

Socio-Cultural Benefits of Pan Parks: Case Study at Bieszczady National Park, Poland

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Introduction

World Wildlife Fund's Protected Area Network (PAN Parks) aims to balance tourism and nature conservation via partnerships with conservation organizations, travel agencies, business communities and other groups on a local, national and international level. For PAN Park's verification, a protected area must meet five principles each with specific criteria (i.e., nature values, habitat management, visitor management, sustainable tourism development strategy, and business partnerships) (PAN Parks, 2005).

There are eight PAN Park locations including Russia, Finland, Sweden, eastern European countries and Italy with new parks targeted for verification in 2007. A sustainable tourism strategy is necessary to combine tourism's potential and socio-economic development with overall nature conservation goals of protected areas (Cottrell & Cutmisu, 2006). PAN Park's principles include guidelines to develop and implement a Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy. Bieszczady National Park (BNP) in Poland was verified as a PAN Park in 2002.

The goal of this pilot study was to develop monitoring of the socio-cultural benefits of PAN Park status for communities and tourism development at BNP. The central question was Does PAN Parks benefit socio-cultural development in PAN Park locations? A local PAN Park advisory group developed a sustainable tourism development strategy to link the park to tourism development in the region.

Methods

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in the pilot-study conducted over a 5-day period in November, 2005. Eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted among stakeholders representing BNP staff, local authorities, PAN Park business partners, tourism businesses, and NGOs to represent the PAN Parks region. Interviews explored tourism development, sustainability of tourism in the context of socio-cultural, economic, environmental and institutional capacity building and the role of PAN Parks on beliefs about sustainable tourism development. Interviews were conducted in Polish by an interpreter with translations made directly onsite. A five-page self-administered questionnaire with both English and Polish versions was administered among 36 stakeholders involved in tourism to solicit responses about familiarity with PAN Parks, PAN Parks status of BNP, participation in tourism planning, tourism to BNP, satisfaction with tourism development, and socio-demographics. Study participants were selected by the local PAN Parks coordinator via telephone a few days prior to the interview period to make an appointment.

Criteria for selection were based on sector representation (e.g, park employee, accommodation, tour operator, local government) and availability. The prism of sustainability, a holistic framework of sustainable development, was used as the theoretical lens to examine the economic, socio-cultural, environmental and institutional aspects of

tourism development (see Eden et al., 2000; Spangenberg & Valentin, 1999). As a pilot study, limitations were lack of representation of actors besides tourism or park related interests.

Results

Results of both methods were compiled to assess the socio-cultural benefits of PAN Parks. For the qualitative, a partnership for sustainable development among stakeholders was evident supporting an overall vision of sustainable tourism development. PAN Park certification contributed most to environmental protection and an improved community attitude toward nature conservation. Socio-cultural aspects for the community were noted as public outreach, environmental education, promotion of the arts, and sustainable development of the region. Open communication between the park and local communities received mixed reports indicating a need for further awareness building among local residents. From the quantitative survey, stakeholders familiar with PAN Parks gave higher satisfaction scores for the cultural, economic and environmental aspects of sustainability than did those who did not know about it. Respondents overall were not very happy with the quality of tourism development in the region with more than 50% not satisfied.

Conclusion

PAN Parks with its sustainable tourism development strategy process is viewed as a driving force for sustainable development combining protected area concern for environmental protection with active involvement of tourism businesses. Although cause/effect (PAN Parks concept) cannot be claimed, perhaps those stakeholders familiar with the ideals supported by PAN Parks have a better understanding of what sustainable tourism involves; consequently they tend to value the importance of the various aspects of sustainability more than those people not informed about PAN Parks. The PAN Parks Foundation will begin the systematic monitoring of the socio-economic aspects of PAN Parks certification at verified national parks across the various protected area sites.

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