Chapter 11

Tourism development and green horizons in protected areas of Croatia and Slovenia: synthesis and perspectives

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Abstract

This chapter discusses different management approaches and recommendations for administration of protected areas, where tourism is recognised as one of the most important management challenges—depending on the situation, it can be either a curse or a blessing. Therefore, the goal of this chapter is to compare methods of management of protected areas in Croatia and Slovenia, with an emphasis on tourism. The systems of administering protected areas in both countries show some similarities, but also have major differences. In Slovenia, the system is relatively decentralised, especially for protected areas that are of a lower category of protection. This is the result of a bottom-up approach. In Croatia, the top-down approach, mainly characterised by centralised management, prevails—especially in the case of management of national parks and nature parks. Differences in management approaches influence the level to which a given protected area is included in the tourism supply, which is consequentially reflected in forms of tourism as well as differential spatial influences.

Key words: protected area, management approaches, tourism development, Croatia, Slovenia

Introduction

The need for new space for new development opportunities is consequentially reflected in increasingly expressed problems on all levels of spatial development (Faber et al., 1987). The result of this has been an intense increase in the number of protected nature areas over the last 20 years (UNEP-WCMC and IUCN, 2016), as well as increasing efforts to efficiently protect protected areas. This highlights the need to determine and resolve problems with existing management models in order to find the most appropriate model for each individual protected area. The global network of parks is currently a key option for maintaining and improving conservation of biodiversity and the environment as a whole (Timko and Innes, 2009).

Numerous authors have highlighted planning and managing the environment as a means of achieving a sustainable environment and sustainable world (Ogrin, 1999; Boetequilha and Ahern, 2002), not simply for its physical presence, but for its metaphysical connotations, as well as the ability to plan and protect landscapes in keeping with social factors (Butula, 2003). Accordingly, the question emerges of whether tourism in protected areas is an opportunity or a challenge (or both), when contemporary trends in global tourism indicate conflicting interests for protected areas (Guimarães et al., 2018). This affects the direction of development for areas that are generally unevenly-developed and generate significant economic benefit (Dudley et al., 2008). Tourism, as opposed to other economic sectors, is (theoretically) interested in maintaining protected areas in order to continue using and developing them for material gain in the long term (Ružić, 2011).

Approaches to the management of protected areas

The founding of the first national parks naturally sparked ruminations on how they might be managed (Marinović-Uzelac, 2001). In the era when the first protected areas were largely managed as individual components of the areas in which they were found, the character of management significantly differed depending on the state and management goals. Today, the emphasis is decidedly on the concept and quality of management of protected areas (Martinić, 2010). The need for active management of protected areas has become clear with time, after experiences showed that a declaration of protected status alone was not enough to actually protect an area (so-called “paper parks”) (Dudley et al., 1999).

In order to successfully protect an area, influence over the activities taking place within it is necessary. Therefore, the management of protected areas depends on the management of economic (and other) activities taking place therein, whereby activities should either be restricted or encouraged, depending on the needs of the space. There is significant emphasis in management on protecting natural diversity and cultural heritage, education and recreation, and strengthening local communities.

Management of protected areas is a cyclical process, whereby goals are reached by carrying out pre-arranged activities within a set framework (Dudley et al., 1999). The aforementioned process includes assessment of the status of a given area, and defining management goals and necessary planning activities to achieve them, which are then carried out with simultaneous oversight and efficiency assessments—allowing for the adjustment of planning activities as deemed necessary—after which the entire process is repeated (Ministry of Environment and Energy of the Republic of Croatia, 2018). Management goals must present a clear description of that which is meant to be achieved via management. Activities of management are those that should be carried out in order to reach a specific goal or goals. The implementation of goals is understood to include the implementation of planning activities.

