

# The Transformation Process of Lake Abant, A Protected Area, Into a Nature-Based Tourism Destination

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## Abstract

Lake Abant and its environs constitute a tourism destination that has retained popularity throughout all four seasons, attracting both overnight visitors and day-trippers. Although national public interest in the area began to emerge—albeit modestly—in the latter half of the 1930s, its transformation into a tourism destination accelerated particularly during the 1950s, as domestic tourism in Türkiye gained momentum. This transformation took place in parallel with the broader development of tourism in the country, supported by the efforts of local administrators and successive governments. From the early Republican era onwards, recreational use of the area steadily increased. Activities such as youth and sports camps, winter sports events organised under the auspices of the People's Houses (Halkevleri), and the interest shown by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and İsmet İnönü significantly contributed to the region's emerging identity as a tourism destination. In the 1950s, before terms such as “National Park” or “Nature Park” had entered the legal lexicon, legislative action was taken to formally regulate Lake Abant and its surroundings. Significantly, just prior to the general elections of 14 May 1950—which marked the end of the single-party period and the ascent of the Democrat Party—Law No. 5614 (dated 20 March 1950) on the Assignment of the Environment of Lake Abant to the Bolu Special Provincial Administration was enacted. This occurred even before the passage of Türkiye's first tourism-specific legislation, the Law on the Encouragement of Tourism Establishments (Law No. 5647, dated 24 March 1950). The former is arguably the most critical milestone in the area's transformation into a formally recognised tourism destination. In subsequent years, investments led by the Türkiye Tourism Bank improved the area's infrastructure. Over time, the area was granted various protection statuses, designated as a “Nature Park” in 1988 and, more recently, a “National Park” in 2022. In conclusion, the historical transformation of Lake Abant into a nature-based tourism destination stands as a compelling example of the effectiveness of Türkiye's domestic tourism policies and local governance.

**Keywords:** Lake Abant and Environs, Bolu, Tourism Destination, Tourism Destination Development

**Jel Classification:** Q26, Z32, N94.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of a tourism destination lies at the core of tourism studies and represents one of its most intricate components. Destinations are commonly defined as geographical areas that offer unique features and natural attractions to both tourists and day visitors (Coltman, 1989). According to UN Tourism (formerly UNWTO), a tourism destination<sup>1</sup> is “a physical space with or without administrative and/or analytical boundaries in which a visitor can stay overnight. It comprises a cluster (co-location) of products and services, activities and experiences along the tourism value chain and represents a basic unit of analysis in tourism”. Destinations may be classified as macro or micro entities, ranging from continents and countries to cities and individual sites (Ülker, 2010, p. 10; Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2003). Research on destinations typically focuses on development processes, lifecycle stages, and the socio-economic impacts of tourism (Haugland, Gronseth, & Aarstad, 2011).

A review of the relevant literature reveals that existing research in areas such as marketing (Dawson, Fountain, & Cohen, 2011), strategic destination planning (Formica & Kothari, 2008), cooperative destination marketing (Wang & Xiang, 2007), destination competitiveness (Mazanec, Wöber, & Zins, 2007; Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2004), dynamic destination management (Sainaghi, 2006), destination governance (Beritelli, Bieger, & Laesser, 2007), local business networks (Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2004), and community-based tourism planning and collaboration (Jamal & Getz, 1995).

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<sup>1</sup> This operational definition of a tourism destination was formulated by the Committee on Tourism and Competitiveness (CTC) and adopted as part of a set of key definitions recommended during the 22nd Session of the UNWTO General Assembly, held in Chengdu, China, from 11 to 16 September 2017 (A/RES/684(XXII)).

A significant body of work also evaluates nature-based tourism destinations from a recreational perspective. However, studies on popular nature-based destinations frequently offer limited insight into their historical evolution and developmental trajectories. In Türkiye, the Eastern Marmara and Western Black Sea regions have become prominent hubs for nature-based tourism owing to their dense forests and biodiversity. Their proximity to İstanbul and Ankara, coupled with their strategic location along the Trans-European Motorway (TEM), has further enhanced their accessibility and attractiveness (Hoşcan, 2017). Among these destinations, Bolu occupies a central place, with Lake Abant—celebrated for its natural scenery—emerging as one of the most frequently visited micro-destinations in the country. Offering considerable recreational value throughout the year, the lake caters to both overnight tourists and day visitors. Its rich and diverse ecosystems support a wide array of activities, including hiking, fishing, cycling, horse riding, winter sports, and picnicking. The serene waters and surrounding woodlands are particularly valued for their restorative and calming effects (Sayın & Karadağ, 2016; Yılmaz & Okan, 2021).

## 2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

### 2.1. Study Area

The primary material of this study comprises Lake Abant<sup>2</sup> (LA) and its surrounding area, located within the administrative boundaries of the Central District of Bolu Province.

