

Comparison of local and foreign visitor's choices in two national parks in Latvia

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Introduction

The park managers should be aware of the needs of their visitors so that they are satisfied with their experience during the visit. The park managers should balance the needs of nature preservation and interests of visitors in order to ensure preservation of nature values for the next generations because every visit leaves some kind of impact on the visited territory (Eagles 2009, Beardmore 2015). The European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas (ECSTPA) is of good assistance in retaining this concept in practical management.

The goal of the present article is to show needs of local and foreign visitors and assessment of their visits in two national parks (NP) in Latvia. One of them, the Kemeru National Park (KNP), has earned (2012) the certificate of ECSTPA (Livina&Atstaja, 2015).

Study areas and methods

Latvia has four NP, of which the KNP and the Gauja National Park (GNP) are close to the Latvian capital, their entrance gates are up to 50 km from Riga.

The GNP is Latvia's oldest national park (1973) and has ambitious goals to become the most visited destination outside Riga in 2018. The territory of the GNP is inhabited and, including its entrance gates (Sigulda, Cesis, Līgatne, Valmiera), had a total of 110,000 residents in 2015.

The KNP was established in 1997 and its main value is bogs and wetlands. The previous visitors' survey was conducted in 2012 as a part of preparation task for the ECSTPA.

Visitors' survey in the KNP was conducted between July and November 2015 in the Latvian, English and Russian language and in the GNP between June and October 2015 in Latvian and English. The basic method of the research was survey, but because of the large number of questions it could be interpreted as a structured interview – a qualitative method. Respondents were surveyed in different locations of the KNP, GNP objects, transport hubs, choosing different days of the week, weather conditions, times of the day and special public events. For the GNP the main locations of the survey were Sigulda, Līgatne, Valmiera, however, survey of visitors in remote objects of the park are lacking to ensure good coverage.

Results

The comparative results of study are in table 1. Visitors highly appreciated the educational and infrastructure work invested in the KNP, which can be seen in the visitors' wish to recommend the park to others. There was a large number of visitors who had not visited

the KNP before (41% of local residents were for the first time in the KNP, and 9.5 percent of visitors to the GNP were first-time visitors in the group of local residents).

58.5% of the KNP visitors had a repeated visit and 41.4 percent of them said that the waste management and cleanliness in the park has improved, 42.9 percent said that it has remained at the same level as earlier, 4.5 percent said that the situation has deteriorated, and 11.6 percent said that they could not tell the difference.

Commenting on their assessment, foreign visitors to the KNP most often praised the intact, beautiful nature, the unique landscape (sightseeing towers). The respondents named serenity, tranquillity of the location, the fact that there are not many other tourists. They also praised infrastructure, maintenance and safety of infrastructure, friendly people. In their criticism, several foreign tourists underscored that there has been no bike rent, and there was poor accessibility with wheelchairs. Several foreigners underscored that it would be important to translate the basic information on stands also in Russian (at least contact information, emergency services).

Many visitors of KNP pointed at the necessity of toilets, waste bins, catering services. The questionnaire for the local visitors of the KNP included a question about the waste management principle they would support. Unfortunately, just 22.9% of respondents supported a principle that visitors bring away their own waste, and 77.1% supported a principle that there is a waste bin at the beginning/end of the nature trail or entrance/exit of the object. It means that much work should be devoted to environment education of the visitors.

For the interest of the administration of the GNP, the Latvian respondents also had to answer a question about their support for sports events in the territory of the GNP. 82.8% of all respondents supported the idea and 9.2% did not support it. Meanwhile, 8% of the polled people did not have an answer to this question.

More than half of respondents were positively surprised and satisfied with their experience in KNP. In evaluation the average mark from Latvian visitors for a trip to the GNP was 8.27 in a scale of 10, KNP was 8.43. Foreign visitors had a positive confirmation on their expectations when visiting the nature park. None of them had a negative confirmation on their expectations. 35.7 % even believed it exceeded their expectations in GNP.

Table 1. Comparative review of study results.

Indicators	Foreign visitors in KNP	Local visitors in KNP	Foreign visitors in GNP	Local visitors in GNP
Number of respondents	32	194	42	105
Net Promoter Score	10 (moda) 8 (median)	8 (moda) 9 (median)	8 (moda) 8 (median)	8 (moda) 8 (median)
The length of visiting park (%)				
Up to 1 hour	6.3	6.0	2.4	2.9
2-4 hours	56.3	70.0	50.0	41.0
Full day	28.1	16.0	33.4	45.7
2 or more days	9.3	8.0	14.2	10.4
Significance of ECSTPA certificate, %	18.8	22.6	n/a	n/a

Indicators	Foreign visitors in KNP	Local visitors in KNP	Foreign visitors in GNP	Local visitors in GNP
Significance of the Natura 2000 label, protected area	28.1	21.6	64.3	n/a
Mode of transport (%)				
Car		79		68.6
Train		7		3.8
Public bus		2		8.6
Tourism company coach, rented bus		9		11.4
Bicycle		2		3.8
On foot		1		4

Conclusions

The visitors' survey shows that determined activities of the NP have brought results because many residents chose to visit NP, and the repeated visitors mostly said that cleanliness and infrastructure in the KNP has improved.

It is important for visitors that their basic needs for food and toilets are met, and work should be continued to improve these aspects. At the same time, the infrastructure development density and increase of the number of visitors to the already crowded objects should be revised, creating ways to divert visitors to less popular objects. One of the unresolved problems is accessibility of territory of both NP and links between objects by public transport.

Visitors' largest expenses include travel expenses, catering and entrance fees. As the GNP has more catering service providers and sites with entrance fees than the KNP then visitors' expenses are larger in the GNP.

There are no sharp differences in the opinions of foreign tourists and local residents, with the only exception being that foreign tourists more often name the significant role of intact nature.

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