity. By showcasing ethnographic and architectural traditions alongside natural assets, the *Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park* stands as more than a biodiversity conservation area—it exemplifies a *model of integrated rural development*, where cultural heritage becomes a driver of environmental stewardship, cross-border cooperation, and sustainable tourism.

**Tourism Development Perspectives.** From the perspective of territorial tourism planning, the resort serves as the core of tourism activity. Through the activities carried out in resorts, tourism contributes to the systematization of the territory and to economic growth within a defined economic, legal, fiscal, and urban planning framework.

A key priority in the Lower Prut Meadow Natural Park is the sustainable valorization of its natural and cultural heritage. This approach aims to develop attractive tourism products while preserving the environment. Areas adjacent to the Danube Delta deserve special attention, given that the Delta benefits from the Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) financial mechanism, which stimulates integrated territorial development. This mechanism is anchored in the Integrated Strategy for the Sustainable Development of the Danube Delta (Government Decision no. 602/2016), particularly under Pillar II – Improving the Economy, where tourism is one of the strategic components.

The establishment of the Natura 2000 European

network in Romania, which includes the Lower Prut Meadow Natural Park, introduced essential tools for the inclusion and management of protected areas. This represents a significant step toward conserving landscapes and biodiversity, while also creating opportunities for sustainable tourism. By combining agricultural, cultural-ethnographic, and nature-based activities, the park can promote tourism that respects environmental protection principles.

**Accommodation Infrastructure.** In Galați County, the number of accommodation units represents only 0.50% of the national total, though it has increased slightly by about 8% over the last three years. Despite this growth, the number of available places has shown variable trends over the past decade.

At the end of 2014, the Lower Prut Meadow Natural Park hosted 20 tourist accommodation structures, most of them located in the city of Galați. Over the past ten years, new establishments have emerged:

- In Tulucești, a tourist guesthouse and a small-capacity hotel opened.
- In Berești, an agrotourism guesthouse was established.
- In Galați, three new guesthouses and the Brateș tourist complex were inaugurated, aiming to capitalize on the tourism potential of the lake within the natural park.

By the end of 2024, the total number of accommodation structures reached 27, showing a continuing upward trend. This increase in accommodation units has led to higher tourist reception capacity. Although variations are not significant enough to greatly impact county-level tourism, the total number of arrivals has increased in both the natural park and the county over the past decade (Fig. 14).

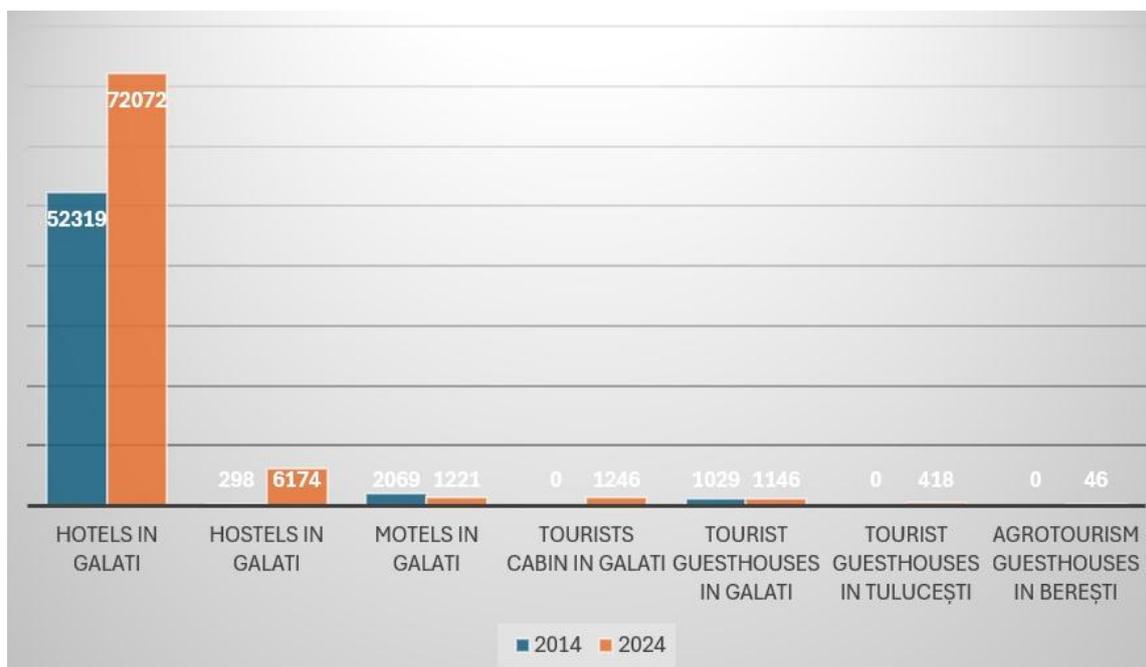


Fig. 14. Tourist Arrivals in Accommodation Units in Localities within the "Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park", Years 2014 and 2024

