

117 Synergies between youth and biosphere reserve. Case of North Vidzeme Biosphere reserve, Latvia

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“No one will protect what they don't care about; and no one will care about what they have never experienced.”
/David Attenborough/

The COVID-19 pandemic proved that natural areas play an important role in human daily life and even more in their leisure time activities. Managing institutions of specially protected areas are paying more attention to planning tourism infrastructure without harm to the environment and show members of society, especially youth, that these areas are open for people.

More and more questions have been raised about young people and their motivation to visit protected natural areas in order to raise awareness and ensure nature protection in the future (Egan, 2016). It is important to understand why travelers go to visit nature tourism attractions and what influences their decision or motivation to go there in order to be able to prepare and offer an appropriate service. Nature experiences can have a very strong emotional impact on a personality, especially a child or young person (Falgoust, 2017). As it is mentioned in Mab Youth Forum declaration 2019 “Children and youth are among the most vulnerable groups to the effects of environmental degradation”.

Motivation is characterized by three things: drive, purpose, and need. There are a significant number of designed and redesigned tourist motivation theories, but Metin (2019) distinguishes 4 main groups of nature tourism motivations: novelty-self-development, return to nature, knowledge, and a healthy lifestyle and escape. Researchers point to the emergence of a new hybrid tourist, defined as a tourist seeking several needs to be met at the same time: recreation and entertainment, spending time with friends and physical activity. This confirms that classical theories of motivation for young people need to be studied in an integrated and complex way (Raunio, 2014; Grinfelde & Livina, 2016).

The North Vidzeme Biosphere Reserve (NVBR) was chosen as the study

area because it is the largest protected area in Latvia, covering 6% of the total area of Latvia. The reserve was established in 1997 and was recognized as a protected territory of international importance in the framework of the UNESCO MAB program on December 15, 1997. The NVBR represents the terrestrial and coastal 10 Baltic sea ecosystems, also covering river basins of the coast of Gulf Riga. It includes 10 administrative counties (fully and partially) with a total area of 457,708 hectares (DAP, 2019). More than half of the NVBR terrestrial area is covered by forests and swamps. The area also includes 24 nature reserves, 1 nature park, and 2 protected Natura 2000 marine areas.

The NVBR area is attractive for tourists for its amazing natural attractions: the Salaca river, Burtnieks Lake, Randu meadows, Vidzeme rocky seashore, and a variety of swamps and boglands, providing nature trails and watching towers. The area is also crossed by long-distance hiking and velo routes: Baltic Coastal Hiking (route E9), the Forest Trail (route E11), and EiroVelo 13 (also known as the Iron Curtain Trail). Tendencies show that knowledge and recognition of the area is increasing (1).

Methodology. To achieve the aim of the research, the integrated research method was used. Between May and August 2019, an online survey of the behavior of Gen Z and Gen Y with main purpose to explore motivation and influencing factors for young people to visit the NVBR. A total of 317 questionnaires were obtained, of which 295 were valid for processing the results. Three focus group discussions and after three observations in nature was used for qualitative research method. The aim of the focus group discussions was to find out the learning habits and understanding of the natural and cultural heritage of Gen Z as a value in the context of

travel. Each focus group included 5-7 participants, all of whom were born between 2000 and 2005. The novelty of the present study is that for the first time in Latvia, the potential target audience of protected area is analyzed from the generational perspective. Of all of the online survey respondents, 65% were young people in the age group 15–19, and 35% were in the 20–25 age group. However, even though they were visiting the reserve or even living in it, there were instances where participants did not know that it is a part of NVBR. Furthermore, when asked about their associations with the area, participants mentioned negative things like “something very complicated”, “protected area where is not allow to visit.”

The main motivations to visit the biosphere reserve were push and pull motivation: to relieve stress, to socialize, to escape from daily life, to do activities, to vitalize respondents' daily life, to enrich knowledge, and to gain a new and unique experience. They have a positive attitude towards spending time in nature and traveling in nature as one of the most relevant leisure time activities.

Youth want to receive information that is well visualized, so it is very important for tourist information to have visual material, notably, high quality pictures. They are seeking interactive

involvement, the use of all senses, technological solutions. Acquiring new knowledge must be an added value.

It can be concluded that young people currently lack information and education about the existence of such protected areas as the biosphere reserve in Latvia, about the fact that the biosphere reserve is freely available with well-equipped infrastructure for society. Since young generations are technologically savvy and value adventure and new experiences, it is suggested to develop initiatives with elements of play and competition to raise young people's awareness of protected natural areas and to motivate them to visit NVBR among like-minded communities.

There was a tendency for young people to plan their time more carefully, trying to devote most of their time to leisure and leisure activities rather than compulsory activities. Therefore, it is very important to remember that when creating tourism offers for young generations, there must be room for spontaneity, creativity, and time and space for photographs.

References

(1) Druva-Druvaskalne & Livina, 2018 <https://doi.org/10.17770/sie2019vol5.3928>