

From the Beginning Until the World Heritage Title: The Tendencies and Management of Visitor Flows at the Hortobágy National Park

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Abstract: The Hortobágy was always in the center of interest because of its special natural values and its characteristic landscape. Even since 1973, when the Hortobágy National Park was established (as the first national park in Hungary) the visitor flows has been significant. However, this mainly meant a 1 or 2 days mass visits. The successive management plans paid increased attention to the problems and issues related to the visitor flows and the possible solutions. The developed zoning-system and the management regulations based on this deal with the tourism.

The recently built Epona Rider Village and then the private tourism organizations appeared in increasingly large numbers, and require a new management approach. The important developments of the recent years (educational center, museums, demonstrational centers) also had a great influence on visitor flow management. The practice applied in each stage of the development process, their modifications and further developments, which is to meet the requirements of the World Heritage title, will be introduced.

BACKGROUND

The Hortobágy National Park (established in 1973) is the first, and until now the largest Hungarian national park with its 81,000 hectares. It received the "World Heritage" status from UNESCO in 1999. The Hortobágy "puszta" (i.e. "barren lands") is an excellent example for the traditional land use being carried on for centuries, ensuring the lasting co-existence between human and nature. All these – goods, natural and cultural values acknowledged as the part of the national heritage – can not be isolated or disclosed from the society. It is necessary to ensure the opportunity for getting acquainted with these values, the learning process, the environmental awareness and the recreation. For a long while, experts are seeking for the solution that satisfy the needs of the nature conservation and recreation: for this reason the term "eco-tourism" has been developed.

In the Act No LIII of 1996 (Nature Conservation Act), Hungary declare the need to ensure the visitor access to the protected natural areas, as the part of information-flow, education, research and tourism. It is necessary to promote the widest possible public knowledge on the natural values, and the conservation activities carried on the protected areas, while performing various recreational activities.

DEVELOPMENT OF VISITOR FLOWS IN THE AREA

Due to its size, and besides the areas of high protection, the Hortobágy National Park is capable to ensure the visitor access according to the international standards, and to satisfy the needs of recreation. The first overall eco-tourism development plan was prepared in 1994, based on the IUCN zoning. Three zones were formulated according to the visitor flow:

- free access areas,
- guided access areas, and
- areas closed for visitors.

As the basis for visitor strategies, program packages were elaborated, and touristic developments were made.

PROGRAMME FOR THE TOURISM MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT

The Hortobágy area attracts some 200,000 visitors, most of them spend only one day in the area (day-trippers). For this reason the development of a new complex program that enables the sustainable tourism is of crucial importance. The key elements of such program are:

- due to infrastructure development formulation of four demonstrational centers representing the main territorial features of the area;

- the income of the locals is increasing (services, accommodation, guiding, selling of home-made goods, etc.);
- the local and regional natural values (habitats, species) receive more attention do to the presentation;
- the income of the National Park is also increasing;
- the realization of the planned developments will promote the conservation of landscape and habitat values, and the biodiversity will also increase;
- with the realization of the Visitor Centre that presents the Hortobágy National Park in its whole, the prestige, social acceptance (public awareness) and the national – international reputation of the of the nature conservation activities will increase and
- the environmental and natural awareness and behavior will further develop.

The tools for the control of visitor flows in the near future are:

- the Visitor Centre (when ready);
- in situ presentation of the “living puszta” (restored wetland, gene bank - presentation of ancient farm animals -, Przewalski horses, characteristic landscape elements, bicycle road, guide boat, etc.);
- bird-watching tours (avifauna of aquatic-, grassy-, and loessy habitats, alkaline ponds and marshes, migrating birds and bird hospital, etc.);
- renovation of narrow-track railway (in the fishpond area);
- further development of the “West Reception House” of the Hortobágy National Park (cheap accommodation for students, exhibition hall).

Long term development are as follows:

- realisation of ethnological and culture-historical exhibitions;
- launching of permanent nature conservation campus;
- full development of information posts (poster network for orientation, education and zones);
- bulletins, brochures and events;
- development of traditional fairs;
- continuous development of the ranger network.

The Hortobágy National Park, as the managing authority of the area is intends to strengthen the co-operation between the actors in the tourism of the area, by involving them into the commenting, preliminaries, decision making and realization process, in order to ensure the conflict-free visitor flow management of the area.

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