

131 Impacts of lockdown on the management of Brazilian National Parks

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What did the current pandemic represent for park managers in Brazil? This pandemic certainly created negative consequences for 'costumers' (visitors). But does this mean as well for conservation? Based on interviews sent to the 74 managers, we present an overview of the impact of Covid-19 at management of Brazilian National Parks.

Closing the Parks

Following the guidelines of the World Health Organization to maintain social distancing to contain the pandemic, the Brazilian government decided to close all National Parks from March 17, 2020 for the public. In addition to recreational activities, fieldwork conducted by researchers from other institutions has also been suspended.

Three months after its closure, some parks began the gradual reopening process for visitors and researchers. With great regional differences and completely different biomes, the managers followed a protocol, but each park had to deal with different pressures.

Tourism had to adapt to this new reality: few customers. Even if the parks could open their doors tomorrow without any restrictions, they would face a shortage of visitors in the short and medium term. Does the number of visitors will recover one day to the pre-pandemic levels? Many uncertainties have arisen with the birth of a new normal, the-one-and-a-half-meter society. Air travel - both international and domestic - tends to decline. Maybe forever. This not only brings great changes for the tourism sector, but also for Parks whose management is strongly based on the number of visitors. Some believe that the valorization of Brazilian national ecotourism is the way out, as social distance would be easier to implement. Is it realistic? We believe that ecotourism flow in the future turns out to be lower than the pre-pandemic level and this forces the Parks to adapt to fulfill their agendas related to public use.

Environmental conservation amid pandemic Covid-19

At a global level, during the pandemic, the protected areas had a reduction in the number of visitors, making it possible to benefit from some positive effects related to a reduction in impacts on the environment including the lower risk of running over animals. Sharma (2020) reports positive results such as a lower level of pollution in the air and water, a drop in greenhouse gases and the recovery of the natural space by wildlife.

However, a closer look suggests that the impacts of the pandemic are not merely positive. Buckley (2020) points out two possible unwanted side effects of the pandemic for conservation: i) increase in poaching due to reduced income from tourism; and (ii) extractive companies can opportunistically and through multiple mechanisms, have access to public domain resources inside protected areas.

Some results

This survey had an online questionnaire, addressing 25 questions structured in: 1) Basic information; 2) Execution of activities; 3) Pressure to reopen; 4) Infractions after the parks closed; 5) Visualization of fauna by employees ; 6) manager's position during the mandatory closure of the park. Of the total of 74 Parks, 44 managers sent their responses.

Thirty of the 44 parks that replied the survey did not have a reduction in their working hours. Some of them had problems adapting to the new reality, others were successful and were able to set up virtual meetings or participate in distance learning courses. The new reality has even benefited a surprising number of Parks, mainly in the Amazon region. The Internet is helping and facilitating its operation, as these Parks have precarious access sometimes only by boat. Traveling is expensive and time-consuming.

Threats

With the threat of the Brazilian economy shrinking, it was expected that this scenario would have a negative impact on ICMBio, the Federal Agency that manages National Parks. The results do not confirm this hypothesis for now. In 90% of the parks, the staff has not changed. In the medium term, there is a potential risk of shrinking in sectors linked to nature tourism, as a 40 to 50% reduction in the visitation rate in Brazilian Parks is expected.

In general, tourism inhibits illegal actions in protected areas. It was evident that the mandatory closure of the parks promoted an increase in the presence of poachers according to the managers' report. Likewise, there has been an increase in fishing, both recreational and as a source of income (Figure 1). Mining has also increased. They also emphasize that parks that do not control the entry of visitors lead to intense and disordered use. This condition, combined with the lack of land tenure regularization, represents a favorable scenario for infractions.

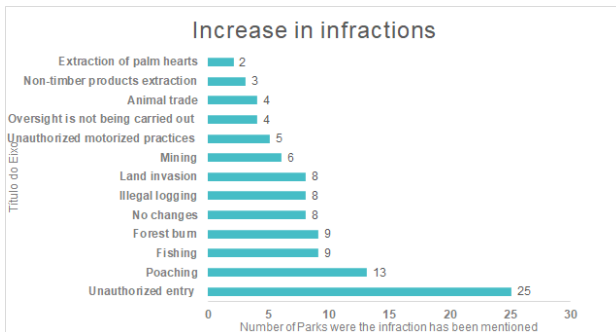


Figure 1: Increase in infractions during the pandemic in the Brazilian National Parks

The most cited negative effects were the interruption of scientific research and projects with the local communities. In many regions where tourism is the main driver of the local economy, the impact with lost revenue has been great. Other impacts cited: the lack of opportunities to use the available financial resources due to the lockdown; lack of outdoor spaces for the population to practice activity; growing demotivation among the indigenous population; accumulation of work in trail maintenance. On the closure of national parks: only 5% of managers did not agree with the closure and 76% did.

After our survey we believe that ideal scenario would be to reopen the parks for the residents of the area where they could recreate and get in contact with nature respecting social distancing of 2 meters. In parks with the presence of indigenous people, riverside dwellers and quilombolas, a partial opening should occur with the restriction of external visitors in areas with local residents.

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