

# Visitor Management and Destination Management as Tools for Sustainable Regional Development

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## Introduction

This paper explores the interdependency between protected areas (PA's) and the regions in which they are located. Processes of change in the rural world are not only a threat to the sustainability of the economy and the quality of life of communities that live from agriculture, forestry or fishing, but equally jeopardize biodiversity and affect protected areas. Rural areas, their communities and nature conservation could have a common stake in finding models of sustainable development.

Tourism is gaining acceptance as a tool for sustainable development. Visitors to protected areas could contribute significantly to support the economy of PA's and rural communities. The challenge is to define the role of visitor management (VM) in sustainable regional (tourism) development and to come to a strategic approach to implement this role successfully. The possibility to connect visitor management to the innovative concept of Tourism Destination Management is explored.

In order to understand the mutual dependency between successful conservation management and sustainable rural tourism development, a closer look at the challenges that rural areas and PA's have in common can be useful. Areas with high ecological values are often located in relatively remote rural areas. Many traditional and natural landscapes survived mainly due to their remoteness. Unfavorable conditions for modern farming and forestry have been able to sustain only a limited local population, for whom traditional land use was not so much a choice, but a necessity. Those isolated areas also have never been able to create attractive

conditions for investments in other sectors. That leads to a situation where the desire of rural communities to have access to modern life standards could easily be neglected. Rural areas are confronted with an exodus, because the traditional agricultural activities were no longer competitive on globalizing markets and because the quality of life was no longer attractive to young and talented people. Land abandonment seems to go side by side with intensification of farming and forestry. The remaining farmers are forced to comply with modern efficiency standards that require an increased use of herbicides, pesticides and heavy machinery, which in their turn require bigger plots of land, that are not compatible with the small scaled character of the landscape that biodiversity requires. Forestry and other rural activities face similar processes of intensification. If unemployment rates and poverty are growing, the pressure of the local population on the natural resources will only increase.

While the establishment of a protected area is a great step forward from the conservation point of view, it deprives the local population of a part of its resources and sets limits to traditional activities with an important economic and social function (hunting, grazing, logging). PA's that were not successful in accommodating communities interests by creating economic alternatives tend to suffer from practices that under the new regime have become illegal: hunters become poachers and conflicts arise.

Although tradition is not always a guarantee for ecological sustainability, traditional land use forms part of the conservation of biodiversity. The lack

of economic sustainability of this land use has become a common threat to protected areas and rural communities.

If areas are sparsely populated and their economic value decreases, the temptation to use them for high impact activities like construction of tourism resorts and ski slopes, infrastructure, storage of nuclear waste, mining, logging or hydro-energy projects increases. Although these developments in big part take place outside the protected area boundaries, their impact on conservation can be huge. At the same time these activities are usually not under the control of communities and do not sustain the rural economy.

Biodiversity does not stop at the boundaries of protected areas: many species depend on a healthy, natural environment and ecological corridors. The future of nature conservation is connected to the future of the countryside. Conservation depends on conservation of a rural way of life and on a healthy rural economy. The insight that protected area management should be based on good, pro-active relationships with its environment is gaining ground<sup>1</sup>. Stakeholder involvement and community involvement have become new standards in conservation.

Protected areas often share with rural communities a need to enhance economic sustainability. New models for sustainable regional development should be based on establishing economic and social links between PA and environment. Given the limitations for economic activities that sensitive landscapes and protected areas offer, sustainable tourism development has become an accepted strategy for conservation<sup>2</sup>, although there still is limited empirical evidence of its effectiveness<sup>3</sup>.

This paper advocates an approach in which a protected area could be a catalyst for regional development. Tourism can only play a role in this process if the region has sufficient potential to

become a successful tourism destination. Visitor management can be an important tool to maximize the contribution of tourism/ visitor flows to sustainable development and conservation. In order to play that role effectively, a strategic approach is required.

