

The restrictions in a national park help us. See how!

Restrictions have their place in a national park

Many people know why there are restrictions in a national park and agree with them. I have received various questions from tourists wanting to know why, in the Retezat National Park, they aren't allowed do certain things which are allowed in other parts. Let us take them one at a time, but first write a bit about what a national park means to us.

National parks are places in which the plants and animals living there are the masters. We, humans, are only their guests. Our first care should be not our comfort, but their protection. This is the main objective of a national park and all activities, including tourism, should lead to such a goal. We are not the hosts here; we are just visitors in their world. If we are careful about where we go and if we don't leave traces of our passing in their "house", it is OK. But are we all really doing this?

Our main concern should be protecting life forms which exist here. Besides what we are not allowed to do, there are still many things which we can do and which we can enjoy.

We're certain that many of you know that the Earth and other forms of life would be better off without us, humans. Let us think about the life which we, humans, would lead, if there would be no plants and animals left on Earth.

Below, we will answer the most common questions of tourists wanting to visit Retezat.

1.

Why can't I use a dead tree or a spruce taken down by storm to make a fire?

2.

I want to go wherever I want to and I'm not allowed. I must go only on marked routes. Is it fair? Why can't I camp wherever I want?

3.

Why must I keep my dog in a leash when going in Retezat? My dog doesn't bite.

4.

Why is grazing allowed in Retezat? It's a national park after all!

5.

Can you ride a bicycle in the Retezat NP?

Why can't I use a dead tree or a spruce taken down by storm to make a fire?

If it's dead anyway and nobody uses it, why aren't we allowed to set it on fire?

In a national park, dead trees are as important as living ones. A tree fallen to the ground is never useless. After a while, it becomes a host for thousand of forms of life which make home beneath the bark or in the wood. Gradually, the tree becomes "alive" through the various saplings and all sorts of plants growing on it. From microscopic fungus to the largest beetles, thousands of species depend on a forest's dead wood. The forest would be much poorer in forms of life, or could even disappear in the absence of dead wood ensuring its nutrients. Many birds, frogs, lizards, even mammals feed with insects living in dead wood. By destroying the wood, you destroy the insects and thus you lower, by starving, the number of creatures depending on them. Did you know that bears use dead branches and wood to line their lairs? Hollows of dead or dying trees are a home for birds and bats. Let's not be selfish and ruin the home of creatures which have a well defined purpose in nature! Moreover, the importance of dead wood for the forest is often forgotten. We often forget that the soil of mountain forests is very poor in nutrients. Here, there are no fertilizers besides leaves of annual plants, dead bodies and excrements of animals, as well as dead wood.

There have always been exaggerated claims of dead trees being infectious to others, in order to justify their exploitation. The best example against this idea is in the Retezat National Park, on the Lăpușnicului Mare valley. Here there is a several hectares cluster of spruces, sapless after the flooding in 1999. Not only did the cluster not affect the surrounding forest, but under the sapless trees there is a "crop" of spruce saplings. A forest "without sapless trees" is an almost dead one, or extremely poor in life. In order to avoid this, in the UK holes are made in inferior branches of oak trees to encourage creatures which depend on dead wood to return to these forests, together with all the other birds and mammals which have disappeared. We hope that Romania will never end up in such a situation, but in order to avoid it, we must all understand that each useless, perhaps even dangerous, camp fire can destroy entire generations of important species.

I want to go wherever I want to and I'm not allowed. I must go only on marked routes. Is it fair? Why can't I camp wherever I want?

The answer is short: because we would otherwise destroy or damage plants and

animals protected by law, and moreover, we would risk harming ourselves.

Long answer: It's nice for people when visiting or "going to be guest", as Ana, a friend from the other bank of the Prut says, not to go wherever you want, but to sit nicely in places in which you don't annoy the hosts and the household work. You don't rush into the bedroom and you don't ransack someone's larder. It's about the 7 years at home, isn't it?

When leaving a marked path in a national park, it's like rushing into someone's bedroom. A camping area in a national park is the equivalent of the "guest room" where granny accommodates guests. How do we know we aren't setting up tent on the last survivors of an endangered species? Maybe this is of no interest for the selfish, although the Earth's wellbeing should be of interest for us all. After all it is our home.

