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HUMAN-ANIMAL COHABITATION AND BIOCULTURAL DIVERSITY: INSIGHTS FROM NON-AGRARIAN ROMA COMMUNITIES IN THE DANUBE REGION

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Abstract. Historical non-agrarian Roma/Gypsy communities in Europe have often come into conflict with social doctrines emphasizing household living, local attachment, and dependence, characteristics typical of the agrarian adaptations of settled communities. During 2020 – 2024, anthropological fieldwork in the Roma localities of Dolinka (Slovakia) and Mahala (Bulgaria) was conducted with the aim of analysing the identity, function, and parallels between humans and animals in terms of cohabitation, perception, and the efficient distribution of small, everyday innovations. Using coding lists, we evaluated the interpretations of Roma participants of human-animal semi-adaptations in predominantly agricultural areas. Our findings included data and case studies related to (1) the coexistence of humans and animals, (2) the traditional functions of beneficial symbiosis, and (3) the potential for heritagization. This research provides qualitative and quantitative evidence of human-animal interactions, demonstrating that the cultural identity of Roma communities is intricately processed and plays an important role in the heritagization and preservation of biocultural diversity.

Keywords: coexistence, humans, animals, Roma communities, non-agrarian adaptations, preservation of diversity.

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INTRODUCTION

The formation of relationships between humans and the environment incorporates knowledge in addition to habits and strategies of action that reflect periods that are not considered that distant in terms of anthropology. Recent eras of intensive agriculture, industrialization, and the subsequent acceleration of the Anthropocene have significantly shaped the societies arising from this development. Historical non-agricultural and non-industrial adapted communities in Europe have come into conflict with the social doctrines of permanent local habitation, as well as the strict agricultural and industrial structuring of time and the productive specialization of Europeans characteristic of the 20th century. During this period, a growing European intolerance towards communities that did not adopt the dominant strategies of agricultural or industrial subsistence also became evident[1]. The intensification of general norms surrounding resource and environmental ownership marginalized originally migrant groups such as the Roma, Gypsies, Sinti, and Travellers. Until then, these groups represented semi-adapted communities existing on the edges of the agroindustrial colonized world. Instead, Roma communities adapted to economic niches involving "marginal" opportunities, engaging in flexible, non-wage labour and relying on narrow profit margins from multiple sources.

Although Roma have historically served as suppliers of diverse services to non-Roma populations, they have also been subjected to distrust, intolerance, and

[1] HANCOCK, Ian F. *We are the Romani people*. Hatfield: Univ of Hertfordshire Press, 2002. ISBN 1902806190.

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animosity since their arrival on the European continent in the 13th to 14th centuries[2]. Their adaptations can thus be viewed as twofold: to the natural environment and to the social one of the settled (and often hostile) majority society. All subsequent Roma adaptations should be analysed within this dual framework: economic, as outlined in the article by Gmelch[3], and the persecution and discrimination imposed by majority European societies. Culturally distinctive and marginalized groups generally maintain an ethnic or religious endogamy, driven both by segregation imposed by the majority society and by an internal desire to preserve the "intactness" of the community[4]. Endogamous Roma communities today frequently identify themselves differently internally but maintain cultural distinctiveness in both Europe and America[5]. This distinctiveness is evident, among other aspects, in their relationship with nature and the environment, which is minimally influenced by agriculture or industrialization and often reflected in their connection to animals. Semi-adapted Roma and semidomesticated animals can be perceived as archetypal figures of a preindustrial era, reminiscent of the European community before the full realization of industrial colonization.

This research was conducted with the aim of classifying types of adaptations to better understand the cultural implications of adaptive behaviours, including the plasticity and diversity of human-animal coexistence, territorial nomadism as distributive convoys of knowledge, and the impacts of overuse or neglect, such as the loss of heritage, biodiversity, or wildlife. The work also examined general domestication parallelisms in human-animal cohabitation. The central focus of the article is the evolving coexistence and identity of humans and animals in localities within the context of the Danube region. This region refers to the geographical area surrounding the Danube River, Europe's second-longest river, which has historically served as a trade route and cultural link between Western, Central, and Eastern Europe, resulting in a melting pot of languages, traditions, and ethnic groups. It

[2] *Ibidem*.
[3] GMELCH, Sharon Bohn. Groups that don't want in: Gypsies and other artisan, trader, and entertainer minorities. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 1986, vol. 15, pp. 307–330. ISSN 0084-6570.
[4] JAKOUBKOVÁ BUDILOVÁ, Lenka. Endogamy between ethnicity and religion. Marriage and boundary construction in Voyvodovo (Bulgaria), 1900–1950. *The History of the Family*, 2020, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 46–69. ISSN 1081-602X. Available from: https://doi.org/1080/1081602X.2019.1641132.
[5] OKELY, Judith. *The traveller-gypsies*. Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 1983. ISBN 0521288703; GAY Y BLASCO, Paloma. Picturing 'Gypsies' interdisciplinary approaches to Roma representation. *Third Text*, 2008, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 297–303. ISSN 0952-8822. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/09528820802051978; MILLER, Carol. *The church of cheese: Gypsy ritual in the American heyday*. Boston: Gemma, 2009. ISBN 1934848611; SUTHERLAND, Anne H. *Roma: Modern American Gypsies*. Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2016. ISBN 1478633794.

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represents a crucial area for studies in environmental sustainability, cross-cultural interaction, and regional development.

We explored the native taxonomy of animals, which, while conceptually reductive, is highly mythologized. Key methods for this recognition included the cultural transmission of native taxonomies, pathways, and biases, as well as examining the effects of coevolution between culture and nature on cognition, perception, and environmental behaviour, and analysing the dynamic processes of cultural change, including the potential for guided adaptation[6]. Our argument emphasizes the importance of parallel lines of human adaptation to change, particularly in the domestication of animals. From the perspective of preserving biocultural diversity, our intention is to clarify how cultural evolutionary dynamics can inform policy and practice, highlighting their relevance for sustainable cultural and environmental stewardship.