#### 2.1.1. Toponymy and History

Toponymy, the study of place names and their origins, provides valuable insights into both natural and cultural landscapes (Yılmaz, 2021). The name Abant may reflect a distinctive feature of the region. Historical sources record variants such as Aband, Abat, and Abad, while the standardised use of “Abant” emerged only after the 1950s (Önal, 2011; Kara, 2023). Turkish dictionaries do not offer definitions for these terms, yet in Middle Persian, *Ābād* or *Ābādān* denotes “flourishing” or “prosperous” (Nişanyan, 2022). The suffix *-abad*, widely encountered in place names across Anatolia and the Near East, originates from Persian and signifies a settlement or inhabited area, often linked to a founder or community. Compound examples such as *Sa’dābad*, *Neşātābad*, and *Feyzābad*, prominent during the Ottoman Tulip Era, were commonly used for palaces and promenades in İstanbul. Similarly, names like *Şemsābad* and *Haydarābad* indicate association with individuals or groups (Şahin, 2007; Kubbealtı Lügati, 2006). Notably, Abant does not conform to the compound structure typically formed with the *-abad* suffix. An alternative etymological theory relates the name to the Abantes (Greek: Ἄβαντες), a Proto-Greek tribe from Euboea in the Aegean Sea, noted for their role in the Trojan War. The name derives from the mythological figure Abas, son of Poseidon and the nymph Arethusa (Erhat, 1972). Following the Aegean migrations, the Abantes settled in Chios and parts of Asia Minor, merging with other tribes (Şiraz, 2006). However, no historical evidence indicates their presence in the Western Black Sea region. In conclusion, the name Abant may be a linguistic remnant of Greek colonisation, a variation of the Persian-derived *Abad*, or, more plausibly, a derivation of the Persian root *ab*, meaning “water”.

Although the history of the region may extend as far back as 5,000 BCE, the limited number of archaeological findings is often attributed to the area’s dense vegetation, seismic activity, erosion, and landslides. As part of the broader Black Sea Region, and particularly the Western Black Sea and Bolu, the area has been influenced by various civilisations. Settlement is believed to have started during the Hittite period. The region’s favourable natural conditions have long made it attractive for habitation. Most information about the ancient period in the Black Sea Region relates to the era of Greek colonisation, beginning around the 8th century BCE (Drews, 1976). Various peoples and powers, including the Pala and Tummana tribes, the Hittites, Phrygians, Cimmerians, Lydians, and Ionian colonists (Miletus, Megara), were followed by Roman, Byzantine, Seljuk, Candarid, Ottoman, and finally Turkish Republican rule (Umar, 2004; KARM, 2016).

#### 2.1.2. Geography and Topographic Structure

Lake Abant is a natural lake situated in the northeast of Bolu Province, within the Köroğlu Mountains, between 40° 35’ 32” – 40° 37’ 36” north latitude and 31° 15’ 17” – 31° 19’ 12” east longitude. It lies

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<sup>2</sup> Lake Abant and its surroundings have been placed under protection at various times under different legal statuses; it was designated as a **nature park in 1988**, and most recently, as a **national park in 2022**. In this study, the term “**Lake Abant and its surroundings**” is used contextually to refer to either **Abant Nature Park** or **Lake Abant National Park**, depending on the relevant timeframe.

approximately 34 km southwest of Bolu city centre, 20 km from Mudurnu, 22 km from the Ankara–Istanbul D-100 highway, 225 km from Ankara, and 258 km from Istanbul (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Study Area**

There are no villages within the designated boundary; however, the entire areas of the Örencik, Sarıyer, and Samat plateaus, as well as part of the Pelitözü Plateau—belonging to nearby villages—are located within the park. Paved roads connect the site to the Pelitözü Plateau and Taşkesti to the west, and to Mudurnu town to the south.

LA and its surroundings are designated as a national park covering an area of 1,262.23 hectares, of which 1,246.88 ha are state forest and 15.35 ha are public land. The park is under the authority of the 9th Regional Directorate of Nature Conservation and National Parks, affiliated with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. In terms of forest management, responsibility lies with the Bolu and Mudurnu Forest Directorates, part of the Bolu Regional Directorate (Karakaya et al., 2011; Lake Abant National Park Long-Term Development Plan, 2024).

The lake lies at an elevation of 1,328 metres in mountainous terrain, between the Abant and Keremali mountain ranges, which form the second inland chain of the Western Black Sea mountains, running parallel to the Black Sea coast. Prominent surrounding peaks include Erenler Hill (1,794 m), Alaçam (1,689 m), Sarıyerçalı (1,444 m), Türkmənçalı (1,627 m), and Kızlarçalı (1,329 m), with an average elevation of 1,397 metres across the site (Tunçer, 2002).

The lake covers a surface area of 125 ha, has a maximum depth of approximately 18 metres, and a shoreline of 6 km. It is fed by underground springs and surrounding surface waters. Rainfall and snowmelt are channelled into the lake via Beşpoyraz Stream (west) and Fındıklı Stream (east), while the Abant Stream flows out from the southern edge of the lake and eventually drains into the Black Sea through a series of rivers including the Bolu Stream, Büyük Su, Dirgine River, Devrek Stream, and Filyos River (Tunçer, 2002).

The surrounding terrain dates to the Palaeozoic era, while the lake basin itself formed during the Cretaceous period. There are three main theories regarding the lake's formation: (1) sediment accumulation blocking a valley; (2) a volcanic crater origin; and (3) tectonic subsidence caused by erosion and landslides. The area lies within the lowest sections of the North Anatolian Fault Zone, between the termination point of the 1944 earthquake and the initiation points of the 1957 and 1967 earthquakes. Fault ruptures pass through the north-western corner of the site, extending in a northeast–southwest direction (Sayın & Karadağ, 2016; Demirtaş, 2000).

The climate of LA and its surroundings reflects a transitional character between the Continental and Black Sea climates. Summers are cooler than those in the southern parts of Bolu, while winters are cold and snowy. During the summer months, average temperatures range from 22°C to 27°C. In winter, temperatures may drop as low as -5°C. Heavy snowfalls can cause tree damage (snow breakage), and the lake often freezes entirely from the shore inward due to sudden cold spells. Precipitation is highest in winter and spring, while July and August are the hottest and driest months (Servi, Akata, & Çetin, 2010; Mater & Sunay, 1985; Lake Abant National Park Long-Term Development Plan, 2024).

