169 Krka National Park's biodiversity as basis for wildlife tourism development

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Krka National Park, a karst hydrological pearl of the Croatian coast with its distinctive geological, geomorphological, hydrological and biological richness, was declared a National Park in 1985. The geomorphological playfulness of the river Krka with the karst canyon along with 7 magnificent waterfalls with numerous lakes, rapids and cascades create an unreal and unique landscape pearl which generates a rich biological diversity. However, the tourist offer of the park does not differentiate or implement specific forms of tourism such as wildlife tourism, which is why the paper investigates the perception of visitors about the valorization of the park's biodiversity as a paradigm for the development of wildlife tourism; especially since the park is filled with a number of valuable, rare and endemic species. The research maps out the species' habitats and proposes a unique programme for the visitors which prefer the wildlife tourism.

Krka National Park's Biodiversity as Basis for Wildlife Tourism Development

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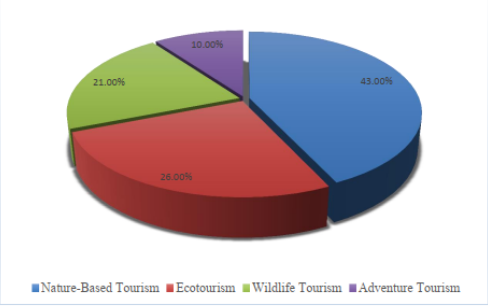
Figure 1. Which form of tourism would you be interested in the Krka National Park



The aim of the research and the methodology

The questionnaire was used as the primary measuring instrument of this empirical research. The survey incorporated a semi-structured questionnaire that was conducted on a sample of 303 respondents (N = 303). It was conducted directly with visitors of the park in person. The primary research included 12 questions about socio-demographic characteristics, 10 questions about staying in the park and experiences of the Park and 20 statements reagrding visitors' attitudes about biodiversity as a paradigm of wildlife tourism development (Likert scale 1-7). A 7-item scale was used to obtain a greater response differentiation. Variational analysis was used to process the results .

Biodiversity as a particularity of the Park

The research of the flora of NP Krka recorded 1.186 different plant species, among which the most numerous are Mediterranean and southern European plants with several endemic species (41 endemic taxa in the Croatian flora). According to the results of the research, about 1000 species of invertebrates live within the National Park, 9 amphibian species, 19 species of reptiles, 229 bird species, more than 200 species of butterflies and 46 mammal species (16 of which are endangered bat species).. The freshwater part of Krka is inhabited by 20 different fish species, of which 11 are endemic. The research of speleological objects revealed 129 species, many of which are rare, and among them were several endemics.

Survey on the biodiversity of the Park

Different socio-psychological profiles of the respondents (59% foreign visitors) demonstrated sensitivity towards certain natural values in the park. Moreover, one third of the respondents were be open to undergo an educational program on the park's flora and fauna. A particular interest towards the wildlife tourism was shown by 21% of respondents (Figure 1), which is an objective ecological niche for this form of tourism.

When it comes to the biological heritage as a prerequisite for the development of wildlife tourism, the visitors generally agree (scores ranging from 5 to 7) in most of the 20 claims. This is clearly illustrated by the following statements: Considering the size of it, there is an exceptional biodiversity in the park (70%); Wildlife Tourism has a long-term perspective in park's tourism (78%); Ichthyofauna/fish are extremely interesting to observe (70%); Endemic species are an invaluable treasure of the park (85%); Conditions are suited for the development of bird watching tourism (72%).

To conclude, the exceptional biodiversity in and around the park can and must be valorized via wildlife tourism whilst taking into account the health of the park's ecosystem in its entirety. The obtained results present a foundation for the practical designing of the permanently sustainable wildlife tourism, i.e., although special attention is given to the protection and preservation of the species and habitats, the biological richness of the park still becomes accessible to the interested parties. Finally, this wouldn't interfere with the economic or marketing benefits of the park as a tourist destination.

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