Oversight, in this context, refers to two different activities: overseeing the implementation of planning activities (what was done, how, and when); and overseeing the effectiveness thereof (overseeing changes in the status of that which is being protected) (Ministry of Environment and Energy of the Republic of Croatia, 2018). In keeping with the aforementioned, the self-management of protected areas should be (Alexander, 2008):

- based on assumed obligations—in harmony with the reasons underlying a given area's protected status;
- appropriate—adjusted to the specific conditions and needs of a given area, and based on established practices and decision-making methods;
- adaptable—able to adapt activities to changes in management conditions without threatening the underlying status for which the area was given protected status;
- participative—directing how stakeholders are able to actively take part in the management of protected areas with their advice, recommendations, and/or concrete activities;

- planned—management goals and activities are planned in advance and their implementation takes place according to pre-arranged priorities and plans;
- transparent—open to the public and clearly-defined.

In order to increase the potential of protected areas, administrators and policy makers seek information regarding the strengths and weaknesses of management methods, and the various pressures and threats that protected areas are subjected to (Hockings, 2003). There are many reasons to assess management efficiency. For example, management bodies generally want to improve their performance via flexible management. Local and national governments and agencies generally want to wisely invest in protected areas, taking into account the specific needs of a given protected area and prioritising accordingly. Local communities and NGOs generally want to know that their interests are being taken into account in the planning process for a given area. Other stakeholder demands might also present themselves during the planning process, i.e. for more transparent reporting, good business practices, etc. (Hockings et al., 2006). Assessment of planning (or aspects and goals of planning) consists of an analysis of all relevant information for a given area, forming the basis for the definition of management goals and activities.

Management of tourism in protected areas of Croatia and Slovenia—similarities and differences

Although tourism can have many beneficial effects on protected areas, management of tourism often presents a considerable challenge. In order to ascertain how to best administer tourism in protected areas, especially in national parks, the main trends in tourism demand and supply must be determined. According to Eagles (2007), park visitation will continue to increase in the future and tourism in national parks will lead to increased public participation and collaboration, while increasing education levels in society will lead to increased sophistication in park administration and park services.

Other important trends can be identified, such as the increasing share of elderly population, which has a significant influence on the demand of activities, settings, and experiences in protected areas, as well as the increasing availability and accessibility of information technology, which profoundly influences park visitation. Continuous growth of the number of

protected areas, especially national parks, impacts the capability of many park administration institutions, and finally, global climate change will affect many protected areas and the tourism taking place in them in unforeseeable ways.

One of the most important questions regarding the management of protected areas (as well as tourism) is financing. As Conner (2007, 210) argues, 'protected areas are financed and supported by governments because they are public goods, that is, they are non-rival and not-excludable'. An equally-important reason for financing protected areas with public funds lies in the fact that they represent natural value that has been recognised and protected by the state for future generations, as natural heritage and part of the local, regional, and/or national identity.

On the global level, there has been a noticeable trend of reduced financing for protected areas from state budgets (as well as from other public sources), with a parallel increase in entrance fees, educational and recreational programmes, and other activities. This means that the most attractive protected areas are increasingly transforming into typical tourism sights, and in some cases full-fledged tourism destinations, forcing their primary role—nature protection—to play second fiddle. In such cases, the management of protected areas closely resembles the management of business entities.

This is a real and present problem for successful nature protection, which has led to paradoxical situations of commercialisation of protected areas in circumstances when mass tourism has threatened their fundamental function, i.e. the reason for which the area was categorised as protected: nature preservation. On the other hand, with sustainable tourism, revenues support nature protection activities and can be recognised as a decided benefit for the maintenance of protected areas. Another positive aspect of sustainable tourism development in protected areas is the prevention of other, more environmentally invasive activities.

Less-attractive and/or less well-known protected areas have fewer tourist visits, limiting the scope of tourism services and the financial effect of entrance fees. In most cases nature protection is not in question, however, under conditions of reduced public financing and tourism income, nature protection as a fundamental function can come under threat.

