

Local awareness, acceptance and tourism development: challenges and opportunities for protected area management in Post-Soviet countries – the Samur-Yalama National Park, Azerbaijan

Julius Arnegger, Azerbaijan Tourism Institute, Azerbaijan, julius@arnegger.net

Til Dieterich, Baku State University, Azerbaijan, til.dieterich@gmail.com

Victoria Rodina, Azerbaijan Tourism Institute, Azerbaijan, rodina_victoria@yahoo.com

Introduction

‘Park-people relationships’ is a focus of researchers since the 1980s, notably the role of protected areas (PAs) as components of regional economies and their potential to provide income to local communities, through, for example, nature-based tourism (Arnegger, 2014). Conversely, PAs are likely to face opposition if local communities are not adequately compensated for use restrictions (Mayer, 2014).

The adoption of integrative management approaches arguably pose specific challenges to post-Soviet countries, where PA systems were not exempt from the general dramatic economic and political changes since the late 1980s (Müller, 2014). This study focuses on local awareness of, and attitudes towards, a newly-established national park in Azerbaijan, and evaluates challenges and opportunities for regional economic development.

Context: Azerbaijan’s PA system and Samur-Yalama National Park (SYNP)

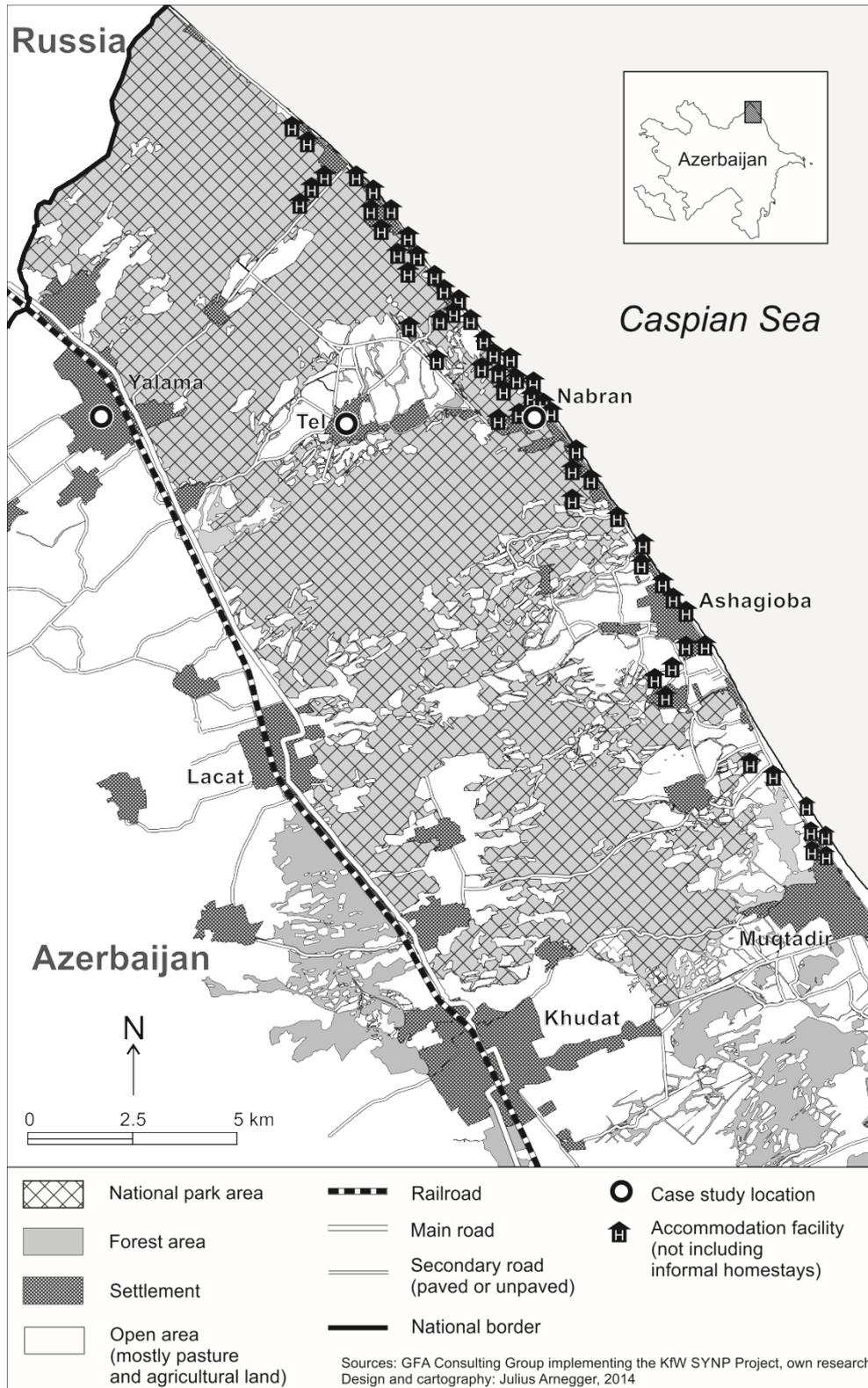
Azerbaijan and the Caucasus region at large are considered as a global biodiversity hotspot (Schmidt and Uppenbrink, 2009). Azerbaijan’s PA system dates back to Soviet times, but all of its nine national parks were established since 2003 as part of a new, ambitious PA program. Challenges for Azerbaijan’s PAs include underfunding, lack of research and monitoring, and a low degree of public awareness for environmental issues (USAID Caucasus, 2010). The latter is aggravated by insufficient inclusion of the local population in decision-making processes in which, comparable to Soviet times, top-down approaches prevail.

