

# VISITOR MANAGEMENT, A TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN PROTECTED AREAS

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**Abstract:** *The article analyzes visitor management techniques as a way to develop sustainable tourism in protected areas. Visitor management is an important tool in recreational and protected areas, as increasing use levels can negatively impact the quality of recreational experience as well as natural resources. To meet the requirements of both nature and visitors, a prudent and careful management is necessary. In order to manage protected areas within acceptable ecological and social carrying capacities, tourism planners need to monitor visitor numbers, leisure activities and behaviour and understand expectations and motivations.*

**Key words:** *sustainable tourism, protected areas, visitor management.*

## 1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the world's fastest growing industries and its global impacts are immense and highly complex. Given that a high percentage of tourism involves visits to naturally and culturally distinguished sites, there are clearly major opportunities for investing in the maintenance of biological resources.

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enjoy a natural environment [3]. Tourism can support the protection of natural resources, as local residents realize the value of their asset and want to preserve it.

At the same time, our global heritage of living species is threatened as never before, as the protected areas that harbor so much of our biodiversity are exposed to the pressures of unsustainable development. The precautionary approach urges us to be especially concerned about tourism in protected areas, given the risk of damage and destruction to this unique natural resource.

Tourism is a major management issue for many protected areas as the presence and actions of visitors can present serious problems for biodiversity conservation. Therefore tourism has to be managed with care and site managers must assess and

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balance the costs and benefits of tourism in protected areas. It is also important to find ways for local people and communities to benefit from tourism linked to conservation, as this helps to demonstrate the economic value of the natural resources being conserved.

## **2. Sustainable Tourism Development in Protected Areas**

According to the World Tourism Organization [11] sustainable tourism should:

- 1) Make optimal use of environmental resources that constitute a key element in tourism development, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity.
- 2) Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance.
- 3) Ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation.

Sustainable tourism development guidelines and management practices are applicable to all forms of tourism in all types of destinations, including mass tourism and the various niche tourism segments. Sustainability principles refer to the environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance must be established

between these three dimensions to guarantee its long-term sustainability.

Sustainable tourism development requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, as well as strong political leadership to ensure wide participation and consensus building. Achieving sustainable tourism is a continuous process and it requires constant monitoring of impacts, introducing the necessary preventive and/or corrective measures whenever necessary. Sustainable tourism should also maintain a high level of tourist satisfaction and ensure a meaningful experience to the tourists, raising their awareness about sustainability issues and promoting sustainable tourism practices amongst them.

Although the relationship between tourism and protected areas is complex and sometimes adversarial, tourism is always a critical component to consider in the establishment and management of protected areas.

The definition of a protected area adopted by The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is: "An area of land and/or sea especially dedicated to the protection and maintenance of biological diversity, and of natural and associated cultural resources, and managed through legal or other effective means" [9].

Tourism can degrade natural areas, but can also be a reason to protect nature and culture. It can fund nature management and give nature a direct economic value, providing an incentive for local inhabitants and governments to protect nature [10].

By establishing closer links with the tourism sector, protected areas staff can learn the realities of tourist demands and more effectively meet the requirements of tourism companies. Stronger relationships

between the protected areas staff and the tourism sector can also encourage a greater understanding of conservation priorities amongst tourism companies.

Although the idea of and the need for sustainable tourism have been accepted for some years, and despite the existence of many good examples of activities in this field, the ever increasing challenges facing protected areas showed the necessity of making a real commitment through the development of a Charter.

In 1995 EUROPARC took the initiative to set up the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas, with a project funded by the EU's LIFE programme and led by the Fédération des Parcs naturels régionaux de France on behalf of EUROPARC.

Ten European pilot parks together with representatives of the tourism industry and NGOs active in the tourism and environment fields contributed their combined experience and wisdom and outlined their needs. A final version of the Charter was published in 2000, with 21 parks from Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain and the UK signing a letter of intent.

The Charter commits signatories to implementing a local strategy for 'sustainable tourism' defined as [5]: "any form of development, management or tourist activity which ensures the long-term protection and preservation of natural, cultural and social resources and contributes in a positive and equitable manner to the economic development and well-being of individuals living, working or staying in protected areas."