METHODOLOGY, FIELDWORK, AND RESEARCH METHODS

Work in the anthropological field often resembles the image of a nomad longing for a reciprocal transaction. This analogy emerges because, to develop understanding, the researcher must observe numerous particulars in various places within an infinitely changing temporal context. The researcher's role demands an acute awareness of the pitfalls of subjectivity. The main methodological approach for this fieldwork was to document the daily happenings of the local Roma community, with a focus on understanding and recording everyday activities. Our ambition was to conduct research in the environment of Roma dwellings, exploring the private spaces of the participants. This approach reflects our goal of observing how relations of coexistence are shaped through daily activities and how cultural phenomena are enacted on a day-to-day basis. Descriptive observation was the primary method used to capture empirical reality[7]. This approach, characterized by structuralist precision, allowed for detailed analysis, even of highly symbolic systems of communication. The intention was to document the conventions, habits, or even residual traces of the everyday lives of the Roma. From the observed daily rhythms of the community, individual instances stood out, enriching our understanding of shared experiences[8].

[6] HOWARD, Patricia L.; PECL, Gretta T. Introduction: Autochthonous human adaptation to biodiversity change in the Anthropocene. *Ambio*, 2019, vol. 48, no. 12, pp. 1389–1400. ISSN 0044-7447.

[7] LECOMPTE, Margaret D.; SCHENSUL, Jean J. *Analysis and interpretation of ethnographic data: A mixed methods approach*. Lanham: Rowman Altamira, 2012. ISBN 0759122083.

[8] SCHENSUL, Jean J.; LECOMPTE, Margaret D. *Ethnography in action: A mixed methods approach*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. ISBN 0759122121.

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To fully recognize the variety of everyday cues, we subsequently conducted several interviews with respondents whose cases seemed significant for the study. The deep understanding of the lives of individuals presented its own methodological challenges. To balance the methods employed, we follow a methodological sequence, which emphasizes learning through exposure to and participation in the routine activities of participants in the research setting[9].

Between 2020 and 2024, the authors were part of several research teams in the social sciences, including ethnology, social anthropology, and human ethology, focused on studying coexistence and communication in local communities. These experiences provided clarity on communication strategies and behaviours, improving our ability to explain the diverse contexts of cultures. The ethnicity of the Roma emerged as a specific local context, facilitating a convergence of viewpoints on human-animal coexistence through the triangulation of perspectives across disciplines. The local community creates systems of patterns that allow the better understanding of meanings of coexistence. To illustrate this, we compare two settlements, Dolinka and Mahala (the names were anonymized in line with ethical anthropological principles), where only Roma populations reside.

LOCAL SEMI-ADAPTATION OF ROMA

Roma communities have long fascinated anthropologists/ethnologists in Europe and America, an ethnic/cultural minority largely explained by the expansion of their migratory groups, particularly over the last two centuries[10]. In earlier literature, Carpathian Roma were often likened to archaic and preliterate societies characterized by the oral transmission of knowledge through direct contact[11]. The incomplete adaptation of Roma communities to the agricultural and industrial cultures of Euro-American societies, combined with discrimination by the majority, has driven the development of alternative strategies for the survival of Roma[12]. The search for alternatives to agricultural and industrial dependence has led some authors to compare Roma culture to that of the "bricoleurum"[13]. This concept highlights the

[9] SCHENSUL, Stephen L., SCHENSUL, Jean J.; LECOMPTE, Margaret Diane. *Essential ethnographic methods: Observations, interviews, and questionnaires*. Walnut Creek: Rowman Altamira, 1999. ISBN 0761991441.
[10] GAY Y BLASCO, Paloma. *Op. cit.*; BUDILOVÁ, Lenka; JAKOUBEK, Marek. Anthropological fieldwork, site and Roma communities: Roma/Gypsies in the Czech and Slovak Republic. *Anthropological Notebooks*. 2009, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 5–14. ISSN 1408-032X; SUTHERLAND, Anne H. *Op. cit*.; STEWART, Michael. *The time of the Gypsies*. London: Routledge, 2019. ISBN 0429495803.
[11] HÜBSCHMANNOVÁ, Milena. Několik poznámek k hodnotám Romů. In: *Romové v České republice 1945*. Praha: Sociopress, 1999, pp. 16–66. ISBN 8086038394.
[12] GMELCH, Sharon Bohn. *Op. cit*.; STEWART, Michael. *Op. cit.*
[13] OKELY, Judith. *Op. cit*.

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apparent flexibility of Roma life – their ability to act, think, and improvise continuously in the present – as a response to the accelerating pace and external stimuli of modern life[14]. Jakoubek and Budilová[15] systematically explored the environmental anthropology of Roma communities, shedding light on their pre-agrarian and preindustrial relationships with nature. Like all human actions, these relationships are marked by contradictions and positives. A central theme of this relationship with nature is the contrasting worldviews of the two main actors in European adaptation: peasants (the majority) and travellers (Roma). The often hostile relationship between these groups resembles the tensions between agricultural and transhumant shepherd communities in the Balkans[16]. Both groups are deeply convinced of the correctness of their respective strategies, but inevitably interact, allocate energy to different activities, and structure their daily routines and long-term plans differently.