Source: <https://insse.ro/> – Tempo Online

In contrast, the tourism infrastructure in the Cahul District of the Republic of Moldova is more developed, attracting both domestic and foreign tourists. The region has implemented a sustainable development strategy that emphasizes:

- Use of tourism infrastructure in harmony with the natural and cultural environment.
- Minimization of fossil fuel consumption.
- Conservation of local vegetation and fauna.

Most accommodation units are concentrated in the city of Cahul, offering a higher number of beds. In rural areas of the natural park, rural and agrotourism guest-houses dominate, particularly in Văleni, Colibași, and Slobozia Mare, though with smaller capacity. Over the past ten years, this capacity has increased by 282 places (Fig. 15), reflecting a positive trend in tourism infrastructure development.

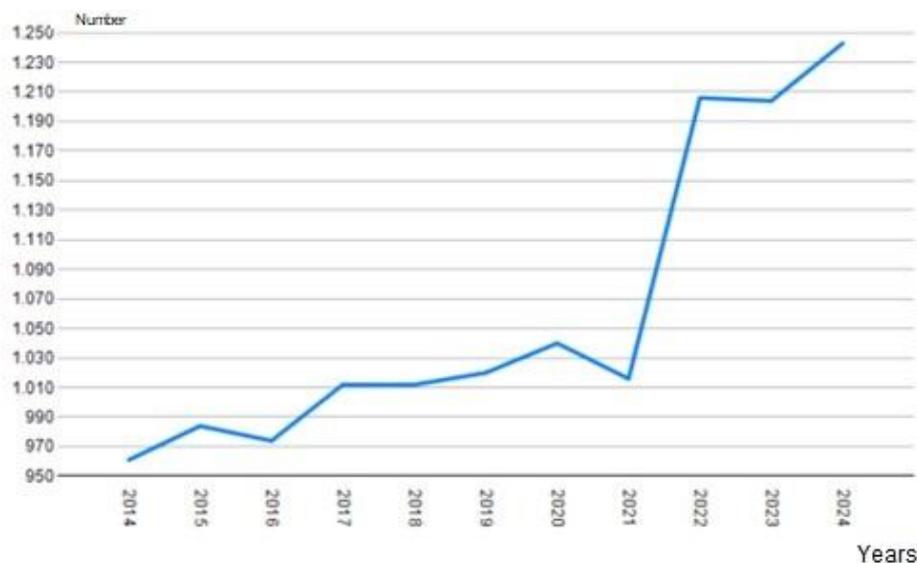


Fig. 15. Existing Capacity of Collective Tourist Accommodation Structures with Lodging Functions, Cahul District, 2014–2024 (number of places)

Source: <https://statbank.statistica.md/>

**Ecotourism.** A major perspective for sustainable tourism development in the studied area is ecotourism, also referred to as ecological or green tourism. This form of tourism prioritizes the preservation of intangible cultural heritage while allowing natural elements to be valued through local culture. For example, visitors can engage in traditional craft activities such as woodworking, willow weaving, or loom weaving. At the same time, careful monitoring of raw material collection is essential to prevent environmental overexploitation.

The Lower Prut sector has significant potential for the development of green tourism, but this requires the establishment of environmentally friendly infrastructure and strict adherence to environmental standards in both promotion and usage of tourist destinations.

Ecotourism integrates conservation, community engagement, and sustainable travel, and can be combined effectively with other tourism forms, including rural tourism, agrotourism, gastronomic tourism, wine tourism, and cycling tourism (Fig. 16). Implementing and promoting ecotourism activities requires adherence to core principles, including:

- Minimizing negative impacts on nature and culture to preserve the destination.
- Ensuring tourism development does not exceed thresholds of social, cultural, or environmental change.
- Maximizing economic benefits for local communities, businesses, and residents of natural and pro-

tected areas.

