

# Values and Benefits of Protected Areas as Potential for Sustainable Development

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Demographic change is a challenge for many remote regions in Europe when it comes to the development of long term sustainable development strategies. While large scale investments often suggest new jobs and economic growth, the possible impacts of new regional development projects on natural resources and nature conservation are neglected. As a consequence, the opportunities and threats of regional development as well as the role of nature as a capital for local economies are rarely known. On the one hand the decreasing populations offer more potential for extensive agriculture, wilderness or sustainable tourism arising from additional land-use options and on the other hand the regions are facing the challenges to enhance the attractiveness and economic prosperity. This means that innovative solutions are needed to combine sustainable regional development that builds on the potential of nature conservation and natural resource management within sustainable and resilient local economic.

In order to better understand the ecologically sustainable territorial development the Protected Areas Benefit Assessment Tool (PA-BAT) was used to assess the protected areas in the Balkan ecoregion an area with a rich natural and cultural heritage. The PA-BAT is a new tool developed and tested by Equilibrium Research, WWF and partners. It was the biggest ever participatory assessments of protected areas benefits at the regional level, 60 workshops held in protected areas with more than 1,200 participants. This kind of workshops are an effective way of gathering and focusing public input at the early stage of protected area management planning process, but also motivation for their continued involvement in following stages.

This region within the geographical scope of the Protected Areas Benefit Assessment is recognized as one of the highest biodiversity areas of Europe, with large tracks of natural and cultural landscapes, hosting the full array of wildlife specific to the region. Parts of the region are recognized as having high quality biodiversity features of global importance, i.e. having terrestrial, freshwater and marine habitats listed in WWF's Global 200 Ecoregions. The region hosts large and almost unspoilt forests and healthy populations of large carnivores (bear, lynx, wolf, golden jackal), and very valuable marine and freshwater ecosystems. However, these qualities are under threat due to the current economic crisis and previous socio-political circumstances. The effects of rural abandonment and degradation of the natural environment are having severe impacts on the livelihoods of many rural communities in the region. The potential for tourism is high, particularly so in the coastal areas, but also in the mountains where cultural, heritage and adventure aspects add value to traditional tourism. Tourism has many potential benefits for local development, but unregulated tourism can be a major threat to protected area objectives.

The overall aim of the PA-BAT is to develop new approaches for and demonstrate how local economies can benefit from a combination of nature conservation and new economic activities that help generate green jobs. The PA-BAT aims to inform protected area managers and all relevant stakeholders about the range of values and associated benefits in protected areas, and introduce a participatory process for engaging a range of stakeholders in identifying and communicating issues of local, regional and national importance to protected area managers. WWF now has a database of information about benefits from approximately 50% of the protected areas in the region.

Top identified benefits were: tourism, forestry, water use, jobs in protected areas and livestock. According to the results of Protected Areas Benefit Assessment about 53% of analyzed protected areas have major economic gain from tourism. Within countries it is uneven distribution of economic gain from tourism, mostly to businesses and governments. The concept of ecosystem services was mostly not recognized by the participants during the PA-BAT workshops.

Ecosystem functioning involves a series of complex processes relating to the cycling of energy, water and nutrients: energy capture from the sun; regulation of water flow; soil building and stabilisation; accumulation of carbon etc. The term 'ecosystem services' describes a wide range of benefits that human society gets from functioning ecosystems, and the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment identifies four types: supporting, provisioning, regulating and cultural services. As humans increasingly impact the natural world, the importance of protected areas in protecting and restoring natural habitats is the subject of much academic and policy interest, but lately business sector as well. The concept of business planning for protected areas has developed in recent years as a mechanism to aid long-term sustainable financing for both protected area management and the development of wider community benefits. The business planning for protected areas should focus on conserving its major values.

The PA BAT gives the guidance how to reach effective involvement of local communities in the management plan planning process and how to integrate management plans with local development policies and strategies. The success of the protection and management of the protected areas depends on numerous stakeholders whose actions are connected to nature.