

## Managing Visitors Through Certification of Protected Areas' Business Partners - A Practical Application in Bialowieza National Park, Poland

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**Abstract:** WWF and its business partner, the Molecaten groep Bv initiated PAN Parks concept in 1997 to develop third party verification for measuring management effectiveness of protected areas. PAN Parks wishes to introduce a marriage between nature conservation and sustainable tourism. Business partners have an important role in the project as service and facility provider for visitors. The implementation of the concept of building cooperation between the management and local entrepreneurs started in Bialowieza National Park in 1998. 30 local entrepreneurs signed a letter of intent to work as candidate PAN Parks' business partners. The concept is that guests visiting these entrepreneurs can get extra information about the Bialowieza National Park, and also about the events in the region. Local entrepreneurs can join if they pay an annual fee, and if they fulfil certain criteria.

### INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the largest sectors in Europe, and has the potential to become a key element of the preservation of rural European landscapes and social structures, through the regeneration of economically depleted areas with the economic input of tourism. Although coastal and city tourism are still the highest in terms of visitors numbers, it is rural and mountain tourism that is growing fast in the European context, and this is mostly around protected areas. The IUCN (1994) lists four reasons why the nineties have offered increased opportunities for protected areas, all of which apply to Europe:

- Human populations are relatively stable and affluent;
- There are declining pressures on land in many areas because of agricultural surpluses and reduced military activity;
- There is a high level of public support for conservation, and
- There is a climate of international cooperation.

WWF's vision for tourism is that it should maintain or enhance biological and cultural diversity, use resources sustainably, and reduce over-consumption and waste. In particular, tourism development and practice should:

- be part of a wider sustainable development strategy,
- be compatible with the effective conservation of natural ecosystems, and
- involve local cultures and people, ensuring that they have an equitable share in its benefits. (WWF, 2001a)

WWF believes that 'sustainable tourism' is currently an unachievable ideal, not least because of

the significant contribution that air travel makes to climate change. It is therefore more useful to think about 'responsible tourism' within the context of a wider sustainable development strategy (see table 1).

#### **Responsible Tourism**

Responsible tourism is tourism that satisfies tourists, maintains or enhances the destination environment, and benefits destination residents.

#### **Ecotourism**

Ecotourism should be seen as a sub-set of responsible tourism and can be described as tourism to natural areas that is both determined by, and benefits local communities and the environment.

*Table 1: Definitions (WWF, 2001a)*

WWF reports tourism certification schemes provide a marketable logo to businesses that exceed (or claim to exceed) a specific standard. The logo enables businesses to demonstrate their environmental and social credentials, which, in theory, allows consumers to identify responsible companies. Tourism certification schemes can therefore play an important role in bringing about more responsible tourism by providing participating businesses with an action plan for improvement that is linked to a market incentive. However, certification is only one of a suite of tools required to make tourism more responsible. Even effective and credible schemes need to be complemented by education, regulation and comprehensive land use planning. In addition, the success of certification will ultimately depend upon sufficient consumer demand for more responsible tourism. A variety of certification schemes already exist and some are more comprehensive than others (Synergy Ltd 2000). The variety of tourism certification schemes that actually leads to confusion of consumers and

problems with protected areas' management engaged WWF to start with a new concept in 1997 called PAN (Protected Area Network) Parks.

### THE PAN PARKS CONCEPT

The PAN Parks concept was initiated under the umbrella of WWF's European Forest Programme by the World Wide Fund for Nature in 1997. Co-operating partners are the WWF, various protected area authorities and a Dutch leisure company the Molecaten Group. Based on a wide consultative process, in 2001 the PAN Parks Supervisory Board endorsed Principles and Criteria for certifying a protected area as a PAN Park (see table 2). The PAN Parks Organisation assists with gathering financial support for the sustainable use of natural heritage by implementing joint marketing and communication activities and with establishing a local organisation responsible for implementation.

Protected areas and business partners wishing to receive the PAN Parks label have to follow 5 guiding Principles split up into further Criteria and Indicators:

Principle 1. PAN Parks are large protected areas, representative of Europe's natural heritage and of international importance for wildlife, ecosystems and natural or semi-natural landscapes.

Principle 2. Management of the PAN Park maintains and, if necessary, restores the area's ecological processes and its biodiversity.

Principle 3. Visitor management safeguards the natural values of the PAN Park and aims to provide visitors with a high-quality experience based on the appreciation of nature.

Principle 4: The Protected Area Authority and its relevant partners in the PAN Parks region aim at achieving a synergy between nature conservation and sustainable tourism by developing and jointly implementing a Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy.