For peasant communities, future planning, hierarchical organization, and timekeeping strategies evolve through increasing abstraction, such as naming processes and preserving historical memory. This tendency, described by Komárek[17], enables the preservation of repetitive patterns from the past, including traditional landscapes and wildlife, as a foundation for their civilization. In contrast, Roma communities maintain a distinct relationship with flora and fauna, often defined by cultural notions of cleanliness and utility. Animals that serve practical purposes – such as transport, trade, magic, or healing – are considered "clean", while livestock requiring breeding are generally viewed as "unclean". However, this classification does not always determine consumption practices. Their adaptations have also shaped their visual perception of the environment, landscape, and nature, with an emphasis on the immediate availability of life's necessities[18]. Roma have an archetypal Indo-European relationship with wildlife, perceiving the wild forest as a space where human influence is weak and the will of the supernatural is fully expressed. Attributes of wild nature are often highly valued, and traits of "wildness" in domestic animals are associated with prestige as well as practical uses in medicine and healing. The Roma term for the wild forest, *jungalo* (meaning ugly, unclean, wicked, mean, snake,

[14] ACTON, Thomas; GALLANT, David; VONDRÁČEK, Petr. *Romové–ohrožené kultury*. Praha: Svojtka & Co, 2000. ISBN 8071975793.
[15] BUDILOVÁ, Lenka; JAKOUBEK, Marek. Mýtus o přírodních Romech. *EkoList*, 2004, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 14–17. ISSN 1211-1431.
[16] SANDERS, Irwin T. The nomadic peoples of Northern Greece: Ethnic puzzle and cultural survival. *Social Forces*, 1954, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 122–129. ISSN 0037-7732; BUDILOVÁ, Lenka. *Od krevní msty k postsocialismu: vývoj antropologického zájmu o Balkán*. Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2020. ISBN 8073254905.
[17] KOMÁREK, Stanislav. *Nature and culture: The world of phenomena and the world of interpretation*. München: Lincom Europa, 2009. ISBN 3929075849.
[18] HÜBSCHMANNOVÁ, Milena. *Op. cit.*; KOMÁREK, Stanislav. *Op. cit.*

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or devil), reflects a symbolic space of chaos, savagery, and mystical forces capable of both helping and harming the community.

ROMA IN EASTERN EUROPE

The Roma community is currently one of the largest ethnic minorities, with an estimated population that could range from 10 million to 12 million people spread unevenly across Europe[19]. The largest populations are in Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Serbia, and Slovakia. They undoubtedly form a significant part of the Eastern European population and have, over the centuries, influenced various social and cultural aspects of life in many of the countries where they have settled. Despite the substantial efforts of various authors in anthropological[20], linguistic[21], or genetic[22] fields to explore the historical, social, and ethnic background of the Roma in Europe, numerous challenges remain in creating a comprehensive account of their history. This is due either to the lack of sources documenting Roma life since their migration from India or the difficulty in defining the Roma identity, which arises from its complex mixture of diverse cultural traditions, languages, and histories, as well as the varying experiences of marginalization and assimilation across different regions.

However, the earliest evidence of mass settlement of Roma-like groups in Europe dates back to the 14th century, when a significant number of Roma arrived in Bulgaria alongside the Ottoman invaders[23]. There is also evidence that Roma settlements began to emerge on Slovak lands during the same period[24]. Later, the history and development of Roma communities varied significantly in different regions of Eastern Europe. In Bulgarian lands, the processes of settling in towns and villages occurred among some segments of the Gypsy population in the Ottoman Empire from the 15th to the 19th century, while others continued to live as nomads and

[19] ENA, Giacomo Francesco; AIZPURUA-IRAOLA, Julen; FONT-PORTERIAS, Neus et al. Population genetics of the European Roma – a review. *Genes*, 2022, vol. 13, no. 11, art. 2068. ISSN 2073-4425. Available from: https://doi.org/10.3390/genes13112068.
[20] IOVITĂ, Radu P.; SCHURR, Theodore G. Reconstructing the origins and migrations of diasporic populations: The case of the European Gypsies. *American anthropologist*, 2004, vol. 106, no. 2, pp. 267–281. ISSN 0002-7294. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2004.106.2.267.
[21] MATRAS, Yaron. *Romani: A linguistic introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. ISBN 1139433245.
[22] FRASER, Angus M. *The Gypsies*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992. ISBN 9780631159674; MENDIZ-ABAL, Isabel; LAO, Oscar; MARIGORTA, Urko M. et al. Reconstructing the population history of European Romani from genome-wide data. *Current Biology*, 2012, vol. 22, no. 24, pp. 2342–2349. ISSN 0960-9822. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2012.10.039.
[23] GAY Y BLASCO, Paloma. *Op. cit*.
[24] CROWE, David. *A history of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. ISBN 978-1-137-10596-7.

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maintained traditional trades[25]. In the Slovakian areas of Hungary, Roma settlers worked as castle musicians and metalworkers, while a growing number served in the armies of Hungary's monarchs. The different attitudes of Eastern European countries towards Roma people during the Second World War highlight the diverse historical trajectories of this minority. For example, Roma in Bulgaria were not required to be transported to concentration camps, whereas many Roma in Slovakia were sent and died during massacres that occurred in Slovakia.

In general, socialist governments in Eastern European countries implemented policies designed to assimilate Roma individuals into the larger society. In Czechoslovakia, the official policy towards Roma was labelled "social integration" and "acculturation". However, in practice, this approach was aimed at pushing the Roma population towards eventual assimilation[26]. In Bulgaria, as in Slovakia, members of the Roma community faced marginalization and discrimination. This trend culminated in 1984 – 1985 when the Bulgarian government launched its largest campaign to forcibly change the non-Slavic names of Bulgarian citizens of Turkish and Roma descent[27]. After political changes and the collapse of communist regimes, Roma communities in Eastern Europe gained the opportunity to freely express their identity and organize cultural events showcasing their traditional music, dance, and customs. However, the transition to a democratic system introduced new challenges for Roma communities, including discrimination in employment, education, and housing. Today, Roma in Slovakia form a diverse community, with variations in appearance, language, and culture. It is estimated that over 90 per cent belong to the "Rumungri" (Hungarian Roma), while the remainder consists of the "Olašski" (Wallachian Roma or Vlax Roma) and a small number of Sinti.