## Methods

This paper is based on the experiences of the author as a consultant in the field of sustainable tourism development in protected areas and in rural areas and on desk research.

Before the role of visitor management can be assessed and a strategic approach to this new role can be presented, some major challenges for sustainable tourism development are identified:

1. From the perspective of regional development, tourism is in the first place an economic activity that has to meet criteria of feasibility, strategic planning, successful marketing, business development and proper management.
2. Tourism development will have to be integrated in an overall perspective of sustainable development. Integration of tourism in the local economic and social structures requires due attention.
3. Sustainable Tourism Development requires a highly professional approach. Rural communities, PA management, NGO's and other stakeholders often lack the expertise and resources to develop and manage a successful tourism destination.
4. Expectations about the feasibility of tourism development have to be based on an objective assessment of tourism potential, human resources and stakeholder support.
5. Although PA's can be considered to be a crucial part of the tourism potential of destinations, few protected areas can be considered to be a "stand alone" destination. The success of tourism depends on the ability of the wider region to develop into a competitive destination.
6. Tourism consists of many different markets that share one characteristic: they are highly competitive. Tourism will only be able to generate the expected benefits if the right market segments are targeted. Expected benefits are high, while the car-

<sup>1</sup> E.g.: Arthur and Mc Hall, Integrated Heritage Management; Denman, R., The Tourism Company, WWF Guidelines for Community-based Eco-tourism Development, 2001. <http://assets.panda.org/downloads/guidelinesen.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> E.g.: WWF, IUCN, Europarcs, EU.

<sup>3</sup> Tourism according to definitions includes staying overnight and thus requires a more complex infrastructure than visitor management. Its economic impacts and benefits are also bigger, since staying overnight includes a higher spending. Every tourist is a visitor once entering the PA, but not every visitor is a tourist.

rying capacity is usually fairly low. Unfortunately protected areas attract a variety of market segments and some protected areas have to deal with mass tourism and with negative tourism impacts. An example: the eco-tourism<sup>4</sup> market targets tourists with a specific interest in nature and culture. Yet this market is far from homogeneous: preferred activities range from bird watching to high risk adventure. There is a fierce competition between suppliers and between destinations. Increased mobility makes destinations in different countries and even different continents to direct competitors. Tropical rainforest experiences, for example, are offered in countless destinations worldwide.

7. Rural tourism destinations and eco-tourism destinations usually do not have a very pronounced tourism profile that distinguishes them from their competitors. Tourism accessibility is often low due to the remoteness. There is a dispersed, small scale supply of tourism products and services. Since the average professional expertise of suppliers is low it is hard to offer a quality product. Many different suppliers and stakeholders are involved and a good structure for co-operation and co-ordination is lacking.

These challenges make clear that only long term strategies, based on an integrated approach and proper management to implement these strategies, will generate the expected results. Without such a strategy tourism will have little chance to be a sustainable activity that generates the economic, social and ecological benefits expected. The role of local communities, craftsmen and entrepreneurs and the use of local resources seem to be underestimated.

Tourism Destination Management (TDM) is a comprehensive strategic approach to make a destination competitive and to manage and market it properly<sup>5</sup>. A tourism management organization with a clear mandate from all stakeholders should be set up in order to formulate and implement a sustainable tourism strategy. A ma-

ajor task is to turn the dispersed supply of tourism products and services into a coherent and attractive product. Engagement of PA management in TDM implies a proactive role of a protected area in destination development and a co-operation with tourism stakeholders. It gives management a say in decision making processes on tourism development and land use of the wider region. TDM offers new perspectives for the applications of visitor management systems at a larger scale, while enhancing the quality of the visitor experience, reducing negative impacts and planning the expected socio-economic benefits for conservation and local communities.

In this approach visitor management (VM) expands across the PA borders and aims at a structured co-operation with the wider region. Although the focus will be on the economic role of VM, benefits for more traditional functions like interpretation are obvious.