Developing policies and laws related to sustainable tourism solidifies and acknowledges a desire to maintain a high

level of commitment to achieving sustainable tourism development. Policies that recognize tourism as a valuable element of protected area management provide guidance to the managers of these areas.

Planning guidelines applicable to government and managers of protected areas include [1]:

- Develop and implement effective land-use planning measures that maximize the potential environmental and economic benefits of travel and tourism while minimizing potential environmental or cultural damage.
- Tourism activities should be planned at the appropriate level with a view to integrate socio-economic, cultural and environmental considerations at all levels.
- Planning for tourism development must be integrated with other planning efforts at the site, regional and national levels, applying tools such as strategic environmental assessment and integrated resource management.

Poor planning and management of tourism development in and around protected areas can have devastating, long-lasting and sometimes irreversible effects. Non-sustainable tourism is negative for conservation goals, for local communities and for societies in general [2].

### **3. Visitor Management in Protected Areas**

Managing tourism in a sustainable way however requires both a long-term perspective and careful consideration of the many ways in which tourist activities and environment interrelate. What is needed is a systematic approach and a tool kit for planning in order to provide the

necessary resources for visitor management. Therefore it is important to provide standardized data and collect them as early as possible.

Increasing recreational use of national parks and protected areas can impact natural and cultural resources and the quality of the visitor experience. Determining how much recreational use can ultimately be accommodated in a park or protected area is often addressed through the concept of carrying capacity [7].

From a management perspective, visitor impacts are significant because they directly reflect management success in meeting two primary mandates: resource protection and recreation provision [8]. In this respect visitor impacts need to be managed since:

1. Visitor use can negatively affect vegetation, soil, water and wildlife resources as well as the quality of visitor experiences.
2. Visitor crowding and conflict can reduce the quality of visitor experiences.
3. Environmental attributes such as vegetation and soil resistance and resiliency, influence the type and severity of visitor resource impacts.
4. The use/impact relationship limits the effectiveness of visitor use reduction and dispersal strategies.
5. Decision-making frameworks can provide an explicit and flexible means of managing visitor impacts.
6. Indirect management strategies are often less costly to implement and are preferred by visitors.

Visitor management is an administrative action oriented towards maintaining the quality of park resources and visitor

experiences [4]. In many but not all situations management tends to focus on the negative impacts resulting from unrestrained visitor activity. In other situations management acts assertively to create and maintain opportunities for visitors to view, experience, learn about and appreciate their natural and cultural heritage.

Broadly speaking there are four strategic approaches which can be used to reduce the negative impacts of visitors on protected areas [3]:

1. *Managing the supply* of tourism or visitor opportunities, e.g. by increasing the space available or the time available to accommodate more use;
2. *Managing the demand* for visitation, e.g. through restrictions of length of stay, the total numbers, or type of use;
3. *Managing the resource* capabilities to handle use, e.g. through hardening the site or specific locations, or developing facilities; and
4. *Managing the impact* of use, e.g. reducing the negative impact of use by modifying the type of use, or dispersing or concentrating use.

The visitor management techniques available to managers of natural resources include [6]:

- Regulating access by area (zoning);
- Regulating visitation by visitor type (through pricing)
- Implementing entry or user fees;
- Providing interpretation programmes and facilities;
- Regulating visitor behavior (codes of conduct);
- Concentrating on allowing accredited organizations to bring visitors to the site.

Sustainable tourism practice within protected areas is a long-term commitment. But while it is important to think long-term, it is also necessary to set realistic short and mid-term goals. Individuals, businesses and organizations must be aware that benefits are long-term, and should not expect to experience them immediately after sustainable practices are implemented. In practice, only a small portion of benefits will arise quickly; most will depend upon many years of continued effort [3].

#### 4. Conclusions

Protected areas normally achieve recognition and enhanced protection when sufficient numbers of people visit them, appreciate them, and take political action to assure their survival. Park tourism is a critical component of protected area establishment and management.

The big challenge for nature management is to preserve areas with minimal human impact, in particular by leisure activities, while at the same time, zones must be found to satisfy recreational and educational needs.

The development of visitor management plans as part of the management of protected and recreational areas is widely accepted by park managers and international organizations as a way of reducing conflicts. Establishing such visitor flow concepts requires accurate knowledge of visitor numbers and activities along with information on their needs and motivations.

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