The heterogeneity and identity of the Roma population in Bulgaria is even more complicated by processes of constructions of Bulgarian identity. Many modern Bulgarians, as noted by[28], sought to distance themselves from the Ottoman Empire, which they perceived as a symbol of Asia's decadence and backwardness. To achieve this, they focused on constructing a Slavic identity and aligning with the ideals of Indo-European culture. Roma, with their cultural and "ethnic" heterogeneity,

[25] MARUŠIAIKOVA, Elena; POPOV, Veselin. The Bulgarian Gypsies–Searching their Place in the Society. *Balkanologie. Revue d'études pluridisciplinaires*, 2000, vol. 4, no. 2. ISSN 1295-2826.
[26] MARUSHIAKOVA, Elena; POPOV, Vesselin. State policies under communism. *Factsheets on Roma History*. 2008. (Preprint).
[27] MARUŠIAKOVA, Elena; POPOV, Veselin. The Bulgarian Gypsies...; DANOVA-ROUSSINOVA, Savelina. Roma in Bulgaria: Human Rights and State Policies. *OSCE Yearbook 2001*, 2001, pp. 281–292. ISSN 1613-7369. (Preprint).
[28] DETCHEV, Stefan. Who are the Bulgarians? Race, Science and Politics in Fin-de siècle Bulgaria. In: *We, the People: Politics of National Peculiarity in Southeastern Europe*. Diana MISHKOVA (ed.). Budapest: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 237–270. ISBN 9789637326653.

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particularly their multilingualism[29], were viewed as an empirical obstacle to the ideological construction of an ideal Bulgarian "nation". Consequently, barriers emerged during the last century between those considered "ideal" Bulgarians and those perceived as "others", such as Turks, Pomaks (Bulgarians converted to Islam who retained the Bulgarian language), Armenians, Greeks, Jews, and, ultimately, Roma[30]. In this context, Roma individuals who identified themselves as members of a specific community and locality were more likely to emphasize their connection to particular places and their inherent aspects: nature, as well as landscapes and wild and domesticated animals. These elements held significant value in their language as well as their customs and shared memories of a collectively lived past. As Peicheva[31] observed, reactions against official ideologies within local communities can be interpreted as attempts to assert a distinct "cultural identity". The central question of our research was: how is the presumed "identity" of the Roma currently constructed within the historical symbiosis of animal perception? It should be noted that claims about the nomadic character of the Roma often presume their close coexistence with animals, an assumption extensively discussed by anthropologists. These discussions are frequently associated with concepts such as "tradition" and "authenticity".

HUMAN-ANIMAL RELATIONSHIPS AMONG ROMA

Due to the uncertainty surrounding the exact origin of the Roma in India, there is almost no evidence of their social and cultural background during their time in their ancestral homeland. The situation is further complicated by the fact that traditionally the Gypsies did not produce written documents or scriptures, relying instead on oral tradition to pass information down through generations. Any attempt to reconstruct human-animal relationships risks falling into unverified assumptions. Since Gypsies lack written records documenting their migration from northern India through the Middle East and into Europe, most of what is known about them relies on historical accounts authored by outsiders. These often portray a highly distorted view of their lifestyle, marked by a lack of understanding of the Gypsy population, making it a challenging task to reconstruct an accurate and worthy representation of their culture. Following the migration of Gypsy communities from the Indian subcontinent to regions including Persia and Armenia, the evidence of their lifestyles, occupations, and presence therefore remains inconclusive.

[29] BACHTIN, Mikhail. *Estetika slovesnogo tvorchestva*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1979. UI 5900098.
[30] GAL, Susan; IRVINE, Judith T. *Signs of difference: Language and ideology in social life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. ISBN 1108680704.
[31] ПЕНЧЕВА, Л. 'Цигания' и българската идентичност (Аксиологически аспекти). *Български фолклор*, 1998, 24, № 1–2, с. 132–141. ISSN 0323-9861.

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Information about the Gypsies became more abundant during their time in the Byzantine Empire. From this early period, a fragmented picture emerged linking Gypsies, often referred to as *Athinganoi*, to various animals such as bears, snakes, and horses. A poem from that time, originally intended as a satire on the animal world, reveals that Gypsies were known as bear keepers and, additionally, they frequently worked as snake charmers and animal trainers in general[32]. It would be incorrect to assume that these were their only occupations; rather, it highlights the association of Gypsies with roles such as bear keepers, snake charmers, fortune tellers, and soothsayers – professions largely linked to the occult and black magic. However, evidence from Balkan countries suggests that animal training has long been a tradition among Gypsies, particularly among the eastern orthodox Romanian *Ursari* (derived from the word *urs*, meaning bear). Due to their semi-sedentary lifestyle (active season travelling), Gypsy bear trainers wandered the countryside during the warmer months and performed various tricks to entertain audiences. They were not confined to specific locations, visiting villages and cities whenever markets or public gatherings occurred. By the late 19th century, Bulgarian and Romanian bear trainers were noted in many parts of the world, including the Near East and North Africa[33]. In Poland, the 18th-century town of Šmorgovie gained fame for its bear academy. Gypsy trainers would spend years training young bears to perform tricks, and these trained bears were then showcased throughout Europe. This tradition continued until the 19th century, when bears became increasingly scarce[34].

Similarly, Balkan Roma people trained monkeys for various performances, such as picking coins, playing instruments, and dancing. These trained monkeys were often taken on tours throughout Europe, including Poland and France[35]. Typically, they travelled in small groups consisting of a few families, including children who not only participated in their parents' performances but were also involved in training the animals from a young age. The bond between the animal and the humans was remarkable, as bear cubs routinely lived together in the same household. The bear was raised as a member of the family, a connection further emphasized by the personal names given to the animal[36]. Using musical performances, typically

[32] SOULIS, George C. The Gypsies in the Byzantine Empire and the Balkans in the late Middle Ages. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 1961, vol. 15, pp. 141–165.
[33] MARUSHIAKOVA, Elena; POPOV, Vesselin. Bear-trainers in Bulgaria (tradition and contemporary situation). *Ethnologia Bulgarica*. 1998, 1, pp. 106–116. ISSN 1310-5213; KOCÓJ, Ewa. Ignorance versus degradation? The profession of Gypsy bear handlers and management of inconvenient intangible cultural heritage. Case study–Romania (I). *Zarządzanie w kulturze*, 2016, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 263–283. ISSN 2084-3976.
[34] HORVÁTHOVÁ, Emilia. *Cigáni na Slovensku*. Bratislava: Slovenská akadémia vied, 1964. ISSN 1848-865X.
[35] *Ibidem*.
[36] KOCÓJ, Ewa. *Op. cit.*

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featuring a tambourine, bears were trained from a young age to perform tricks and a typical form of dance. To control their movements, the owners pierced the nose with a metal needle to attach a chain or rope for easier handling. According to Marushiakova and Popov[37], during the socialist era, the *Ursari* shifted their focus, working primarily with animals in newly established cooperative farms, while performances with bears and monkeys became a tradition carried on mainly by the older generation.