PAN Parks Principle 5: PAN Parks' business partners as legal enterprises are committed to the goals of the protected area in their region and the PAN Parks Organisation, and actively cooperate with other stakeholders to effectively implement the region's Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy as developed by the local Executive PAN Parks Organisation or similar forum

Table 2: PAN Parks Principles to follow for protected areas and their business partners

In the first phase of the project, Principles and Criteria were developed to set guidelines as to which protected areas can earn the PAN Parks label. The draft was formulated based on literature, comments of experts, input from protected area managers and by examples of good practice. The third draft of Principles and Criteria was tested by 18 protected areas in 15 European countries that filled out questionnaires of self-assessment. The data was summarised in a report highlighting good practice, weak points and advise for future

development. On these grounds and with the help of experts, Principles and Criteria 1 (Natural Values), 2 (Habitat Management) and 3 (Visitor Management) were finalised in 2 workshops and finally approved by the PAN Parks Supervisory Board in 2001.

Currently 7 protected areas have signed a letter of intent assuming the status of Candidate PAN Park, committing them to achieve PAN Parks certification by 2006. A further 5 protected areas have been designated Prospective Candidate PAN Parks, with certification expected by 2011 (see table 3). Candidates and Prospects fall within one of four European regions: Northern, Central and Eastern, Southern, and Western Europe. The PAN Parks Foundation will focus its resources in working with Candidates to realise certification; upon certification, the best Prospect in that region will jump up to the position of Candidate. By using this three-tiered system (Verified PAN Parks, Candidate PAN Parks and Prospect PAN Parks), the PAN Parks Foundation can better manage the growing network, and also sets strong incentives for improvement of park management. The first PAN Park certified by the PAN Parks Organisation is expected by 2002.

Candidate PAN Parks	
Finland	Oulanka National Park
France	Mercantour National Park
Italy	Abruzzo National Park
Poland	Bieszczady National Park
Slovakia	Slovensky raj National Park
Slovenia	Triglav National Park
Sweden	Fulufjällets Nature Reserve
Prospective Candidate PAN Parks	
Greece	Dadia Forest Reserve
Hungary	Duna-Dráva National Park
Poland	Bialowieza National Park
	Biebrza National Park
Romania	Retezat National Park

Table 3: List of Candidate and Prospect PAN Parks (PAN Parks Courier, 2001 Summer)

Once the network will be created, i.e. the first label is actually awarded, full promotion, marketing and communication, organised by the PAN Parks Foundation, will follow.

#### PAN Parks' objectives

The PAN Parks label intends to highlight large European protected areas with a minimum surface of 20 000 hectares, which are outstanding in terms of their natural values and management, as well as in their quality nature-orientated tourism products.

The PAN Parks Foundation is to lead to joint communication and marketing of these areas. The objective is to raise awareness and appreciation for European natural heritage and thus foster acceptance and financial support for conservation issues. Moreover the creation of sustainable tourism

products should help regional economic development in the surroundings of the protected area.

The PAN Parks Foundation wishes to invite tourism businesses and other private sector organisations into the network as co-operating partners who then can use the label.

#### *PAN Parks Certification*

For a protected area to be certified by the PAN Parks Foundation, it must first undergo independent verification in accord with PAN Parks Principles and Criteria. A team of independent consultants will be appointed by the PAN Parks Foundation to carry out verification. A protected area must first submit an application form for verification to the PAN Parks Foundation, providing basic information such as management plans, and sustainable tourism development strategies. The independent verification body will perform a desk evaluation of the application form, and if deemed a quality applicant, will then visit the park and conduct field verification. The verification body will provide a report on the field verification to the PAN Parks Foundation, including a recommendation supporting or not supporting certification. The PAN Parks Foundation will certify a protected area based on the recommendation.

The PAN Parks Foundation is currently developing a verification manual, including checklist, which will outline regulations and steps to follow when conducting field-verification.

The PAN Parks Foundation is currently investigating the possibility of using the Europarc Federation's "European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas" as part of its verification system. Both the PAN Parks Foundation and the Europarc Federation recognise the potential benefits of joining efforts on sustainable tourism targeting European protected areas. An opportunity for co-operation also lays in setting common criteria for certification of local partners in and around protected areas. Talks between the organisations are ongoing following the autumn signature of a "Common Strategy under Parks for Life".

#### *Target oriented approach*

In order to establish a network of outstanding parks on the European scale, PAN Parks is following a target oriented approach: a protected area will be required to meet all Criteria set under the Principles before earning the PAN Parks label and the associated rights and obligations of certification (*see attached chart*). The Principles and Criteria set strict guidelines for member parks so to 1) guard the quality of the PAN Parks label; 2) establish long-term, committed partnerships between parks and communities; 3) preserve, restore and add economic value to European nature.

Earning PAN Parks certification requires serious commitment from a protected area and surrounding communities. The PAN Parks Foundation has hired regional co-ordinators tasked with working with Candidate PAN Parks and local communities to improve their conservation and visitor management and sustainable tourism development so to meet the Principles and Criteria by 2006.