SYNP was established in 2012 with support from the German Development Bank (KfW) and international consultants (MENR, et al., 2014). The park covers 11,772 hectares of the last remaining coastal forests in the country (Schmidt and Uppenbrink, 2009). It is located on the Caspian shore, south of the Russian border. The forest areas are fragmented and interspersed with settlements and pasture plots of different sizes. The latter, as well as the coastline which has been used for tourism purposes since Soviet times, are excluded from the park (cf. Figure 1). Parcels on the coast are increasingly occupied by tourism infrastructure and second homes, often in ecologically sensitive locations. Although the development of park-related sustainable tourism products is planned, so far, both demand and supply focus on conventional (mass) beach tourism.

SYNP's outline and location thus imply potential land-use conflicts between conservation, agriculture and tourism.

Three case study locations (cf. Figure 1) were selected so as to represent existing intraregional differences: decreasing tourism intensity from coast to hinterland, and decreasing access to major transport and trade routes from the hinterland to the coast: (1) The small beach resort town *Nabran* (ca. 620 inhabitants) is a popular destination for domestic tourism. It accounts for 3,000 hotel beds and an unknown number of private homestays. (2) *Tel* (ca. 500 inhabitants) is situated in the central area of SYNP. Although close (3 km) to Nabran, Tel is rarely visited by tourists and economically disadvantaged due to a lack of infrastructure and its location off the main road and beach. (3) *Yalama* has about 3,600 inhabitants. Here, border traffic on the road to Russia has a marked influence on the local economy.

Figure 1: Map of SYNp



Methods

In August 2012 and December 2013, 30 semi-structured interviews on socioeconomic conditions and development as well as acceptance of and attitudes towards SYNP were conducted with local residents in Nabran, Tel and Yalama, and with representatives of public authorities. The latter included managerial staff from the SYNP administration and municipalities. Local residents were selected so as to represent typical socioeconomic situations in the three villages and the region at large with regard to employment status, degree of involvement in tourism, existing work-relation to SYNP, etc. Interviews typically lasted between 20 and 60 minutes; they were recorded and later transcribed.

Results

To date, knowledge of SYNP among the local population remains diffuse. Different patterns of awareness, attitudes and potential land-use conflicts emerge in the three case study locations that reflect the socioeconomic disparities outlined above.

Respondents in *Yalama* are mostly unaware of and indifferent to SYNP. In this settlement, the local economy is, besides the omnipresent subsistence farming, based on trade and border traffic and much less dependent on natural resources than in Nabran and Tel, where tourism and agriculture prevail.

In *Nabran* and *Tel*, most respondents link a positive view of the national park to hopes for a speedy connection to the public gas distribution system. Due to high market prices for firewood, poorer households, notably in Tel, appear to still rely on illegally collecting firewood in the forests of SYNP, and using the latter as pasture for livestock. Thus, pressure on natural resources persists.

Expectations related to tourism development in SYNP are voiced from the local population and public authorities in *Nabran*. However, concerns are raised with regard to ecological stress from increased visitation e.g. solid waste pollution.

In *Tel*, most respondents claim to view SYNP positively at first, but deeper questioning reveals more ambiguous attitudes: compensations for use-restrictions on natural resources (or lack thereof) are an issue of concern for the rural poor. In addition, it is questionable whether the establishment of SYNP will significantly mitigate unemployment, the overarching problem in Tel.

Discussion and conclusion

Without adequate compensation and participation, nature conservation in Azerbaijan is likely to be at odds with the socioeconomic needs of poor peripheral communities. The latter require more attention by PA managers in order to minimize deviant behavior such as clandestine grazing or the collection of firewood. In the short-term, establishing a gas supply will alleviate financial stress for poor households, but developing national park-related tourism offers also needs to be considered, so as to achieve a more balanced regional distribution of income, and, ultimately, local support of SYNP's conservation goals.

SYNP's location in proximity to a popular beach destination holds the potential of a diversification of tourism products. However, careful planning and management are necessary in order to make tourism a driver of sustainable regional development. Finally, it also appears important not to raise

unrealistic economic expectations related to SYNP: in the short-term, a significant increase in visitor numbers is questionable given the marginal role that ecotourism is currently playing in Azerbaijan.

References

Arnegger J. (2014) Protected Areas, the Tourist Bubble and Regional Economic Development. Two Case Studies from Mexico and Morocco, Würzburg: Geographische Gesellschaft Würzburg, in print.

Mayer M. (2014) Can nature-based tourism benefits compensate for the costs of national parks? A study of the Bavarian Forest National Park, Germany. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 22 (4), 561-583.

MENR - Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources of the Republic of Azerbaijan, KfW - Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau and GFA - GFA Consulting Group. (2014) Samur-Yalama National Park. Available at: <http://www.samur-yalama.az/> (Accessed: 17.03.2014)

Müller M. (2014) From Sacred Cow to Cash Cow: The Shifting Political Ecologies of Protected Areas in Russia. *Zeitschrift für Wirtschaftsgeographie* 85 (in print).

Schmidt S and Uppenbrink M. (2009) Potential Analysis for Further Nature Conservation in Azerbaijan: A Spatial and Political Investment Strategy, Greifswald: Michael Succow Foundation.

USAID – United States Agency for International Development Caucasus. (2010) Biodiversity Analysis Update for Azerbaijan, Vol. I/II. Arlington, VA: USAID.