**Cultural Tourism.** From an ethnographic perspective, the localities within the natural park belong to the “Lower Danube” area, characterized by distinct cultural heritage elements shared on both banks of the Prut River. These include:

- Traditional customs: Colindul (Christmas caroling), Plugșorul (New Year’s plow ritual).
- Agricultural rituals: Păparuda, Caloianul, Lăzărelul.
- Traditional clothing and gastronomy: Including fish-based dishes.

This cultural foundation, shaped over time, has been influenced by historical events, transhumance, migration, and socio-political developments, resulting in multicultural diversity—particularly evident in the Cahul District—which today constitutes a center of cultural and touristic attraction.

Examples of cultural and ecological tourism integration include:

- The Eco Village tourist complex in Văleni, Cahul District, which hosts the museum “*Traditional Peasant Courtyard – Casa Dorului*”. This site offers ethno-folkloric workshops and activities for both locals and tourists under the concept of “unity in diversity.”
- In Galați County, a landscape-based cultural gradient is observed: the northern villages are more traditional and conservative, while southern villages reflect

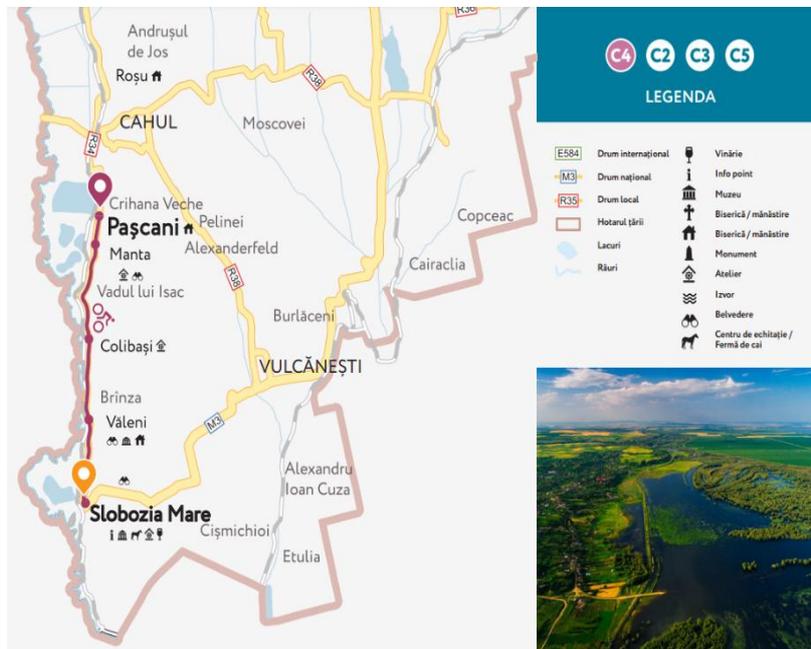
greater modern influence from the city of Galați. Despite this, strong attachment to preserving traditions, especially winter holiday customs—remains evident.

Cultural tourism is further supported by folk art museums and village collections, such as:

- The “Petru Caraman” Village Museum in Tulucești, reflecting rural life on both sides of the Prut.
- The Fishermen’s Area Museum, which organiz-

es events like “La Dunăre de Sânziene”, showcasing customs like Paparuda and Caloianul, with participation from local and regional folklore groups, including from Reni, Ukraine.

- The “Vatra cu Dor” Museum in Șivița, offering interactive workshops in weaving, pottery, and natural mask-making, particularly for student groups.



**Fig. 16. Tourist Route – “Discover the South by Bicycle” in Republic of Moldova**  
 Source: <https://moldova.travel/>

Intangible cultural heritage is transmitted across generations, continuously recreated through the interaction of communities with their environment and history. This process provides a sense of identity and continuity while promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. Key elements include customs, traditions, performances, legends, gastronomy, ethnographic items, textile-based artifacts, paintings, folk crafts, and handi-

craft workshops (Fig. 17).

Cultural tourism can be enhanced by ecotourism, particularly through local community-led initiatives that preserve and promote traditions. Integration of folk festivals and agrarian celebrations—such as Paparuda, Lăzărețul, and Caloianul—into a cross-border tourism circuit can further promote the cultural and ethnographic traditions specific to southern Moldova (Fig. 18; 19).