A VM plan should form part of the overall management plan and contribute significantly to its conservation objectives. If the PA assumes a role in regional sustainable development, this role will have to be specified in objectives.

As table 1 shows, visitor management consists of many possible products and services and yet the inventory is far from complete and not adapted to local conditions. Although from a management perspective these elements are likely to be perceived as tasks, they also can be perceived as services or 'products' to the visitor and to the destination. This prevents the situation where the PA is one of the core attractions of the destination and is investing heavily in quality services for visitors, but is not benefiting from tourism revenues. The question is, how these benefits can be made tangible and who is going to pay a fair price for these services. Tasks and responsibilities, costs and benefits have to be clearly defined.

These 'products' have to be integrated in a systematic way in the tourism products that the destination offers. Synergy with other suppliers and with the destination as a whole should be assessed. This leads to efficiency, cost reduc-

4 Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people (The Ecotourism Society, [www.ecotourism.org](http://www.ecotourism.org)).

5 Beunders N. Framework for the development of a tourism destination management introduction training course for managers in the tourism industry, June 2004 (Unpublished document for the Slovene State Secretary of Tourism).

Table 1: An exploration of possible 'products' of visitor management.

<b>Visitor management Products/ services</b>	<b>Tourism Destination Benefits/ Community Benefits</b>
Information Education Interpretation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Linking protected area to region</li> <li>• Development of concepts, storylines, themes, trails, routes, information systems, signposting, providing information about local communities, their culture and tourism supply</li> <li>• Environmental education and training for community, schools etc.</li> <li>• Conservation of local culture (story lines, myths)</li> </ul>
Marketing Promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marketing and promotion of destination (Protected area is core of identity/image of destination)</li> <li>• Website PA as marketing/ promotion/distribution channel</li> <li>• Concept and product development</li> <li>• Promotion of local products and services</li> </ul>
Merchandising Food and Beverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outlet for regional produce</li> <li>• Conservation of traditional handicrafts</li> <li>• Promotion of organic agriculture</li> <li>• Local enterprises for catering</li> </ul>
Activities & Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create activities/experiences with local providers/community</li> <li>• Local people work as guides, cultural brokers, animators</li> <li>• Events based on local culture</li> </ul>
Surveillance Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local employment</li> <li>• Increase overall level of safety and medical care</li> <li>• Reduce illegal activities</li> <li>• Co-operation with local police</li> <li>• Inform tourists about hazard/health risks</li> </ul>
Infrastructure, Accommodation + Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improvement &amp; maintenance of roads, trails</li> <li>• PA facilities as local facilities (education, community centers, accommodation for school camps etc.)</li> <li>• Hire local enterprises for construction, maintenance</li> </ul>
Intact landscapes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contribution to tourism potential of area</li> <li>• Contribution to conservation natural heritage of communities</li> <li>• Conservation of traditional land use</li> </ul>
Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improvement of local public transport</li> <li>• Sustainable transportation policy</li> </ul>
Etc.	

tion and a higher quality of products and services. Websites of protected areas have been increasingly used as a promotion and distribution

channel for local tourism products and services<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> See for example [www.peakdistrict.org](http://www.peakdistrict.org), [www.nationalparknockberge.at](http://www.nationalparknockberge.at), [www.hogeveluwe.nl](http://www.hogeveluwe.nl), [www.hohetauern.at](http://www.hohetauern.at).

Maybe the most significant contribution of the PA to regional development is the development of new concepts, products and services. The PA has in the eye of the potential visitor and consumer a high brand value that represents intact nature, exciting nature based experiences, quality, reliability and safety. Some protected areas have turned their logo into a quality brand for local (tourism) products and services. The PAN Parks logo is being awarded to local businesses that have a partnership with the PA.

In order to maximize the benefits for the local economy, VM should make use of the concept of Local Supply Chains. A Supply Chain comprises the suppliers of all the goods and services that go into the delivery of tourism products to consumers<sup>7</sup>. A Local Supply Chain focuses on local suppliers. A methodology similar to quality certification systems could analyze the steps of the production process of all products to see if optimal use is made of local resources. Simultaneously other sustainability and quality criteria can be applied to make sure that production processes meet high standards.