### 2.1.3. Flora and Fauna

The integrated ecosystem of LA, comprising forest and aquatic environments, significantly enhances the area's biodiversity. The absence of prolonged summer droughts supports the extensive distribution of both deciduous and coniferous tree species. The area lies within the western boundaries of the Euxinian sub-region of the Euro-Siberian Floristic Region and hosts a rich array of vegetation, including endemic trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants. Forests composed of pine, fir, oak, beech, chestnut, poplar, and various wild fruit trees are classified as mixed forests. Most of the site falls within the hinterland Black Sea forest zone, with a smaller portion extending into the coastal forest zone (Servi, Akata, & Çetin, 2010; Tunçer, 2013).

Scientific studies have identified 761 taxa in the area, comprising 751 species from 86 families, 363 genera, 156 subspecies, and 60 varieties, with 51 species being endemic. Among these, *Crocus abantensis* (Abant Crocus) is one of the most recognised and has been listed under the Bern Convention due to its sensitivity to ecological conditions (Külköylüoğlu & İkişce, 2006). Additionally, 103 macrofungal taxa from 34 families and 67 genera have been recorded, including locally known species such as *Cincile*, *Dedebört*, *Karakız*, and *Yeryaran* (Gökçeel, 2017; Servi, Akata, & Çetin, 2010).

Faunal diversity is equally notable. *Salmo trutta abanticus* (Abant trout), one of seven fish species in the lake, is endemic. Also endemic are the Abant dormouse (*Muscardinus avellanarius abanticus*) and the small crested newt (*Triturus vulgaris kosswigi*). Forests surrounding the lake are home to wild mammals such as bears, wolves, deer, foxes, and squirrels, along with birds of prey (e.g. eagles, hawks, vultures) and various waterfowl and songbirds (Bolu Provincial Directorate of Environment, Urbanization And Climate Change, 2015). The Abant Wildlife Development Area, covering 1,830 ha, was designated on 5 October 2006. It lies near Dereceören village, 8 km from the lake. Initially established as a deer breeding station over 95 ha, the area was later expanded and officially protected by the General Directorate of Nature Conservation and National Parks (DKMPGM, 2025).

### 2.2. Method

This study aims to examine the development process of LA as a nature-based tourism destination within historical, legal, and administrative contexts, employing a qualitative research paradigm. Qualitative methods allow for an in-depth exploration of subjects and provide meaningful insights into observed phenomena (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011). There are three main reasons for selecting LA as the study area. First, it is among the earliest tourism destinations that emerged during the early Republican period of Türkiye. Second, it offers recreational use throughout all four seasons. Third, it plays a central role in shaping Bolu's tourism identity and serves as a prominent element in the region's destination branding.

The study was conducted in three stages:

1) **Literature and Archival Review:** Primary sources included national/local media, state archives, institutional reports, statistical data, and academic publications.

2) **Acquisition of Authoritative Data:** Spatial and operational data (e.g., maps, visitor statistics) were obtained from the Bolu Directorate of Nature Conservation and National Parks, the legally mandated authority.

3) **Temporal Analysis:** Data were periodised and examined contextually through a case-based methodological framework.

This study's limitations stem from restricted access to all relevant documents and the inherent subjectivity that may arise during the process of document analysis.

### 3. THE HISTORY OF TOURISM ACTIVITIES IN AND AROUND LAKE ABANT

In studies examining the development of tourism in Turkey on a periodical basis, Turkish tourism is generally addressed in two periods: the Pre-Planning Period (1923–1963) and the Planning Period (after 1963). In this study, in parallel with the literature, the development process of LA and its surroundings as a nature-based tourism destination is also discussed under the headings: 1- Pre-Planning Period (1923–1963), 2- Planning Period (after 1963). The transformation of the area into a tourism destination occurred particularly in the 1950s, in parallel with the development of tourism in Turkey, especially with the initial domestic tourism movements. The Law on the Assignment of the Environment of Lake Abant to the Bolu Special Provincial Administration dated 20 March 1950 and numbered 5614, was an important step in the transformation of the area into a tourism destination. Therefore, in this study, the pre-planning period (1923–1960) is evaluated in two sub-periods: 1923–1949 and 1950–1963. In some studies, the period after the 1980s is considered a separate period in which development planning theoretically lost its importance and neoliberal policies became dominant. The 2000s are evaluated as the beginning of a

transition into a new world order shaped by high technology, with the start of the new millennium. In this study, the planning period is examined in three sub-periods: 1- the period between 1963–1980, 2- the period between 1980–2000, and 3- the post-2000 period.