#### **PILOT IMPLEMENTATION**

Prospective Candidate PAN Park Bialowieza National Park was established in 1921 and covers 10 502 hectares. It is famous for its rich primeval forests and the reintroduction of the European Bison. The park gets over 100 000 visitors a year who visit educational facilities as The Bison Breeding Centre and the Nature and Education centre. In winter they can take part in the snow tracking of wolves and contribute to the research data of the park.

In autumn 1999, 30 local stakeholders became local Candidate PAN Park partners of Bialowieza National Park, and thus become actively involved in the park's sustainable tourism development. As candidate partners they have signed a contract which obliges them to support the set Principles and Criteria, to seek to full-fill them and to take part in the development of a shared sustainable tourism strategy. The contract includes a yearly fee to the PAN Parks Organisation. The candidate partners show their commitment by using the PAN Parks sign

The current e-commerce pilot project "PAN Parks E-Passport to Bialowieza" will help partners to profit from the network. A jointly developed website will advertise tourism sector services offered by the partners. Visitors have the opportunity to book accommodation and activities in advance and to get information on the region. Apart from the booking system, the website contains news, maps, and a regional calendar of events ongoing in the park. The overall goal of the project is to strengthen support amongst park authorities and local communities for the future certification of Bialowieza National Park as a PAN Park.

The website is found at [www.poland.panparks.org](http://www.poland.panparks.org). In the long term, PAN Parks Foundation wishes to develop websites for all certified PAN Parks and their partners.

#### **EVALUATION IN PRESENT STAGE**

A mid-term evaluation of the project in June 2001 showed the followings (see also table 4):

Generally most of the partners during last holiday season appreciated our e-commerce project and many said that it requires patience, and accepted that clientele cannot be build up in short time.

- Partners, which have cancelled participation during the pilot phase, had enough guests and were already used to manage bigger scale of business as it was being offered at presence by PAN Parks.
- Most of the partners are looking forward and are optimistic, but most of them are still expecting assistance and trainings. Others are ready to move more or less independently.
- Signals are there that new people would like join PAN Parks, but during this year they were not able provide tourist services (they have been not finishing yet with improving their accommodation, investment to reconstruction, etc...).
- The website ([www.poland.panparks.org](http://www.poland.panparks.org)) should be improved, more regular update of information needed. Some partners complain that website should be made more attractive, more interactive. Many partners mention that website is missing map to navigate guests how to get to particular partners.
- Some partners recommended create links to the others travel agencies in Poland/abroad.
- Some of partners are already presented on different websites running by Polish companies for free.
- Some partners have already own web page and some are preparing own web page, these partners asked to create links between e-commerce and their web page.
- Some partners living in state forestry houses where they pay rent to forest office complained that they invest money into reconstruction (bathrooms, etc), and after rent finishes and they moved the investment will be lost, others complained that forest office officially do not agree that their buildings should be rent for guests...
- Some partners complained that information which were delivered to PAN Parks Foundation has never or slowly been put on the website.
- Some partners mentioned that marketing effectiveness of PAN Parks logo is quite low, because guests did not have any knowledge about it.

Effectiveness of PAN Parks e-commerce website through comparing number of nights provided by PAN Parks partners:

- Total: 1323
- Through e-commerce website: 155
- Through other channels: 1168
- Percentage of effectiveness: 12%

Table 4: number of nights provided by PAN Parks partners

## CONCLUSIONS

### *Lessons learnt*

It should be noted that PAN Parks Foundation is only learning from pilot e-commerce project. The goal is to use this experience to develop a wider e-marketing strategy for the whole organization. Other WWF Initiatives such as the Gites Panda in France could also be good case studies for further improvement. A full project evaluation will of course be carried out at the end of 2002 and will lead to the development of a guideline, toolkit for similar projects. As soon as this guideline is available PAN Parks Foundation intends to enlarge the project for all Candidate and Prospect PAN Parks. Next steps in the pilot are as follow:

- Evaluate experience in Bialowieza
- Modify criteria for business partners
- Clearly set criteria what/who should be our future ideal partners (this include rules and standards how to renovate partners accommodations respecting local tradition and architecture, how to create partnership with protected area managers, etc)
- Find local coordinator on the ground who should manage project on every days base

PAN Parks Foundation's role is to coordinate, shape strategy for project, manage/advice contacts towards national park and others partners, and keep eye that project will not slide into pure tourist promotion activity, but guarantee connection with nature protection in particular protected area.

### *Opportunities to proceed in 2002*

PAN Parks Foundation continues financing the project and playing a feature role in it until end of 2002. However contracts, which were signed between the Foundation and local partners will be expire at the end of 2002. Due to the high expectation of local partners the project will most probably continue with the different organizational structure.