Cave paintings found in various locations indicate that horses held a special place in human societies thousands of years ago[38]. Given the historically nomadic lifestyle of many Roma communities, it is surprising that horses held a significant place in their lives, being regarded as noble and pure animals. Even today, it is common to find images of horses displayed alongside family photographs in many Roma households. Although cultural and dietary practices vary among different Roma subgroups, the consumption of horsemeat has not traditionally been a common practice. In some economically underdeveloped areas of Europe, Roma communities continue to rely on traditional horse-drawn carts as a primary mode of transportation. Over the centuries, European texts have consistently highlighted horse-trading as a significant occupation among Roma communities. Their attitude towards horses, and animals in general, is reflected in some of the ethnonyms linked to traditional Roma occupations. For example, the *Lovari/Lovara* (horse-dealers), a subgroup of Roma people whose name was derived from Hungarian, were known for their involvement in horse-trading.

Roma people were skilled healers, and this expertise extended to animal care. In addition to tending to their own horses, they often provided veterinary services to local farmers, receiving both goods and money in return. The available documents highlight that in Slovak regions horses played crucial role in the Gypsy lifestyle. However, not every Roma family could afford horses, which were quite expensive. This economic restriction frequently led Roma people to resort to horse theft, and royal decrees from as early as the 17th century accused Roma people of horse theft[39]. Horses played a crucial role in enabling the nomadic economy of the Roma people and their economic significance is underscored in Stewart's analysis. In his study of the Vlax Roma horse trade in socialist Hungary, he highlights the distinctive role of horse-dealing in the economic behaviours of the Roma people[40]. Horse markets were a longstanding tradition in Berlin, contributing to the city's economic vitality until

[37] *Ibidem.*
[38] CLUTTON-BROCK, Juliet. *Horse power: a history of the horse and the donkey in human societies*. London: Natural History Museum Publications, 1992. ISBN 0565011677.
[39] HORVÁTHOVÁ, Emilia. *Op. cit.*
[40] STEWART, Michael. *The time of the Gypsies*…

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the 1930s. These markets also functioned as social spaces where Roma and non-Roma Berliners could interact and exchange[41].

Research among English Gypsies revealed that Roma people generally avoid contact with dogs and cats, considering them unclean. Images of these animals are also banned from their homes. Similarly, frogs and snakes are linked with misfortune and evil, while peacocks are associated with the evil eye. Therefore, images of these animals are not found in Roma households. In contrast, rabbits, hares, and hedgehogs are considered edible, but only after their fur and, in the case of hedgehogs, their spines are completely removed[42]. The Roma in Poland and former Czechoslovakia shared similar beliefs about the cleanliness of animals. Like their counterparts elsewhere, they consider cats, dogs, and snakes to be unclean. On the contrary, hedgehogs are seen as relatively clean and are even consumed[43].

HUMAN-ANIMAL COHABITATION IN ANTHROPOLOGY: EVIDENCE

We conducted research on human-animal cohabitation in Dolinka and Mahala, as well as among those living a short distance outside these settlements. The Roma settlements (*romane gava*, *mahala*) represent a common settlement unit among Roma communities in the Danube regions. These settlements, whether permanent or seasonal, are generally located outside the majority population villages, a placement historically influenced by discriminatory and segregationist measures, such as those enacted during the Second World War, and in many cases even earlier[44]. In the cases where settlements were integrated into the locality, Roma communities typically inhabited the peripheries of historical settlements. These dwellings were most often one- or two-room structures built through self-help efforts[45]. The Dolinka and Mahala settlements, located outside the central village, have a population of approximately 250 to 500 Roma. In 2020, the authors conducted the first contextual interviews in the Dolinka settlement to explore perceptions of the environment and nature (Figure 1). The hypothesis emerged that the Roma community in Dolinka and Mahala does

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not associate its coexistence with the environment with a fixed, defined, and managed physical space. Instead, it is tied to an imagined one where relationships can form, objects of interest can be encountered, and cooperation can occur. To test this hypothesis, a survey was conducted to examine the stability of collective memory (n=67). This collective testing helped identify specific human-animal relationships in both past and present contexts. Animals were recognized as significant actors in both the physical and spiritual realms. The boundaries between past and present often blurred, with actors from remembered events merging into real time and space.

Fig. 1. *Fieldwork photo collecting survey data, Dolinka (2024).*

Fig. 2. *Fieldwork photo collecting survey data, Mahala, 2024.*

Direct observations of daily life revealed challenges in recognizing the precise nature of human-animal interactions and the roles animals play in daily life. Domesticated animals, which were the primary focus of observation, appeared to have shifted away from their original utilitarian purposes. Instances of animals bred for meat, draught work, or protection were only observed sporadically. Although a significant portion of the male population works in the forest daily, narratives about wild animals were rare. Between 2023 and 2024, research efforts were directed towards documenting baseline data on human-animal coexistence in the Roma populations of Dolinka and Mahala (Figure 2, Figure 3).

Fig. 3. *Traditional horse drawn cart, Mahala, 2024.*

The first step involved creating a list of common wild and domestic animals in the area, along with their names in the Romani language used in daily communication. We hypothesized that the

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stability of native animal taxonomy is directly related to the frequency of human-animal interactions. In Dolinka we interviewed 67 participants in all age groups (children under 10: n=16; pre-productive age: n=19; productive age: n=18; post-productive age: n=14) to examine the taxonomy in the Romani language. Eighteen animals were identified as more resilient in their coexistence with humans, including 10 domestic and eight wild species, which appeared to hold the most functional importance (Table 1). These animals were associated with four primary functions: dietary (DIET), mythological (MYTH), protective (TABOO), and healing (MED). All participants provided their informed consent and rated the importance of existence with these animals on a scale of 1 to 6.