### **3.1. Lake Abant in the Pre-Planning Period (1923–1963)**

#### **3.1.1. The Period Between 1923 and 1949**

The earliest documented exploration of the area is credited to Reşat Aker, a veterinarian and mayor of Bolu (1933–1945), who promoted the lake after visiting Mudurnu. Captivated by its natural beauty, he conveyed his impressions to the local community in Bolu and began gathering further information. He subsequently shared his findings with Ahmed Fahreddin Bey, the first governor of Bolu in the Republican era. Aker's initiative led to an exploratory visit by a delegation comprising the governor and the local gendarmerie commander. Photographs taken during this visit were exhibited at the Bolu Halkevi, contributing significantly to the lake's public recognition (Aker, 1946). The first formal initiative concerning LA began in 1928, during the governorship of Ali Sakıp Beygo (1928–1931). Accompanied by provincial council members, Beygo visited the lake and introduced measures to regulate animal husbandry in the area, initiated preliminary work for a road, and oversaw the construction of a guest facility named "Mudurnu House" by the Municipality of Mudurnu (Evcin, 2013; TBMM Parliamentary Record Journal, 1950). During the 1930s, youth camps were established across Turkey by various organisations. Among the most significant was the Young Red Crescent, established in 1934 as a division of the Turkish Red Crescent Society. These camps aimed to promote the health, education, and social development of children and young people, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Bulut, 2007). Institutions such as the Turkish Aeronautical Association, schools, People's House (Halkevi) Sports Clubs, and military training units also organised camps, which included scouting and physical education activities.

In 1932, the Excursion and Camping Branch of the Bolu Halkevi established a scouting and sports camp on the shore of LA. The following year, a physical education teacher from Bolu Secondary School organised a ten-day camp with students by the lake (CHF Bolu Halkevi, 1933). National newspapers reported that sports clubs, schools, teachers, and the local public were actively participating in similar activities at the site.

The visit of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to Bolu on 17 July 1934 marked a turning point in the recognition of LA. Although Atatürk did not visit the lake directly, he examined it on a map and instructed officials to construct a forest road providing direct access from Bolu to the lake (Evcin, 2022a). The road was initially completed in 1935 under the direction of Governor Salih Cemal Gülen and Mayor Reşat Aker but was soon damaged. It was repaired and reopened in July 1937 under Governor S. Salim Gündoğan (Özdemir Tiryaki, 2019).

The Abant Festival significantly boosted national recognition of the area. Initially celebrated as "Gazi (a title of honour for a war hero) Day" on 6 March (proposed by MP Cevat Abbas Gürer in 1931), it was renamed "Atatürk Day" and rescheduled to 17 July after Atatürk's 1934 visit (Evcin, 2022a). To mark the occasion, officials launched the "Abant Youth and Sports Festival", held annually on the Sunday following 17 July. It evolved into a major regional event featuring athletic contests, folk dances, and the iconic 6,000-metre "Abant Tour" (Özçelik & Dokuyan, 2014; Kılıç, 2021; Evcin, 2022a).

In 1935 and 1936, two 15-day sports camps were established near the lake, with local tradesmen providing supplies and participating alongside enthusiastic citizens (DABCA, 1935; 1936). Thanks to improved road access, for the first time in 1937, group excursions were organised from central Bolu to coincide with the festival. A dedicated 12-room camp centre, built by the General Directorate of Physical Education, was opened during the event, attracting nearly 4,000 visitors (Özdemir Tiryaki, 2019). The facility was later allocated for use by the Sports Department of the Bolu Halkevi (Özçelik & Dokuyan, 2014). In 1937, Daniel E. Wright—an American engineer affiliated with the Rockefeller Foundation and seconded to the Turkish Ministry of Health and Social Welfare—conducted a site inspection of the lake in collaboration with Dr Kamil İdil, Assistant Director of the School of Public Health. The two identified the site as suitable for a sanatorium and summer retreat. Based on their report, the municipal council approved Mayor Aker's proposal to construct two lodges (TBMM Parliamentary Record Journal, 1950; Aker, 1946). The 1938 festival featured footraces, egg-and-spoon races, sack races, and canoeing. New lodges were opened, and a road was completed around the lake to allow motorised transport. One of the buildings was named "Atatürk Lodge" in the hope that Atatürk would use it during his illness, although

this never occurred (Savacı, 2010). Later that year, Bolu's first modern hotel opened in the city centre, and planning began for a similar facility on the lakeshore (Ulus Newspaper, 1938).

In the same year, renowned journalists and Austrian photographer Othmar Pferschy visited the lake to prepare promotional material supported by the General Directorate of Press<sup>3</sup>. Their reports and images contributed to Abant's national and international recognition (Özdemir Tiryaki, 2019).

The year 1937 marked a turning point in Turkey's forest governance with the enactment of Forest Law No. 3116, which formalised state ownership and management of forest lands. This reform led to the establishment of Forest Protection Directorates in 1937, Forest Ward Offices in 1944, and, under Law No. 4767 in 1945, the foundation of today's Forest Operation Directorates<sup>4</sup> (Gümüş, 2018). As part of this institutional restructuring, forestry buildings were also constructed in the vicinity of LA. State forest enterprises played a pioneering role in the industrialisation and enlightenment of Anatolia. The newly established Forest Operation Directorates often functioned as campus-like complexes, incorporating administrative buildings, staff housing, nurseries, workshops, stables, bakeries, dining halls, and even guesthouses and small-scale timber factories (Gümüş, 2018). The Abant facility, for instance, included a power plant, guesthouse, and housing for regional officers—reflecting this integrated approach. During the late 1930s, the main skiing areas in Bolu included Esentepe in Gerece and the surroundings of LA. On Sundays, young people typically engaged in skiing, while children enjoyed sledding activities (Ulus Newspaper, 1938). LA also attracted nationwide interest, and efforts were made to develop the area as a sports destination. Cemil Tahir Taner, the Director General of Physical Education, conducted an on-site inspection with experts, accompanied by the regional director, the governor of Bolu, and the mayor. He identified the location for a ski lodge and highlighted the area's potential for year-round recreational use. In his statement, Taner emphasised that the frozen lake could host ice sports in winter, the slopes were suitable for skiing, and in summer, the area was ideal for swimming, sailing, and water sports. He also noted that the construction of the lodge depended on local support, and once completed, there would be three buildings in the area under the administration of the Directorate of Physical Education (Ulus Newspaper, 1938; Akşam Newspaper, 1939). As part of these initiatives, in 1939, Gigs and **sailing yachts** were delivered by the Directorate for use by athletes in Bolu (Kara, 2023; Ulus Newspaper, 1939).

