

# Visitor Management and Monitoring in Croatian Protected Areas

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## Introduction

Croatian protected areas (PAs), especially national and nature parks are often emphasised as main natural attractions in Croatia. Green Tourism Action Plan sees Croatia as a leader of tourism based on natural heritage and sets several goals for development of sustainable tourist offer within and around PAs (Ministry of tourism, 2016). In addition, different projects on national level have goals to develop tourist offer and marketing of PAs focusing primarily on nature and national parks. In recent years there is also a raise of funds available for PA visitor infrastructure, although many already have educational trails, info centres etc. Even though some PAs have high and some low numbers of visitors, most national parks, with oscillations, show growth (SINP, 2014). Since, there is a growing interest for visiting protected areas globally (IUCN, 2015), we could ask ourselves are we prepared to manage visitation?

In the final draft of the 2016 National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan of the Republic of Croatia most of the goals concerning visitation are connected to the overall purpose of raising the level of knowledge, understanding and supporting nature conservation. Still, within the goal of standardization of all aspects of management, a need for integral systems of interpretation and visitor management in PAs is recognized (MENP, 2016).

## Management of visitation

To prepare Protected Area Management Authority (PAMA) to evaluate their quality of visitor management CAEN created an evaluation framework through adapting Eagles et al 2014 plan policy categories to the Croatian context. Our preliminary results are based on prior analyses and reports as well as management plans content analyses. We identified five key areas and 30 categories within these areas. Firstly, we identified the importance of assessing their capacity to manage visitation including the visitor infrastructure they have. In assessment of capacity development needs of Croatian PA staff, training in recreation and tourism was recognised as one of the priorities (Appleton et al, 2014). PA staff could mostly acquire these competences through practice. Besides the individual, limited institutional capacities (SINP, 2014) should be considered. Another two key areas were: programs and services for visitors as well as communication and promotion. Most PA management plans have a part dedicated to the development of programs or service connected to

visitation and some channels of communication in place. What is lacking is an integral and systemic approach to these topics and more evaluation (SINP, 2014). In the period from 2012 till 2015, number of concession approvals was slowly increasing and almost 30% of all approvals were connected to tourist services and around 70% for trade or transport connected to provision of services. What could be improved is to have standardized criteria for concession approvals on a systemic level. We also identified recommendations and limits of visitor use and activities in PA as a key area. An existing measure that restricts activities in PAs is zonation. Visiting is prohibited in highly strict protection zone and allowed if regulated by PAMA in the strict protection zone. Other zones do not limit visiting (SINP, 2013). Our preliminary management plan analyses showed that regulation of use is less developed. That could be connected to the lack of control and standardized way of collecting data on visitors. Some PAMAs do not control or charge entrance because of spatial features although they do count visitors that participate in educational programs, events and guided tours or for specific objects. To our knowledge only one institution without entrance control calculated the total number of visitors by another method (Eco counters) (SINP, 2014). Continuous monitoring whether or not visitors have a negative impact on values as well as monitoring of visitor experience was also identified as a key area given that it was stated as non-systemic in prior analyses (SINP, 2014). Additionally, Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool results for 2012 and 2014 showed that as far as the endangering of values of the area by the development of tourist and recreational infrastructure and activities of visitors is concerned, one third of all parks stated a high level of threat. A few parks stated a medium level of concern and most of them see these activities as a low threat to their values (CAEN, 2015). Visitor experience monitoring is done through questionnaires focused mainly on general public. Twelve PAs, mostly the ones with higher pressures and visitor numbers, did some kind of visitor surveys in the last ten years. They questioned visitors to find out about demography, attitude, satisfaction, motivation, needs, time of stay or visited locations, willingness to pay etc. (Dujmović et al, 2015). The final key area was engaging local communities and stakeholders in visitation or tourism management. In Croatia participatory planning is recommended and conducted, but forming a stakeholder body with tourism stakeholders is still an exception, although it was done through several sustainable tourism planning processes, including acquiring charters for sustainable tourism.

## Conclusion

In summary this evaluation could help standardize visitor management and monitoring in Croatian PAs and improve PAMAs capacity to plan and conduct visitor management with an understanding that not all categories can be applicable to each PA. One of the key messages from Little Sidney conference was that we should be “using PAs as a powerful tool to create inspiring experiences which will trigger positive emotions with visitors and help to build a constituency for conservation”. This could be achieved only if we have the capacity to manage visitation without endangering the values and visitor experience.



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