Statistics

		cattle	horse	pig	sheep	goat	rabbit	chicken	goose	dog	cat	w.boar	b.bear	r.deer	wolf	hedgehog	h.mouse	b.rat	e.adder
N	Valid	67	67	67	67	67	67	67	67	67	67	67	67	67	67	67	67	67	67
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		4,8657	5,6567	4,6418	3,7910	1,6119	1,0597	2,9851	3,2388	5,6866	4,7164	3,8657	4,0000	1,4925	,9403	2,0299	1,4627	,7164	,7910
Median		5,0000[a]	5,6875[a]	4,6557[a]	3,8571[a]	1,4912[a]	,9184[a]	2,8788[a]	3,4000[a]	5,6970[a]	4,6607[a]	4,1364[a]	4,4231[a]	1,4583[a]	,7660[a]	1,7000[a]	1,0714[a]	,5660[a]	,7500[a]
Mode		5,00	6,00	5,00	4,00	1,00	1,00	2,00	4,00	6,00	4,00	5,00	5,00	1,00	,00	1,00	,00	,00	1,00
Std. Deviation		1,05738	,56548	,68978	1,12192	,85201	1,04273	1,28502	1,36059	,49875	,73456	1,32454	1,74946	,99046	1,05716	1,74052	1,51085	,95037	,70791
Variance		1,118	,320	,476	1,259	,726	1,087	1,651	1,851	,249	,540	1,754	3,061	,981	1,118	3,029	2,283	,903	,501
Range		5,00	2,00	4,00	4,00	3,00	5,00	4,00	6,00	2,00	2,00	5,00	5,00	5,00	4,00	6,00	5,00	4,00	2,00
Minimum		1,00	4,00	2,00	2,00	1,00	,00	1,00	,00	4,00	4,00	1,00	1,00	,00	,00	,00	,00	,00	,00
Maximum		6,00	6,00	6,00	6,00	4,00	5,00	5,00	6,00	6,00	6,00	6,00	6,00	5,00	4,00	6,00	5,00	4,00	2,00
Sum		326,00	379,00	311,00	254,00	108,00	71,00	200,00	217,00	381,00	316,00	259,00	268,00	100,00	63,00	136,00	98,00	48,00	53,00
Percentiles	25	4,2209[b]	5,1641[b]	4,1066[b]	2,8654[b]	[c]	,2347[b]	1,8548[b]	2,3519[b]	5,1894[b]	4,0625[b]	2,9688[b]	2,3421[b]	,6714[b]	,0532[b]	,5968[b]	,2500[b]	[c]	,1518[b]
	50	5,0000	5,6875	4,6557	3,8571	1,4912	,9184	2,8788	3,4000	5,6970	4,6607	4,1364	4,4231	1,4583	,7660	1,7000	1,0714	,5660	,7500
	75	5,6979	.	5,2976	4,7308	2,1800	1,7375	4,1296	4,2969	.	5,3919	4,8977	5,5139	2,2419	1,7500	3,3214	2,5357	1,3889	1,4643

a. Calculated from grouped data.

b. Percentiles are calculated from grouped data.

c. The lower bound of the first interval or the upper bound of the last interval is not known. Some percentiles are undefined.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics of eighteen animals identified in the research.*

The perception of the animals (M ± SD) was analysed through interviews, during which various motivations, strategies, and stories related to coexistence among Roma were recorded and subsequently subjected to content analysis using *Atlas.ti*. The participants provided the most information and reported the highest frequency of interactions for cattle, geese, horses, and boars (Figure 4). In particular, only cattle were associated with daily physical encounters, while the horse emerged as a symbolic animal that all generations linked with ideas and aspirations. The bear was identified as the most well-known wild animal, although its classification may have been influenced by contemporary social discourse surrounding its perceived overpopulation. Content analysis was utilized to identify instances of co-existence within the interviews, with secondary attention given to recognizing the cultural, social, and historical contexts in which human-animal coexistence occurs.

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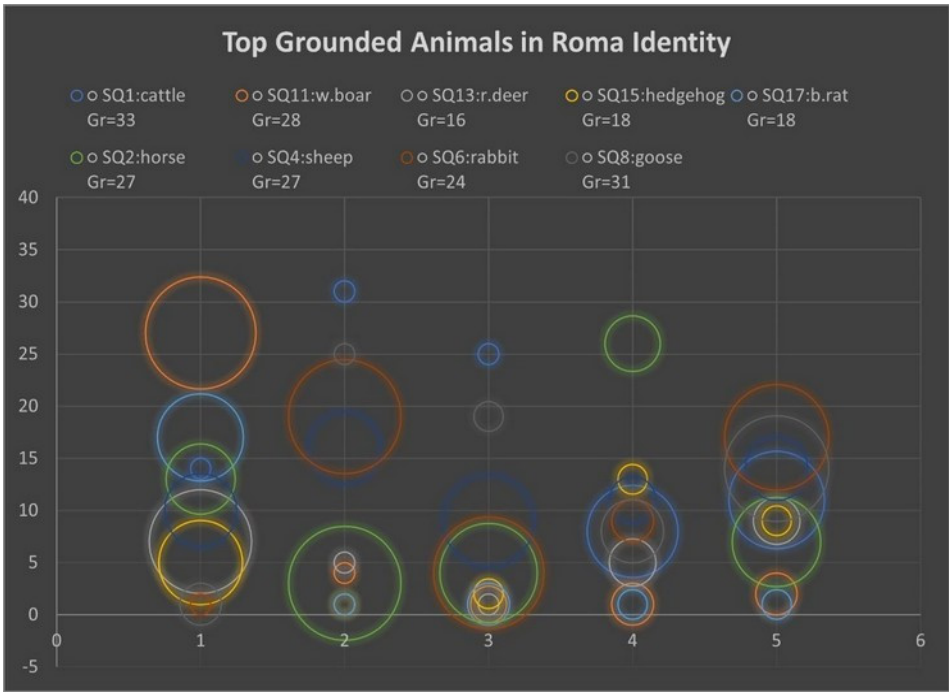

Fig. 4. *Grounding of animals in the collective memory of Roma in the local research localities of Mahala and Dolinka.*
a.) The header of the chart enumerates the nine animals that are generally most grounded in the collective memory of Roma.
b.) The colour of the circle indicates the animal's evidence in the five tracked indicators: x = 1 AFRAID, 2 EAT, 3 HEALING, 4 NICE, 5 PROTECT. Animals with 0 records are not shown in the graph. The size of the circle shows the frequency of anchoring of the animal in the indicator.
c.) The y-axis shows the % conformity of probands by indicator.