As part of the Homeland Excursion Project (Yurt Gezileri Project) (1938–1943), ten painters were sent across various regions of Turkey to promote art, document local culture, and familiarise themselves with the country. Within this framework, Ali Karsan visited Bolu between 15 August and 30 September 1939 and depicted LA in his paintings (Savacı, 2010; Kara, 2023). During his visit to Bolu in August 1939, President İsmet İnönü inspected LA and instructed Governor Naci Kıcıman to build an access road, clean the surrounding area, and plan a lakeside hotel (Kara, 2023; Evcin, 2022b). These developments clearly reflect that LA had already emerged as a nationally significant and promoted tourism destination during that period.

Although Turkey remained neutral during WWII, its tourism industry was significantly affected. Nonetheless, the transformation of Lake Abant into a public recreational area continued. The Bolu Halkevi maintained the Abant Festival and winter sports events. In 1940, a ski lodge was completed, a telephone line was installed, and a new access road built, bringing the number of lakeside structures to six (Kara, 2023).

By 1944, LA had become the setting for its first film, *Hasret* (Yearning), which blended traditional music with a local narrative and showcased the area's romantic scenery (Berktaş, 2008). In 1945, the General Directorate of Physical Education (BTGM) was granted easement rights—the first of their kind in Turkey—for constructing skiing and mountaineering facilities on a frozen lake (DABCA, 1945). Post-war recovery led to an expansion of camping along the lakeshore. National newspapers featured articles and advertisements, and the 1946 Turkey Guide listed various lodging facilities (Kara, 2023).

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<sup>3</sup> Similar promotional events were held across the country in line with the policies of the **General Directorate of Press (Matbuat Umum Müdürlüğü)** of the period (Özdemir Tiryaki, 2019, p. 187).

<sup>4</sup> Law No. 4767 of 3 July 1945 on the Abolition of the Forest Protection Organisation and the Transfer of its Duties and Powers to the State Forest Enterprises



**Figure 2. Sketch Map of Lake Abant and Its Surroundings (1946)**

**Source:** Aker, (1946).

Promotional events in Istanbul, such as the Bolu-Abant Nights held at Maxim and Tokatlıyan halls in 1947 and the Taksim Municipal Casino in 1948, further boosted the area's visibility. These featured folk dances and a tourism film titled Ankara Bolu İstanbul, supported by the General Directorate of Press, Publishing and Tourism (Özçelik & Dokuyan, 2014; Kılıç, 2021).

A 1948 forestry management plan prioritised the conservation of LA's landscape, while road improvements connecting it to Ankara, Istanbul, and Bolu—completed by 1950—incorporated the area into the national road network, reinforcing its status as an emerging tourism destination (Sayın & Karadağ, 2016; DABCA, 1949). Supported by expanding infrastructure and its year-round recreational appeal, LA gradually transformed from a local picnic area into a nationally recognised tourism site.

### **3.1.2. The Period Between 1949 and 1963**

On 21 February 1950, just prior to the pivotal general elections of 14 May 1950, Members of Parliament from Bolu, İhsan Yalçın and Hasan Şükrü Adal, submitted a legislative proposal to the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM) to resolve property disputes and regulate human activities around LA. The proposal was discussed in Parliament on 20 March 1950 and ultimately enacted as Law No. 5614, entitled The Law on the Assignment of the Environment of Lake Abant to the Bolu Special Provincial Administration.

In accordance with Law No. 5614, the Council of Ministers was authorised to allocate land surrounding LA to the Special Provincial Administration free of charge, with borders jointly determined by the Ministries of the Interior, Agriculture, Public Works, and Finance. This move significantly accelerated the region's development for tourism purposes. A comprehensive development plan was to be prepared by the provincial authority, in consultation with the General Directorate of Press, Publishing and Tourism (BYTGM), and finalised with the approval of five ministries: Interior, Public Works, Agriculture, Health, and Social Assistance. This legal framework allowed the provincial government and third parties to construct tourism, health, sports, and recreation facilities in the designated area.