**Fig. 17. Folk workshop; Folk craftsman Paul Buță with students in village of Sivita, Romania**  
 Source: Cultural Association for Romanian Traditions and Customs „VATRA”,



*Fig. 18. The agrarian ritual "Lăzărelul," village of Văleni, Cahul District, Republic of Moldova*  
Source: <https://luncaprutuluidejos.md/>



*Fig. 19. The Caloian ritual, village of Odaia Manolache, Romania. Coordinator: Ecaterina Hulea*  
Source: Personal archive

**Methods.** In the context of sustainable development and the protection of both tangible and intangible heritage, questionnaires constituted a key research instrument. Their purpose was to investigate how local cultural values can be integrated into the management plans

and practices of the Lower Prut Meadow Natural Park.

The questionnaire was addressed to two main groups: residents living near the park (including communes and villages in Galați County and Cahul District) and tourists visiting the area. The aim was to capture a

diverse set of perspectives on the value and integration of cultural heritage within the natural park.

The specific objectives of the questionnaire were to:

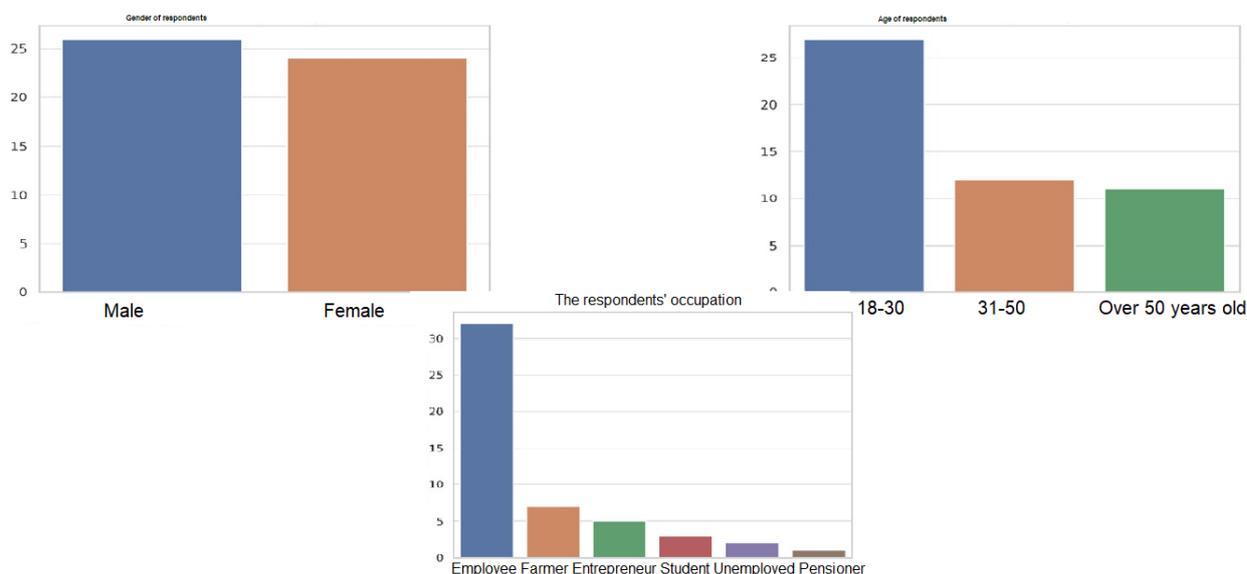
1. Identify community perceptions regarding the existing tangible and intangible cultural heritage in the park area.

2. Assess awareness of the importance of cultural preservation within a protected natural environment.

3. Gather suggestions for integrating local traditions, customs, and crafts into the park's development strategies.

4. Determine general attitudes toward cultural-ecological tourism and its perceived impact on the community.

Collected data were analyzed using both quantitative (statistical) and qualitative methods, depending on whether the questions were closed or open-ended. The results provided insights into general trends, community strengths, and gaps in public perception, forming a solid foundation for practical recommendations on integrating cultural values into the management, development, and promotion of the Lower Prut Meadow Natural Park.



*Fig. 20. Socio-economic profile of respondents*

**Results and Discussion.** The research findings reveal a high level of familiarity among respondents with the Lower Prut Meadow Natural Park, accompanied by significant interaction through visitation. This indicates a strong foundation for evaluating the park's role in the sustainable development of the region, encompassing both ecological and cultural dimensions.

Respondents generally perceive the park positively, recognizing its benefits for the local community. Frequently mentioned advantages include:

- Biodiversity conservation,
- Tourism development, and
- Creation of economic opportunities.