There are plenty of places in this country to be the masters! Let us allow animals and plants to be the masters of at least national parks! "If you can't do good to someone, at least don't do him evil," an old lady in the Apuseni mountains used to say. If we don't want or can't (!) respect our hosts, why are we even going to visit them?

And there's one more thing. You realize how hard it would be to be found (when and) if we stray from the marked path and get lost or, God forbid, get wounded.

Why must I keep my dog in a leash when going in Retezat?

Dogs, "first degree cousins" of wolves, have a predatory instinct. There is something in their genes making them run after other animals, usually smaller than them. That is why the cubs of wild animals can fall victim to the weekend hunters.

When they are not hunters, curiosity is what brings them to dens where cubs await their parents, or birds nests. On many occasions, deer, marmot and black goat cubs are killed by dogs. Eggs in nests are destroyed and the little ones killed. Let us not allow our dogs make the natural selection! They are intruders in mountain habitats. Natural selection is made by those in charge – wolves, bears, lynxes...

The leash stops the dog from chasing wild animals and prevents it from straying. Who can guarantee that after an hour-long disappearance our companion doesn't return bitten by some rabid animals or by an adder? It wasn't close to us and we were unable to defend or to supervise it. For its sake and your own safety, keep the dog close!

Why is grazing allowed in Retezat? It's a national park after all!

There are several important reasons for allowing grazing in parks. First of all, studies have revealed that in areas where there is no grazing many of the plant species that delight our eyesight have disappeared, replaced by high grasses and with a lower number of species. In such places there is no spectacular flower diversity as in the one in reasonably grazed pastures.

Colleagues from parks in Europe told us that after prohibiting grazing on Alpine pastures, many species have disappeared. Now they have to pay cattle owners to bring their animals on the pastures or to pay people to scythe. They've realized that the problem is not grazing, but over-grazing with an excessive number of farm animals, or incorrect grazing. That is what the park administration is trying to implement.

Let us not forget that grazing is a traditional activity in Retezat and thus accepted in a national park. Last but not least, we must keep in mind that pastures in the park are private property, they do not belong to the state. When we walk in as tourists, we enter in people's "courtyards." Here are some excerpts from the Study

on Pastures in Retezat:

*“Studies have revealed that grazing with farm animals can and must continue on pastures in the current area of the Retezat National Park, with certain severe restrictions, rationally organized and practiced. [...] On the Gemenele-Taul Negru-Sesele pastures in the Scientific Reservation, where grazing has been prohibited since 1935, in the autumn of 2003 an expansion of grasses has been recorded – especially *Calamagrostis* – which grow near the forest and which, in parallel with the expansion of mountain pine, lead to the almost complete disappearance of alpine pasture areas. [...] Recommended measures must contribute to keeping a balance between the number of animals and the pastures' support capacity (animal-environment balance), as a guarantee of plant biodiversity, environment protection, and for agricultural use.”*

Is it allowed to ride the bicycle in the Retezat NP?

On roads in the park and around it we promote the use of the bicycle. On Lapusnicului valley there is heavy bicycle traffic. There are even tourists from abroad with bicycles on cars, leaving the cars at Gura Apei and going with bicycles from there to Poiana Pelegii, on the same road. Another splendid road for bicycles, but demanding as well, is in South Retezat, Campu lui Neag-Buta.

The only problem is using bikes in the park on paths and areas where there are no roads. We learnt from others' mistakes. In certain national parks in the West, a lot of money is wasted on repairing mountain routes destroyed unintentionally by bicycle riders. It is a very hard, extremely expensive work.

What is the problem? Having narrow wheels, the bicycle puts a lot of pressure on a square centimeter of land, so that it forms narrow trenches. When the land is moist, they get deeper. Let us not forget that in Retezat the soil is moist nearly all the time. Torrents are formed in trenches and the water completes the erosion caused by bicycles.

Last but not least, we are concerned about tourist safety. The alpine area in Retezat makes it dangerous and hard to cross by bicycle. Not to mention that for the most part you have to carry the bike, not the other way around.

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