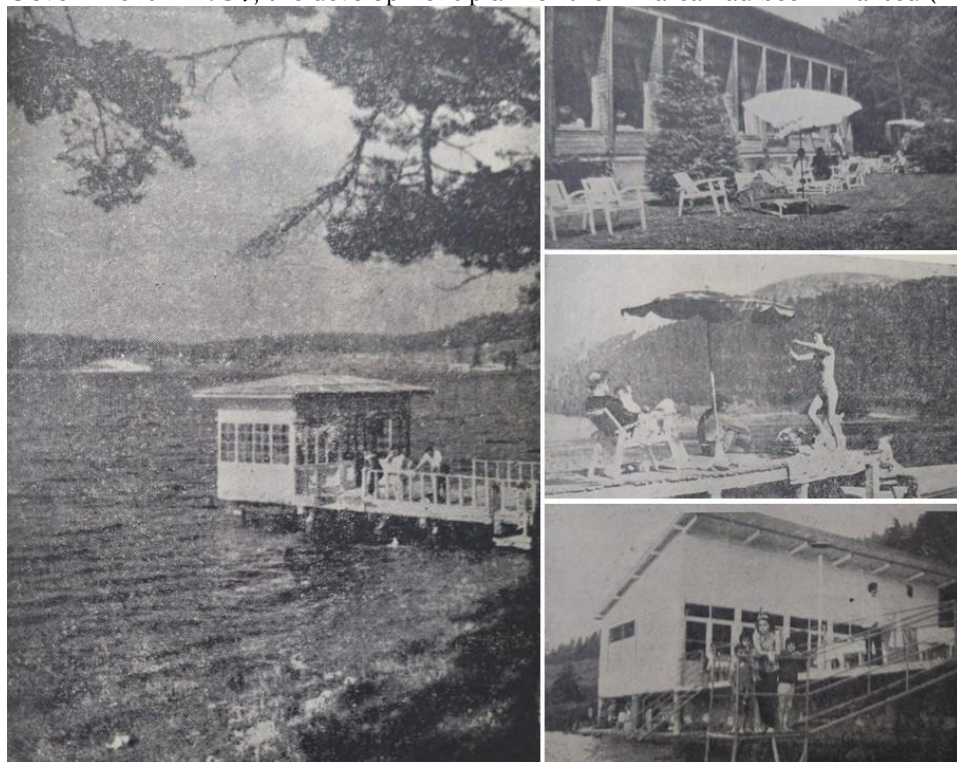
The accompanying regulation for the designated tourism zone was approved by the Bolu Provincial Council on 3 July 1952. Under the same law, successive tracts of land around LA were transferred to the Special Provincial Administration without charge: an initial parcel on 9 August 1951, a 2.36-hectare plot on 17 September 1952, and a 316.64-hectare area on 6 May 1955 (DABCA, 1951–1955). On 15 February 1955, Düzce State Forest Enterprise transferred its nearby buildings to the Bolu Special Provincial Administration. By early 1956, 672 hectares—including lake surface, pine forests, and open land—were registered under the Special Provincial Administration, alongside facilities such as residences, a power station, a boathouse, a mountain lodge, and a summer house.

The Democrat Party's rise to power in 1950 brought socio-economic change that also influenced LA. In 1953, plans were proposed to build an airport in Bolu to facilitate access for tourists (Özdemir Tiryaki, 2019). Turkish Airlines flew 100 passengers that year, and during a 1955 CHP congress visit, several party members flew to Bolu before travelling to LA by taxi (Özçelik, 2013). However, the airport was later closed due to low demand and technical issues (Boluhedef, 2024). Meanwhile, the 1951 closure of Halkevleri

under Law No. 5830 marked the end of an era. These community centres had played an important role in public engagement and collaboration with the General Directorate of Physical Education. Their closure negatively affected the vitality of the Abant Festival.

In response to declining fish stocks, a small artificial trout breeding facility was established near the lake in 1956 by the Bolu Governorship, in collaboration with the Hydrobiology Research Institute and the Meat and Fish Authority (Korkut, Gamsız & Yurga, 2023).

To meet the financial demands of Turkey's expanding tourism sector, the Turkish Tourism Bank Inc. (TTB) was established by decree on 23 June 1955 (Decree No. 4/5413). According to its charter (1958), the bank aimed to promote domestic and international tourism, finance tourism enterprises, and provide transport and travel-related services (Kozak et al., 2010). LA and similar locations were prioritised by the Democrat Party for development. LA became the first site where TTB made a direct investment. Following government approval, one hotel and six furnished mountain lodges were constructed in a pine grove adjacent to the hotel. Each lodge included two flats with a living room, bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen. Supervised by the bank, these facilities were later added to its portfolio through financial restructuring (TTB, 1956). To enhance LA's appeal, plans were made for tennis, volleyball, and golf courts; a pier, diving board, and changing cabins; and a lakeside pavilion. A plan was also proposed for 100 detached mountain lodges on the western slope and, in 1957, a masonry hotel with 100-150 rooms was approved for the eastern lakeshore (TTB, 1957). To support the development of a regional tourism industry, Abant and Bolu Surroundings Tourism Inc. (Abant ve Bolu Çevresi Turizm AŞ) was established on 24 November 1957 with the financial backing of TTB and the participation of Bolu Special Provincial Administration and the municipalities of Bolu, Akçakoca, Düzce, Gerede, Göynük, and Mudurnu. Previous investments made by TTB in Abant were transferred to the new company in the form of credit. Although the facilities suffered damage during the 7.1 magnitude earthquake<sup>5</sup> that struck Abant-Bolu on 26 May 1957, repairs were swiftly completed (TTB, 1957; TTB, 1959). By the end of the Fourth Menderes Government in 1957, the development plan for the LA area had been finalised (BYTUM, 1958).



**Figure 3.** A Collage Depicting the Facilities at Lake Abant (Early 1960s)

**Source:** Şakarcan, (1964).

Due to capital insufficiencies, TTB was restructured under Law No. 7470, enacted on 4 May 1960, and transformed into the Republic of Turkey Tourism Bank Inc. (TURBAN - T.C. Turizm Bankası AŞ), with a public capital majority. In addition to its banking role, TURBAN was mandated to support the tourism

<sup>5</sup> "...The Abant Hotel, located at the epicentre of the earthquake in Abant, collapsed, resulting in the death of three individuals. The highest number of casualties occurred in Elmacıkdere Village, part of the Mudurnu district, where twelve people lost their lives..." (Demokrat Bolu Newspaper, 27 May 1957)

industry by establishing, operating, leasing, and selling model enterprises in transport, accommodation, travel, food and beverage, and recreation.