During the coming year (2002) it must be defined who can play dominant role in this project. At present following scenarios seem to be possible:

- PAN Parks Foundation – although it was decided that it should step out of this project beginning of 2003.
- WWF Poland – WWF Offices can play a vital role in tourism project as described earlier in case of Gites Panda in France.
- Bialowieza National Park authority – probably not the best alternative due to lack of marketing and tourism expertise in the management body.
- One of the present business partners, which runs a travel agency can create its own e-commerce branch, which could lead to a win – win situation, but it needs more time.

### *Recommendation for 2002*

WWF Poland is interested in taking over the leading role in e-commerce. WWF has started a project aiming at enlarging Bialowieza National to the whole Bialowieza forest complex. One of the project objectives is to get the support of local stakeholders for the enlargement process.

From 2003 PAN Parks Foundation keeps its role as advisor in the project by sharing experiences from other protected areas, and providing trainings. Part of the recommendations is to form a Steering Committee for supervising the e-commerce after 2002. This body must include representatives of local partners, management of protected area, WWF office, and PAN Parks Foundation.

The Steering Committee should be responsible for shaping future of the project, provide consultancy, advice, and supervision. It should meet once per year. The role of PAN Parks Foundation in this new situation should be:

- Shape future of this project in Bialowieza National Park
- Careful advice to partners – standard of services, unifying promotion, keep eyes on respecting local tradition, architecture, etc. in a future on website should be only the best partners.
- Help with marketing
- Help in cooperation among subjects (WWF, BNP and others)
- Manage international connections

After the final evaluation all partners will receive an evaluation document with feedback from PAN Parks Foundation so that they know we are following this whole issue and that it will send positive signal and increase credibility of e-commerce.

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### APPENDIX

*PAN Parks Principle 5: PAN Parks' business partners as legal enterprises are committed to the goals of the protected area in their region and the PAN Parks Organisation, and actively cooperate with other stakeholders to effectively implement the region's Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy as developed by the local Executive PAN Parks Organisation or similar forum (hereafter EPPO).*

*Criterion 5.1: PAN Parks business partner follows all national legislation related to its business.*

Indicator 5.1.1: Describe the location of your business, and the relevant verified PAN Park.

Indicator 5.1.2: Indicate that you comply with all relevant national and regional legislation and other legal obligations and duties.

Indicator 5.1.3: If business partner is not situated in or around the verified PAN Park, describe your interest in the area, and in being PAN Parks business partner.

Criterion 5.2: PAN Parks business partner supports the relevant verified PAN Park and its management goals.

Indicator 5.2.1: Indicate in details; how you contribute to the relevant verified PAN Park management goals.

Indicator 5.2.2: Submit a support letter signed by the director of the relevant verified PAN Park as part of the PAN Parks' partner application form

Indicator 5.2.3: Describe your support for concrete conservation project(s) so far.

Indicator 5.2.4: Indicate how your business encourages its clients to learn about the verified PAN Parks, and natural values of the region.

Criterion 5.3: PAN Parks business partners are committed to the PAN Parks Organisation and its goals.

Indicator 5.3.1: Indicate how your business participates in the work of EPPO.

Indicator 5.3.2: Describe your plan to participate in trainings and meetings organised by EPPO.

Indicator 5.3.3: Submit a proof of your annual fee for EPPO.

Indicator 5.3.4: Please submit a support letter signed by the coordinator of EPPO.

Indicator 5.3.5: Describe your plan about how to encourage your clients to learn more about PAN Parks.

Indicator 5.3.6: As a monitoring indicator, submit annual report of business improvement and contribution to STDS to EPPO.

Criterion 5.4: PAN Parks business partners actively participate in the implementation of Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy as developed by EPPO and verified by PAN Parks Organisation.

Indicator 5.4.1: Describe your action plan, which defines the contribution to the Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy.

Indicator 5.4.2: Indicate how your action plan links to the STDS.

Indicator 5.4.3: Describe what existing certification system your business is member of.

*Criterion 5.5: PAN Parks business partners are pioneers and continuously contribute to the improvement of the region's tourism offer.*

Indicator 5.5.1: Describe your plan to improve comfort, safety and quality standards of your business taking the traditional local lifestyle into account.

Indicator 5.5.2: Indicate how your business continuously improves its environmental standards including water/waste water, energy, waste treatment, shopping, and use of existing infrastructure.

Indicator 5.5.3: Indicate how your business contributes to the sustainable use of the land in and around the relevant verified PAN Park.

Indicator 5.5.4: Business partners act on a socially and culturally responsible manner by promoting local economy and traditions in the region.

Indicator 5.5.5: As a monitoring indicator, prove that you follow all PAN Parks Administrative standards as defined in the signed contract.