

Protected Areas-Delivering on Global Conservation Goals and Targets

Boris Erg, IUCN ECARO, Serbia, boris.erg@iucn.org

Tomasz Pezold, IUCN ECARO, Serbia, tomasz.pezold@iucn.org

Oliver Avramoski, IUCN ECARO, Serbia, oliver.avramoski@iucn.org

Tourism, conservation of biodiversity and community well-being have proved to be intimately linked processes throughout much of the recent history of nature protection. Admiration for nature and wildland visitation were among the primary reasons for the establishment of first protected areas in the second half of the XIX century, which marked the commencement of the modern era of nature conservation. Ever since, the importance of tourism and recreation in achieving nature conservation goals has steadily grown. Today, tourism is widely regarded an increasingly relevant tool for biodiversity conservation and a key driver of national, regional and local economic and community development. Hence the growing recognition of the role that tourism plays in sustainable management of natural resources and community development.

In an attempt to capture the full complexity of relationships and interlinkages between nature conservation and development, tourism in protected areas has been encapsulated in major global definitions and standards on nature conservation and sustainable development. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education” (TIES, 2015). The modern concept of ecotourism is based on three main pillars: conservation, communities, and sustainable travel. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the world’s largest nature conservation network, on their part defines a protected area as “a clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values” (Dudley, 2008). Further down the line, IUCN groups all protected areas into six management categories, all of which, except for Strict Nature Reserves, recognise tourism as an important management objective and conservation tool.

Table 1. IUCN Protected Area Categories and their relevance to tourism and visitor use (source: Leung, 2015)

IUCN Protected Area Category	Primary goal and protected value(s)	Relevance to tourism and visitor use
Ia- Strict Nature Reserve	Biodiversity or geoheritage protection (ecological and scientific values)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Most visitor use (commercial tourism or recreation visitation) is prohibited · Public access only possible through organised scientific, citizen science or volunteer service programmes

IUCN Protected Area Category	Primary goal and protected value(s)	Relevance to tourism and visitor use
Ib- Wilderness Area	Protection of the natural character and condition of unmodified or slightly modified areas (wilderness and ecological values)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Low-density visitor use is often a management objective · Restricted public access in terms of amount of use, group size, activity type, etc. · Commercial tourism activity limited and highly regulated (e.g., special use permit)
II - National Park	Protection of an ecosystem and its large-scale ecological processes (ecological, recreation and community values)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Visitor use and experience is often a management objective · A range of recreation opportunities are typically provided through zoning, facility development and visitor services
III - Natural Monument	Conservation of specific natural features (ecological, recreation and community values)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Visitor use and experience is often a management objective · Recreation opportunities are typically provided to facilitate feature protection and public understanding
IV - Habitat/Species Management Area	Conservation through management intervention (ecological, community and recreation values)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Recreation visitation and commercial tourism is usually a management objective · A range of recreation opportunities is provided with associated facilities and services · Commercial tourism common
V - Protected Landscape/Seascape	Landscape/seascape conservation (community, ecological and recreation values)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Recreation visitation and commercial tourism is usually a management objective · A range of recreation opportunities is provided with associated facilities and services · Commercial tourism common
VI - Managed Resource Protected Area	Sustainable use of natural ecosystems (community, recreation and ecological values)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Recreation visitation and commercial tourism can be a key objective · A range of recreation opportunities is provided with associated facilities and services · Commercial tourism common

More recently, tourism has carved its way into several major global sustainable development and nature conservation processes including the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Convention on Biological Diversity's (CBD) Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 and the Aichi Biodiversity Targets. All these processes affirm the importance of protected areas in providing solutions to pressing global challenges such as biodiversity loss and depletion of ecosystem services, community development, and poverty alleviation. In recognition of the increasing role of tourism in the protection of natural heritage and sustainable development, the Secretariat of the Convention of Biological Diversity published the Guidelines on Biodiversity and Tourism Development (CBD, 2004).

Some of the most telling examples of benefits from tourism in protected areas stem from their role in generating income and ensuring human well-being. A research conducted in six Biosphere Reserves in Germany between 2010 and 2013 has shown that the gross tourist spending of the investigated biosphere reserves sums up to a total of nearly one billion Euros, which results in 28,000 income equivalents. These figures show that Biosphere Reserves are an economic factor and thus crucial for employment in rural areas (Job, 2013). In Finland, the self-defined worth of health benefits experienced by all national park visitors in 2013 has been calculated at EUR 226 million in total (Kaikkonen, 2014). Other benefits stemming from tourism in protected areas include a range of economic, environmental, social and cultural issues.

Despite numerous opportunities, it is important to note that the development and management of tourism in protected areas is associated with a range of challenges and risks. Some of these are double-edged, such as the importance of reducing negative impacts of development on the natural environment (e.g. avoiding developing in sensitive ecological areas), while maximizing the benefits for conservation (e.g. generating revenue to finance conservation activities, alternative livelihoods for local communities). In protected areas, tourism should not take place at the expense of biodiversity loss, or mean that local people have more limited livelihood opportunities (Leung, 2015).

At the regional level in South East Europe, along with transition toward more market-oriented economies, there is a growing trend of tourism development and visitation in protected areas. Protected areas are increasingly seen as part of national and local economic development agendas, promoted by both the public and private sectors. Yet, the growing pace of nature tourism in protected areas is often not followed by proper management planning, tourism infrastructure, nor there are adequate capacities for interpretation and visitor management with protected area authorities, local communities, and tour operators.

In trying to ensure the highest international standard in sustainable tourism management, several protected areas in South-Eastern Europe have been recently granted the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas, an initiative led by the EUROPARC Federation, the largest professional network of protected areas in Europe. Other major regional initiatives set to promote responsible tourism in protected areas and sustainable local development include the Via Dinarica, nearly 2,000 km-long hiking trail across the Western Balkans that connects countries and communities along the Dinaric Alps, and the European Green Belt initiative, an ecological corridor aimed at promoting transboundary cooperation and community development along the former Iron Curtain.

What remains to be seen and properly monitored is, how effectively protected area authorities will manage to cope with the increasing trend in tourism and visitation in protected areas, on the one hand, while the public and tourism sectors need to demonstrate their ability to incorporate and implement the state-of-the-art sustainability principles and standards in the programming and implementation of tourism initiatives and activities in and around protected areas on the other.



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