### **3.2. Lake Abant in the Planned Period (Post-1963)**

#### **3.2.1. The Period Between 1963 and 1980**

The period between 1963 and 1980 marked the formal establishment of Turkey's modern welfare state, shaped by the 1961 Constitution following the 1960 military coup. This constitution recognised tourism as a constitutional right and introduced paid leave provisions. The State Planning Organisation (DPT) was founded in 1960, and the First Five-Year Development Plan (1963) prioritised tourism through the creation of protected areas. Yedigöller in Bolu became Turkey's first national park under this initiative. Halkevleri were re-established as democratic civil associations in 1963, but the Bolu branch no longer supported the Abant Festival as before. On 14 January 1965, a tent site near LA was allocated to the 28th Infantry Division for military use.

A significant milestone came with a 1973 decree placing the LA surroundings under the national zoning system due to tourism potential. In June 1975, the Abant Hotel was rebuilt with expanded facilities including a conference hall, sauna, heated pool, and a 250-seat restaurant. The upgraded hotel opened in December 1977, reflecting the growing importance of tourism infrastructure in regional planning (Özdemir, 1992).

#### **3.2.2. The Period Between 1980 and 2000**

The 12 September 1980 military coup marked a turning point in Turkey's socio-economic landscape, initiating neoliberal reforms that reduced the role of centralised planning. Post-1980 tourism policies became increasingly market-oriented, prioritising mass tourism and privatisation over state-led development.

While national parks were first mentioned in Article 25 of the 1956 Forest Law (Law No. 6831), it was the 1983 National Parks Law (No. 2873) that established a clear legal framework. The law empowered the General Directorate of Forestry to designate protected areas for scientific, recreational, and tourism purposes. Accordingly, Law No. 5614—transferring LA's surroundings to the Bolu Special Provincial Administration—was repealed, and management authority reverted to the forestry legislation. Nonetheless, existing rights and rental contracts remained valid.

Among the categories outlined in Law No. 2873, only national and nature parks were designated for public use, while others served environmental or scientific goals. Under this new framework, 1,150 hectares around LA were declared a Nature Park on 21 October 1988, later expanded to 1,196.5 hectares via a 1990 forest management plan.

In the mid-1980s, private sector involvement increased. A casino began operating in 1985, and Taksim Otelcilik Inc.—a Vakıfbank subsidiary—leased land for 49 years to construct Abant Köşk Hotel (1987) and the five-star Abant Palace Hotel (1989), under a build-operate-transfer model. During the Fifth Five-Year Development Plan (1985–1989), the state exited direct tourism investment, shifting to credit-based support through TURBAN (Turkey Tourism Bank Corporation). Privatisation efforts intensified under Law No. 3291 (1986), leading to the transfer of state-owned tourism assets, including LA facilities, to TURBAN Inc. in 1988.

By then, TURBAN had become one of Turkey's major tourism investors, managing numerous hotels, holiday villages, marinas, and agencies. In 1988, it was moved from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism to the Prime Ministry and was merged with the Development Bank of Turkey in early 1989 (Kozak et al., 2010).

On 1 July 1998, a long-term lease granted Bolu Governorship the right to operate LA's visitor facilities, while ecological oversight remained with the General Directorate of Nature Conservation and National Parks (Lake Abant Nature Park Long-Term Development Plan, 2001).

#### **3.2.3. The Period Since the 2000s**

Tourism policy in the post-2000 era reflected Turkey's broader economic realignment, shaped by its engagement with the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the European Union (EU). In line with EU directives, sustainable tourism and environmental protection emerged as core policy priorities (Çiftçi & Coşkun, 2023).

Privatisation gained momentum during this period. On 22 January 2000, 99.99% of public shares in Abant and Bolu Region Tourism Inc.—a subsidiary of the Tourism Bank (TURBAN)—were sold to Em-Sel Construction, Tourism, Industry and Trade Ltd. The Abant Turban Hotel was subsequently rebranded as the Grand Abant Hotel.

Between 2000 and 2001, a 1:10,000-scale Long-Term Development Plan was prepared for the Lake Abant (LA) Nature Park to reconcile ecological conservation with sustainable use. The plan was approved in 2003 and revised in 2007 and 2009. In July 2009, management of key facilities—including the campsite, entrance gate, kiosks, and maintenance services—was transferred to the Bolu Special Provincial Administration.

However, physical interventions such as raising lake levels, widening roads, and blocking the inflow stream drew criticism for causing environmental degradation. Independent investigations by the General Directorate of Nature Conservation and National Parks (DKMP), the Western Black Sea Forestry Research Institute, and various professional chambers confirmed ecological harm. On 18 April 2010, the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects (TMMOB) filed a criminal complaint, followed by legal action from the Chamber of City Planners. On 15 March 2011, the Sakarya 1st Administrative Court ruled in favour of TMMOB, citing both environmental damage and violations of the approved development plan (Tunçer, 2013).

Subsequently, a Nature Museum was established within the visitor centre to exhibit local fauna. On 12 January 2017, a ministerial decree redefined the park's 1,196.5-hectare boundaries, excluding certain highland areas while incorporating the southern slopes near Abant Spring. On 10 June 2022, a Presidential Decree upgraded LA's legal status to that of a National Park<sup>6</sup>, making it Turkey's 48th, while retaining its existing boundaries.

Although much of the physical infrastructure had been completed by this point, increasing visitor pressure and unregulated development around the lake placed growing stress on the environment. These concerns, coupled with deficiencies in transport planning, prompted renewed calls for strategic policy action.