FINDINGS: BINARY SYSTEM OF ANIMAL CLASSIFICATION

In our research, we initially worked with a binary division of animals into domestic and wild categories. However, within Roma perceptions, a more nuanced classification emerged, consisting of three binary groups based on key criteria: vitality (alive/dead), ritual purity (clean/unclean), and behavioural freedom (free/tethered). These categories are fluid, allowing for animals to transcend boundaries at both the species and individual levels. Certain species, such as snakes, dogs, and horses, have stable symbolic meanings within the community, while individual animals that cross these established categories are often attributed supernatural abilities. These individuals then become focal points for supernatural beliefs and expectations, which are deeply rooted in local perceptions and adapted to specific environmental conditions.

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ALIVE/DEAD

The most fundamental category in Roma animal classification is vitality. At the highest end of this spectrum are wild animals that maintain friendly and secure interactions with humans, possess pronounced aesthetic qualities, and are in their prime reproductive age. At the lowest end are old, diseased, or decomposing animals. In Roma communities, encounters with archetypal individuals that epitomize vitality or its absence often evoke strong emotional responses. Beautiful, youthful examples of species such as horses, dogs, and cats elicit uncritical enthusiasm, fascination, and even reverence, creating a value-laden and almost ceremonial effect on the community. Conversely, the loss of vitality in animals, such as ageing or death, tends to provoke disgust and ridicule. Dead or decaying animals may be perceived as unnaturally dangerous, harbouring an elusive evil referred in the Slovak context to as *múlo*.

The actions of exceptional individuals within the Roma community often seek to reconcile these binary archetypes, integrating the characteristics of animals into the collective psyche. This process reflects a broader interest in practices such as healing old or sick animals (e.g., horses, dogs), domesticating wild ones (e.g., bears, roe deer), and managing the domestication or fertility of domestic ones (e.g., cats, dogs). The living-dead dichotomy is particularly evident in practices related to meat consumption. Consuming an animal that has died naturally is considered despicable behaviour, with the derogatory term *degeš* used to label carcass-eaters. However, among Roma communities living on the edge of survival, such practices are not uncommon. Dead animals, such as pigs, sheep, chickens, geese, or ducks, can, through careful cleaning and repeated washing, transition to a more acceptable category of "dead but consumable". In Roma communities, there are various practices that harmoniously connect the archetypes of living and dead animals. These practices take local forms to neutralize the effects of shifting animal energies on humans, while also harnessing these energies for the community's utilitarian activities and functions.

CLEAN/UNCLEAN

Among the Roma, living animals are fundamentally classified as clean or unclean (Figure 5). This classification takes into account various factors, including an animal's function, utility, shape, colour, body cover, mode of existence or breeding, and behaviour. Certain animals, such as snakes, dogs, cats, pigs, and rats, present unique challenges in this classification due to their unusual behaviour. These animals can change between clean and unclean categories based on specific circumstances. The Roma tend to place little trust in coincidence, often attributing

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phenomena to the intervention of a higher power (*devla*). For example, a white albino snake is considered clean, while adders are considered unclean. Similarly, a live pig is unclean, but pork meat is classified as clean; conversely, dog meat is unclean, yet dog lard is clean. Despite their classification as impure, certain animals, or their parts, may have significant magical or healing properties. Strong markers of impurity include anomalies in animal appearance, such as excessive hairiness or a slimy surface[46].

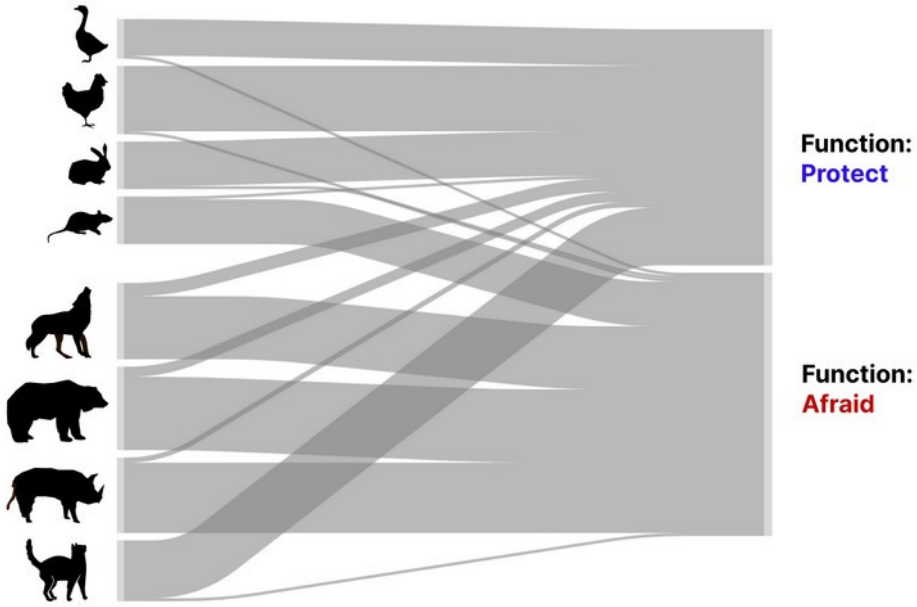

Fig. 5. *Clean and unclean animals reflecting the criteria of protection and aesthetic appeal.*