These responses reflect an increasing awareness of the multifunctional value of a natural park beyond its strictly conservationist role.

However, the analysis also highlights a perceived gap in the promotion and integration of local cultural values. While respondents acknowledge the presence of diverse traditions, crafts, and customs, many believe these cultural assets are not sufficiently promoted or incorporated into the park's management. Additionally, the involvement of local authorities and park administration is often seen as partial, suggesting an urgent need to strengthen institutional and community partnerships.

Respondents proposed several methods for better integrating cultural heritage into the park's development, including:

- Organizing cultural tourism routes,

- Hosting craft workshops, and
- Conducting themed cultural events.

Such initiatives could enhance regional cultural identity, attract tourists, and stimulate local economic development.

A notable finding is the strong attachment of the community to regional cultural values, which aligns with the recognition of the park's potential educational role.

This suggests favorable conditions for cultural and educational programs as part of the park's management strategies. Overall, the research indicates a generally favorable attitude toward the Lower Prut Meadow Natural Park, both in terms of its ecological contributions and its cultural potential. At the same time, the community expresses a clear desire to capitalize more effectively on existing cultural heritage.

The Lower Prut Meadow Natural Park can serve not only as a protected natural area but also as a catalyst for local cultural revitalization. A participatory, community-centered approach is recommended for the development of local and cross-border projects that actively and sustainably integrate cultural heritage.

While the involvement of authorities is perceived as insufficient, the potential for collaboration with local communities is significant. These findings indicate that sustainable development in the region cannot be achieved without the active integration of local cultural values into the park's promotion and development strategies.