To address these needs, a new Long-Term Development Plan was prepared in 2024. The plan aimed to update the 2002 analytical research, reflect the area's new National Park designation, and incorporate current data on the site's natural, ecological, and physical characteristics (Lake Abant National Park Long-Term Development Plan, 2024).

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

LA and its surroundings, with their geographical location, topography, climate, water resources, flora and fauna, constitute a significant nature-based tourism destination and protected area. Although national recognition of the area began modestly in the late 1930s, it has steadily evolved into a well-established tourism destination. This development has been supported both by evolving national tourism policies and by the sustained efforts of local authorities and successive governments.

The local discovery of Abant by the people of Bolu dates back to the 1920s. Due to the lack of a direct road connection with Bolu at the time, the area was primarily known to and used by residents of Mudurnu. National attention towards the area increased in the early 1930s with its mention in the press, and the visit of Atatürk to Bolu on 17 July 1934 marked a turning point in its recognition. A major contributor to Abant's emergence as a tourism destination was Reşat Aker, who served as the mayor of Bolu between 1933 and 1945. Following Atatürk's visit, infrastructural improvements, landscaping, and the construction of two pavilions by the municipality transformed the area. In addition, Aker initiated the "Abant Festival" to complement the Atatürk Day celebrations held annually in Bolu since 1931. This festival was organised at Abant on the first Sunday following 17 July until the 1980s. Despite increasing activity in the area, the development of transport and accommodation infrastructure took time. During the 1930s and 1940s, student and youth camps organised by institutions, notably the Bolu Community Centre, played a significant role in promoting Abant as a nature-based destination.

In the 1950s, concepts such as "National Park" or "Nature Park" had not yet been incorporated into Turkish legislation. Nevertheless, an important legal step was taken to regulate and protect Lake Abant and its surroundings. Notably, even before the enactment of the first tourism incentive law—the Tourism Enterprises Promotion Law (No. 5647) of 24 March 1950, introduced shortly before the general elections of 14 May 1950 that ended the single-party era—a specific law was passed for Abant: the Law on the

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<sup>6</sup> According to **Law No. 2873 on National Parks**, national parks are defined as "natural and recreational areas that possess rare natural and cultural resource values of national and international importance in terms of their scientific and aesthetic qualities, and that include zones designated for conservation, recreation, and tourism."

Transfer of the Lake Abant Area to the Bolu Special Provincial Administration (No. 5614) dated 20 March 1950. Following this decision, the area was placed under systematic maintenance, with measures taken to protect its flora and fauna, alongside significant infrastructure investments. This law can be regarded as a critical milestone in the transformation of Lake Abant into a tourism destination.

The establishment of the Turkey Tourism Bank in 1955 (renamed Tourism Bank Inc. after 1960) led to further infrastructure investments in Abant. Meanwhile, Akçakoca, one of the earliest domestic tourism destinations alongside Yalova, Erdek, and Amasra, experienced rapid popularity as a summer retreat, particularly among visitors from Ankara and Istanbul. This regional mobility positively influenced Abant, which attracted mostly day-trippers from urban middle classes.

Despite favourable seasonal conditions for coastal tourism in the Aegean and Mediterranean regions, various state-led incentives, transportation projects, and promotional policies in those regions have somewhat hindered tourism development along the Western Black Sea coast. Nevertheless, Abant, designated as a nature park in 1988 and as a national park in 2022, along with Yedigöller National Park (designated in 1965), have continued to attract large numbers of day visitors due to their rich vegetation and high recreational value. Winter tourism investments beginning in 1977 in Kartalkaya also contributed to Bolu's year-round tourism activity.

The "Turkey Tourism Strategy 2023" emphasised the need to shift from isolated tourism nodes to integrated tourism corridors, regions, cities, and eco-tourism areas. Within this framework, Bolu was identified as an "Eco-Tourism Focused Development Region" and included in the Silk Road Tourism Corridor and the Bolu-Çankırı-Kastamonu Winter Tourism Axis (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2007). As the image of Western Black Sea tourism has come to centre around nature, forests, and plateaus, Abant has gained prominence as the flagship destination of Bolu. Its popularity has made it almost synonymous with the province's identity.

Visitor education levels are strongly linked to environmental awareness and preferences for protected landscapes. Research shows that 55–60% of Abant's visitors hold undergraduate or postgraduate degrees, suggesting that such areas are particularly appealing to young and middle-aged, educated individuals with high environmental sensitivity. Furthermore, 94% of visitors are from outside Bolu, with the majority coming from Ankara. This can be attributed to Ankara's relative scarcity of natural landscapes and the area's location along the main Ankara-Istanbul transport axis.

As day-trip tourism dominates Abant, especially on weekends and holidays, weekday visitation remains low. Ensuring the balance between conservation and use, prioritising visitor quality over quantity, and aligning marketing strategies with international tour programmes, especially in the Middle East and EU countries, are recommended. Additionally, efforts should be made to attract domestic middle-aged, youth, student groups, and corporate incentive tourism during weekdays. Abant's potential to generate higher national and international revenue from lake tourism depends on comprehensive planning, sustainable development, and targeted promotion. This study contributes to the literature by offering a historical perspective on the development of Abant as a nature-based tourism destination. Unlike earlier research that focused mainly on natural features or tourism potential, this study integrates history, culture, tourism policy, and spatial development. Future studies could explore visitor profiles, expectations, and satisfaction levels, as well as compare Abant with other similar destinations to develop shared solutions to common challenges.

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