As a non-agricultural culture, Roma typically do not keep animals as pets. However, dogs, cats and, in the past, horses have commonly been kept in Roma dwellings for extended periods. For these animals to remain ritually clean, they must have free access to water and food; otherwise, they are classified as unclean. On the contrary, species that are aesthetically valued, such as domestic birds, cats, and dogs, can symbolically absorb the pollution of the house and its surroundings due to their perceived value. Among Roma, the quintessential clean animal is the horse[47]. Over time, its role has evolved from a burden-bearer and a commercial asset to a status symbol and a creature of symbolic significance. Horses are seen as clean and

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intelligent, with the ability to perceive supernatural phenomena[48]. The expertise of the Roma community in horse breeding, healing, and treatment has been a source of prestige compared to majority populations. "Gypsy horses" were often free-ranging and only temporarily stabled, compared to agricultural horses of settled communities, which were considered "free-bonded". The bond between Roma families and horses frequently exhibited a special intimacy, underscored by public expressions of mutual affection. However, horses were not regarded as sacred and the idyllic treatment often associated with them was absent. Practices for treating sick horses or training them could be harsh, reflecting a pragmatic rather than romantic approach to their care.

FREE/TETHERED

Although Roma emphasize freedom and independent action, this value applies primarily in contrast to rural-majority populations. Stereotypes of Roma freedom and unrestrained lifestyles[49] are largely the product of urban romanticism and agrarian societies clinging to instinctual ideals. The historical migrations, seasonal labour opportunities, and group survival strategies required a more flexible approach to occupation, location, and social bonds[50]. This cultural looseness extends to a minimally accepted level of conformity for both humans and animals. For the Roma, conformity is tied to moments of inactivity and their potential for celebration (*bašavel*). Anthropomorphic ideas of freedom are often projected onto animals, leading to the notion that free animals can express unrestrained joy at any moment. On the contrary, animals prevented from such expressions, such as those confined by housing, are perceived differently. Caution is necessary when drawing parallels between wild-free and domesticated-bound animals in Roma culture. For example, a wolf, which does not typically exhibit ritualized expressions of freedom, is not equated with a dog that demonstrates freedom through playful behaviour. Similarly, permanently tethered animals, such as cows lying in their own excrement, are treated with marked indifference due to their perceived inability to empathize with humans[51]. On the contrary, free-ranging animals, such as sheep, are regarded more favourably.

CONCLUSION

The coexistence of humans and animals is often discussed in the context of preserving biocultural diversity through processes such as heritagization. This

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approach aims to safeguard living forms of cultural and natural heritage. Although the conservation of wildlife, industrial heritage, and cultural landscapes has a relatively long history, it has also produced numerous examples that inform effective conservation management. The complex relationships through which humans and wildlife co-adapt to shared landscapes[52] encapsulate phenomena that cannot be confined to a binary view of wildlife and human adaptation. At this intersection are semi-adapted cultures that evolved outside mainstream categories such as hunter-gatherer, nomadic, agrarian, or industrial societies[53].

For example, among Roma communities in the Danube region, the relationship with the environment and its actors (such as animals) does not follow the agrarian-constructed order of co-existence, which often emphasizes the predictability of breeding and reproduction. Similarly, it does not align with the industrial model of adaptation, characterized by the specification and control of human activities. Some scholars[54] argue that although animal domestication has traditionally been viewed through binary lenses, such as savage and civilized, domestic and wild, or nature and culture, many groups and species exist outside this dominant framework of human control. The Roma provide a compelling example of alternative modes of interaction, demonstrating multiple ways[55] in which humans influence the behaviour of animals, such as horses, and how these animals, in turn, shape human communities and cultures. A growing body of research highlights the view that animals are more human-like and less object-like than traditional scientific perspectives suggest[56]. Such perspectives challenge anthropocentric tendencies to segregate animals from their natural environments and incorporate human-animal coexistence into the broader definitions of cultural and natural heritage.

Anthropologists are increasingly interested in examining coexistence processes beyond the simplistic wild-domestic binary. The key objective of conservation is to document, preserve, and understand natural processes. By preserving heritage modes of human-animal co-existence, we can recognize that the evolution of the

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Anthropocene has been shaped by the contributions of various natural actors. This perspective helps to dismantle the traditional *opus contra naturam* opposition, highlighting the interconnectedness of humans and nature.

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БИОКУЛТУРНО РАЗНООБРАЗИЕ И СЪЖИТЕЛСТВО ЧОВЕК – ЖИВОТНО: НАБЛЮДЕНИЯ ВЪРХУ НЕАГРАРНИ РОМСКИ ОБЩНОСТИ В ДУНАВСКИЯ РЕГИОН

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Резюме. В исторически план неаграрните ромски/цигански общности в Европа често са влизали в разрез със социалните норми, акцентиращи върху привързаността към домакинството, към локалната среда и взаимозависимия начин на живот, които са характерни за адаптирането към стопанския поминък при уседналите общности. В периода 2020 – 2024 г. бе проведено теренно проучване на ромските махали Долинка (Словакия) и Махала (България) с цел да бъдат анализирани идентичността, функцията и паралелите между хора и животни по отношение на съжителството, възприемането и ефективното разпространение на малки ежедневни иновации. С помощта на тематични анкети бе оценен начинът, по който участниците в проучването от ромски произход интерпретират частичната адаптация към съжителството човек – животно в райони с основно селскостопански характер. Резултатите включват описание на данни и проучване на конкретни случаи, касаещи (1) съжителството на хора и животни, (2) традиционните функции и положително взаимодействие и (3) потенциал за унаследяване. Изследването предоставя количествени и качествени сведения за взаимоотношенията човек – животно, като показва, че културната идентичност на ромските общности се осмисля по сложен начин и играе важна роля в унаследяването и опазването на биокултурното разнообразие.

Ключови думи: съжителство, хора, животни, ромски общности, адаптация в неаграрна среда, съхранение на разнообразието.

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