If the use of local resources is limited, an analysis should be made of the local potential.

Training programs, business support and (micro) credits can help to increase local involvement.

## Results

Experiences in the field show a need for new and practical methods in the interfaces of visitor management, sustainable tourism development and destination management. The concepts mentioned lack consensus of definitions and a sound theoretical framework based on empirical research.

Emerging tourism destinations around protected areas have serious problems to formulate and implement integrated approaches. A lack of know how from PA management, staff, local communities, stakeholders and NGO's seems to be a major bottleneck.

Despite the need for further elaboration and empirical research, the benefits of the approach could be considerable:

- The tourism potential of protected areas will be more diverse. Even hard core eco-tourists can enjoy the charm of *couleur locale* and small heritage elements linked to their nature experience. The options for product diversification increase. Integration of protected area and environment increases the quality of the experience of the visitor. Authenticity is a prime motive for eco-tourists. Local people providing distinctive tourism services and products, are ambassadors of the local culture and have a value added for the tourism experience. The sense of place is enhanced by tasting of regional products, by following old trading routes, trails of shepherds and pilgrims, learning about survival skills and economies long gone.
- An attractive gamma of activities and facilities can increase the length of stay and the average spending per tourist/day. Visitors that stay overnight become tourists, according to definitions. They spend significantly more than day visitors; not only on accommodation, but also on food and beverage, souvenirs and local products. Increasing the length of stay reduces transportation, increases income and creates a more profound experience. Contacts with residents develop more spontaneously and tourists develop a sense of ownership to the area. This can also stimulate repeat visits and word to mouth publicity.
- Visitor management that makes use of the natural and cultural resources of the whole region makes zoning systems more efficient. Landscapes outside the PA can be very attractive to visitors, while being less sensitive to negative impacts.
- The cultural identity of local communities can be strengthened by linking their cultural heritage and their way of life to the site and the landscape. The community's stewardship to the landscape and its role in shaping and maintaining it should be emphasized. Storylines and themes can be developed based on community input. This will increase the community's sense of ownership for the PA.

<sup>7</sup> Tapper, R. & Font, X.: Tourism Supply chains, Report of a Desk Research Project for the Travel Foundation, Leeds, no date (www.leedsmet.ac.uk) p.3.

- This approach offers unique opportunities for interpretation: reading the landscape through the eyes of the community brings a landscape to life and creates a thorough understanding of the landscape, its ecology, its history and its cultural dimensions. The human dimension makes interpretation of natural values more accessible. Living landscapes have a higher tourism potential than landscapes that merely are open air museums.
- Communities can have an active role in visitor management. Community members, if properly trained, can be excellent guides, hosts in visitor centers, rangers, cooks, waiters and managers. Maintenance of facilities, landscape and visitor infrastructure offers another opportunity. Landscape elements like old paths can be conserved by proper tourism use. Conservation of natural and cultural heritage and income generation go hand in hand.
- Cultural events and festivals reflect and enhance the local identity, while at the same time they are unique tourism attractions. They facilitate spontaneous and real contacts between locals and visitors.
- Market access is a key problem for people in rural areas. Although local produce is often distinctive, of high quality and organic, local producers do not have the knowledge and means to get to the right markets. Visitor centers and websites seem to be good promotion- and distribution-channels for local products, but also for local accommodation and services like guiding, bike- and horse rent etc. Visitor management can bring the consumer to the producer, but also the producer to the consumer. Marked routes can include providers of local products and services and thus stimulate business development or sustain existing local businesses that are often vital to the quality of life of the community (pubs, shops). Direct sale brings producer and consumer in direct contact. Local traditions offer good interpretation tools. Craftsmen give demonstrations and sell their products. Products with a soul. Products for guests that have a great story to tell, because they discovered a very special place...

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