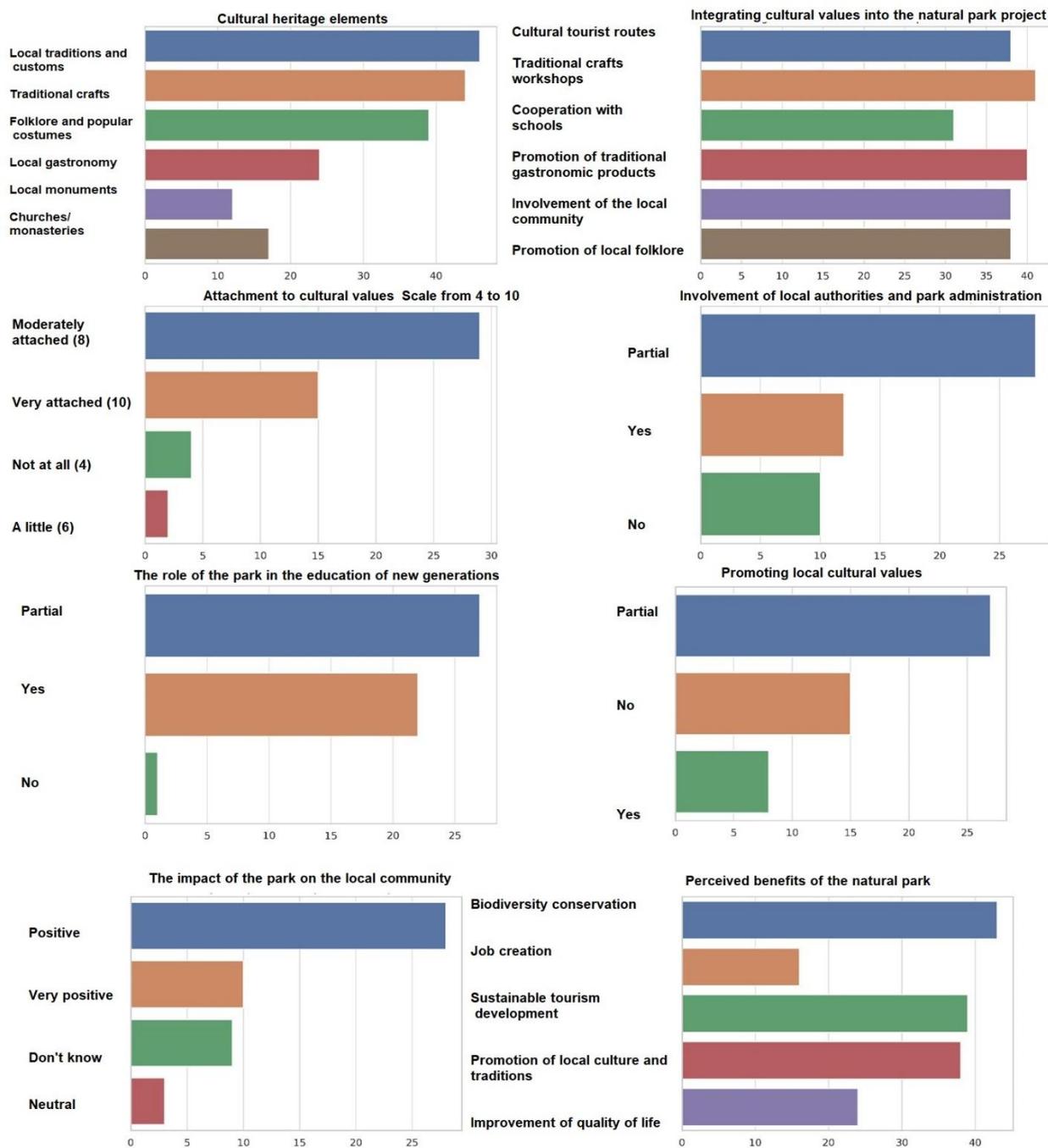


Fig. 21. Results

**Conclusions.** This research highlights a complex and promising relationship between local communities and the Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park. While the park is generally perceived positively, there is a strong sentiment that local cultural resources are insufficiently valorized, promoted, and integrated into its development strategies.

Beyond its ecological function, natural parks can play a crucial role in strengthening local cultural identity, fostering social cohesion, and supporting the local economy. The study revealed that residents possess a high level of awareness regarding natural and cultural values and express significant attachment to them. However, their actual participation in the management and promotion of these values remains limited, signaling the

need for greater openness and collaboration from authorities.

Respondents proposed a range of viable strategies for integrating cultural heritage into the park’s activities, including educational programs, tourism initiatives, cultural events, and craft workshops. These proposals demonstrate both knowledge of local potential and a clear desire for active involvement. Consequently, managing a protected area cannot rely solely on an ecological perspective; it must adopt a transdisciplinary approach that integrates culture, education, the local economy, and active participation from authorities.

In the long term, valorizing cultural heritage within the Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park could:

- Diversify the tourist experience,

- Strengthening economic sustainability,
- Reinforce a sense of local belonging and pride
- Encourage sustained community engagement.

Such a model could serve as a replicable example for other protected areas in Romania and the Republic of Moldova, where the cultural dimension is often overlooked in conservation policies.

In conclusion, for the Lower Prut Floodplain Natu-

ral Park to fully realize its potential as a driver of sustainable regional development, it is essential to move from an exclusively naturalistic vision to an integrative approach, where nature and culture mutually reinforce one another. Achieving this transition requires political will, institutional commitment, ongoing dialogue with the community, and openness to social and cultural innovation.

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## ЗАПЛАВА НИЖНЬОГО ПРУТА – ГЕОГРАФІЧНИЙ ПРОСТІР КОНВЕРГЕНЦІЇ ТА ТРАНСКОРДОННОГО ТУРИСТИЧНОГО СПІВРОБІТНИЦТВА

Це дослідження демонструє важливу роль культурних цінностей у збереженні та сталому розвитку природного парку «Заплава Нижнього Прута». Завдяки аналізу матеріальних елементів спадщини, таких як народна архітектура, та нематеріальних аспектів, включаючи місцеві традиції, звичаї та традиційні практики рибальства, дослідження ілюструє, як культурні компоненти формують та підсилюють самобутню ідентичність парку.

Використовуючи документальний аналіз, польові спостереження та опитування, проведені серед мешканців сусідніх румунських та молдовських громад, дослідження підкреслює необхідність інтеграції культурних вимірів в управління охоронюваними природними територіями. Результати дослідження показують, що ігнорування культурної спадщини може призвести до руйнування цінностей громади та послаблення місцевої ідентичності. Тому в статті наголошується на інтегрованій системі управління, яка сприяє активній участі громади, валоризації культурних ресурсів та розвитку сталого туризму. Зрештою, дослідження демонструє, що включення культурних цінностей не лише зміцнює охорону навколишнього середовища, але й сприяє соціальній згуртованості та регіональній співпраці, забезпечуючи цілісну модель управління природним парком у транскордонному контексті.

**Ключові слова:** культурний ландшафт, заплава Нижнього Прута, транскордонне співробітництво, сталий туризм, участь громади, етнографія.

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