The aforementioned management challenges are also visible in examples of management of protected areas in Croatia and Slovenia. This is clear in the context of tourism valorisation and administration of speleological

formations. Bočić et al. (2006, 20), came to the following conclusion after researching administration models and tourism valorisation: ‘although the majority of the show caves in Croatia are protected by the category of geomorphological monument of nature, their tourism valorization primarily depends on the way of management. Namely, if a public institution runs a cave (e.g. Nature Park or National Park), the protection component is more prominent, ..., as well as the fact that the profit from the cave does not make the basic element of the public institutions profit structure. On the other hand, if a private concessionaire manages a show cave, the business orientation towards tourism is more marked. Consequently, in these cases the connection with local economy is more prominent, just as the significance of the phenomenon within the tourist destinations’.

Different administrative approaches can also be seen in the example of Postojna Cave and Škocjan Caves, the two most-attractive (to tourists) speleological formations in Slovenia. Although both areas enjoy a large number of visitors, Postojna Cave and its surroundings have developed as a typical mass tourism destination, while conservation and a “softer” development approach with positive efforts on the part of the local community characterises the management of Škocjan Caves (Jurinčič and Balažič, 2011).

The systems of management of protected areas in Croatia and Slovenia show some similarities, but also meaningful differences. In Slovenia, the system is relatively decentralised (Groznič Zeiler, 2011), due to a bottom-up approach. Namely, apart from Triglav National Park (the most significant protected area in the state), public institutions founded and financed by the state administer all regional parks, landscape parks, and one of the 56 nature reserves.

All other protected areas lack a public institution tasked with their administration. Local communities (LAU 2) can, if interested, administer such areas via concession. In such lower-rank protected areas (of interest to tourists), tourism development is most often not integrated into a unified tourism supply along with other protected areas. An additional problem in this sort of management system is the lack of clearly-defined institutional responsibilities in terms of governance, which can also be seen in the lack of management plans.

This can lead to situations where the status of protected area is simply a “paper shield” (e.g. in Zajčja Dobrava, Udin Boršt, and Šturmovci

landscape parks). Many authors have warned that without institutionalised management it is difficult to imagine balanced future development of protected areas that must simultaneously juggle nature protection, tourism and recreation, education, and other functions (Hribar et al, 2011).

There are, however, advantages to the existing type of management of lower-rank protected areas (in Slovenia) in terms of creating opportunities for stronger implementation of participative approaches, involving all shareholders in the local community with the goal of integrating a given protected area into the spatial and social development of the wider area in which it is located. On this sort of basis, specific forms of sustainable tourism within a given protected area and its surroundings can emerge, such as nature-based tourism, ecotourism, rural tourism, etc. Thereby, the protected area in question becomes one of a number of tourist attractions in the wider area, creating opportunities for tourism valorisation and the development of other attractions.

In the system of management of protected areas in Croatia, the approach is primarily centralized, i.e. top-down, especially in terms of management of national parks and nature parks—the most visited types of protected areas. In protected areas with lower degrees of protection, a bottom-up approach in terms of establishments and management is also implemented.

An example of the top-down management approach is the PARCS Project (Strengthening the Institutional and Financial Sustainability of the National System of Protected Areas in the Republic of Croatia), which was implemented from 2014 to 2017 by the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Energy of the Republic of Croatia and the UN Development Programme (UNDP), in partnership with public institutions that administer national and nature parks and the Croatian Agency for the Environment and Nature. The project was organised into two components: 1) reformation of the institutional framework in order to strengthen management efficiency of national protected areas; and 2) improving financial sustainability of the network of national protected areas (Ministry of Environment and Energy of the Republic of Croatia, 2017). The aforementioned project enabled the communal presentation and branding of Croatian national and nature parks for the tourism market (Fig. 1), which resulted in an increase in the number of visitors over the last few years.

Fig. 1 Logos for Croatian national and nature parks. The green logos represent continental protected areas, and blue logos represent coastal and island protected areas. This is an excellent example of an integrated visual identity for protected areas, designed for tourism marketing.

Source: Ministry of Environment and Energy of the Republic of Croatia, 2019

In this way, some Croatian nature parks (e.g. Papuk, Žumberak-Samoborsko Gorje, Medvednica) and national parks (e.g. Risnjak and Northern Velebit), which would be less-visible and less visited by tourists (thus generating less income) without significant marketing efforts (web pages, mobile applications, etc.), have been promoted. The number of tourist visits is rising every year in these areas, even though they are still dominantly characterised by educational and recreational activities.

The remaining protected areas are administered by competent public institutions on the county (regional) level, which are present in and financed by each of Croatia's 21 counties, and in few cases by cities, towns, municipalities, and special public institutions. Although the exact manner of management of protected nature areas varies slightly from county to county, it can be seen that the presence of an administrative body has enabled stronger (communal) promotion and integral administration on the regional level, especially for lesser-known areas of lower protection categories.

Such a system of management of protected areas (in Croatia), from the aspect of tourism, opens perspectives of development of (mass) tourism within protected areas themselves, as well as in less-influential areas outside of a given park's borders. This also carries with it the risk that the most visited national parks could transform into full-fledged tourism destinations.

Conclusion

Regardless of differences in management, protected areas—foremost national parks and nature parks in Croatia and Slovenia—are experiencing more and more visitors each year. In relation to global trends, it is realistic to expect that the number of visitors to these areas will continue to rise, and that the conflict between tourism development imperatives and nature protection imperatives will intensify in and around the most-visited protected areas (e.g. Plitvice Lakes National Park, Krka National Park, Triglav National Park, and Škocjan Caves Regional Park). Therefore, strict measures limiting further construction of residential and tourist accommodation should be enacted, in order to maintain an acceptable balance. Apart from construction, regulation of visitor traffic flows in national and nature parks is needed, as well as incentivising and strengthening public transport over personal automobiles (e.g. buses to Vrata Valley in Triglav National Park).

Special care should be given to proper distribution of tourism visits, in both spatial and temporal terms. The aforementioned spatial aspect is understood to mean balanced spatial distribution of visitors within a given protected area, in order to reduce pressure on the most attractive locations. The temporal aspect relates to more balanced tourism over longer periods (weeks, months, years), in order to reduce negative seasonal effects arising from higher visitation on weekends and overall during the warmer half of the year—especially during the high season (summer) of tourism. It is of inestimable value to continually and consistently work on improving education and ecological awareness efforts for both visitors and the local community, in order to preserve the most-visited national and nature parks for future generations, and simultaneously contribute to local economies and communities.

Protected areas of lower attractiveness to tourists in both states should be promoted more strongly to the public, not only for the purposes of tourism marketing, but for their value to society (natural and cultural heritage) as well as for the services that they provide to the ecosystem. In the context of tourism development, such areas can play a significant role as relief areas for the most-visited tourism destinations. Less-developed areas can diversify their economic structure and raise the quality of life for their residents by developing a higher-quality rural, eco, and nature-based tourism supply, as well as recreational activities.

Tourism valorisation of protected areas in Croatia and Slovenia has the power to create additional economic, ecological, social, and political value. Namely, a large share of the border area between Croatia and Slovenia is ripe ground for opportunities of cross-border cooperation for nature protection due to homogeneity and similar natural characteristics. The realisation of closer cross-border cooperation could be easily achieved with Croatia's accession to the Schengen Area, which would render tourism-recreational mobility between the two countries much easier. Additionally, stronger links between existing protected areas on both sides of the border, as the basis for a cross-border protected area (e.g. Risnjak in Croatia–Snežnik in Slovenia, Žumberak-Samoborsko Gorje in Croatia–Gorjanci in Slovenia, the north-western part of Hrvatsko Zagorje–Kozjansko in Slovenia), represent suitable opportunities for cooperation for mutual benefit.

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