

Theory and reality of the field guide profession in a protected area

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Introduction

The creation of protected areas can, in some cases, change the economic and social dynamic of a region. Local economic development is extremely important for achieving successful conservation of these areas.

An analysis of the role of guides was carried during the preparation of the Management Plan for Alto Ribeira Touristic State Park – PETAR. It is well understood that guiding is not only an important financial activity to the local community, but that it also subsidizes natural resource protection by conveying to visitors important conservation values, while improving the quality of the visitor experience.

The study area, located in southern São Paulo State, is widely known for its steep terrain with associated low agricultural value. The entire Ribeira River basin was never a part of the economic cycles of São Paulo State, such as sugar cane or coffee bean cultivation nor industrial development. Features such as difficult access, distance from urban centers, low demographic density, lack of basic services and poverty favored the conservation of great areas of priceless natural and cultural heritage (Lino and Mourão, 2003).

PETAR is known for its exceptional natural and historical sites, features that focused economic development principally towards tourism. The State Park harbors natural wonders such as caves, waterfalls, rivers and also very diverse fauna and flora. Cultural attractions are also extremely relevant, such as viewing sites, historical constructions and local community arts and crafts.

The Park became popular due to the increase of nature tourism and educational field study trips. This popularization led to an increasingly more professional level of guiding and to the requirement that all visitors to the caves be accompanied by a guide. As a result a local economic boom occurred, with an increase of hospitality services, mostly through the construction of or improvements to accommodations in villagers' dwellings.

The most visited sites are close to the Bairro da Serra neighborhood, where yearly visitation averages from 21,511 to 4,963 visitors, respectively (period from 2006 to 2009). Cave visitation demands special caution regarding environmental fragility and visitor safety. With that in mind, PETAR regulations forbid cave visitation without a certified guide.

Methods

PETAR guides, working during the period from December 2009 and January 2010, responded to a series of open and closed questions. From a total of 60 working guides, 14 participated on the interview.

Interviews took place at the main touristic arrival site, as there is no specific place where all the guides meet. In order

to avoid interfering with the guides work and visitors' experience, interviews were done during their free time, breaks, or while they waited for clients.

Results

In spite of the fact that guides have worked an average of 12 years (reaching a maximum of 33 years) they have only attended a few training or capacitate building courses. Besides the basic monitoring course (pre-requisite for all guides), first-aid courses are the most common (64% of all interviewed), followed by geology (57%), both very important for those working in caves.

Other courses mentioned, although less popular among guides, include climbing techniques, rescue, speleological practice, poisonous animals, botany and history. One guide claimed to have taken the basic training course only once, despite the fact that he has worked in the field for nine years. First-aid courses must be taken every three years.

All of the guides interviewed work mostly inside the Park rather than outside, and 100% of the guides work at the Santana site, followed by Ouro Grosso (64%), Casa de Pedra (43%) and, Caboclos (21%).

Half of the guides chose to be a guide as their desired profession. The other half indicated the lack of job opportunities was the main driver to choose this professional option. One important benefit from adventure tourism is an increase in employment opportunities with an increased demand for local guides that are familiar with local conditions and challenges. Approximately 60% of those interviewed stated that it wouldn't be possible to live only on guiding employment.

Only those guides who work full time are able to make a living from the profession, but as there is little regularity of visitation during the week therefore only a few of them can count on a full schedule. One possible consequence of this situation is a long term decrease in guiding quality.

Among the occupations chosen by guides, construction is the most important, with 41% interviewed working in construction. Other activities include arts and crafts, bartending, farming, security and tourism related occupations, such as hotel or restaurant services. When asked about their most desired profession to pursue, if they had no restrictions, only one of the interviewed guides stated that guiding would be his chosen career.

This situation may drive guides to not invest on their own professional training due to lack of time. They spend their free time working on other activities to improve their financial welfare. In addition, the feedback indicated that the time invested on training courses did not guarantee positive returns.

Therefore, even recognizing the guiding profession's rele-

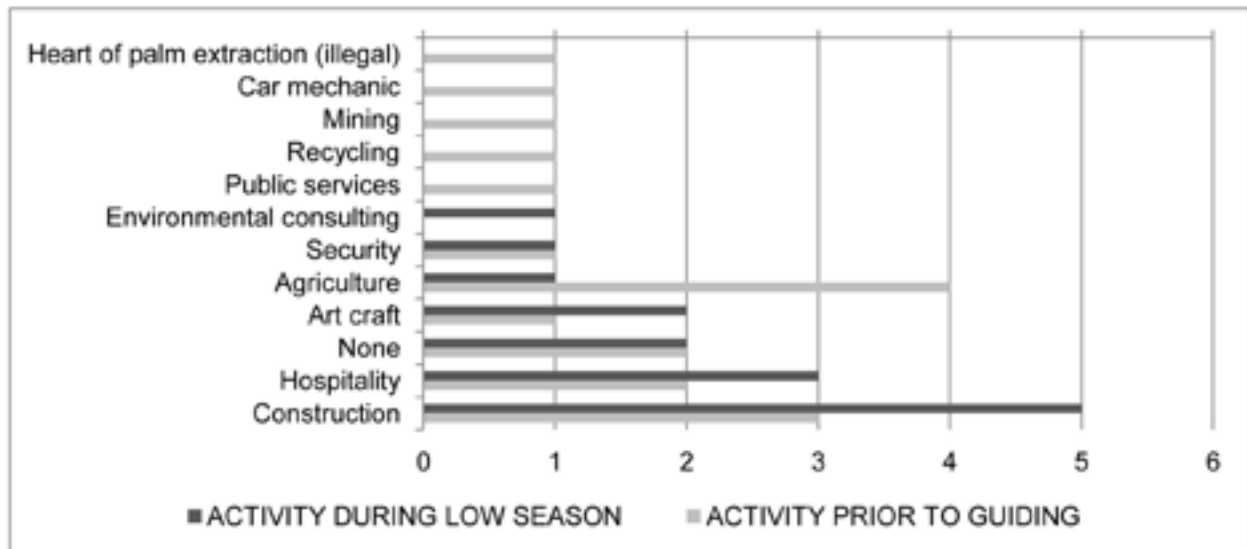


Figure 1. Interviewed guides activities prior to guiding and during low visitation times of the year.

vance to the Park's conservation (50% interviewed fit into this category) and its relevance to the visitor's experience quality and general safety (43% interviewed), guides do not seem to make efforts to enhance their professional training. Family financial security is the highest priority and for that reason any free time available seems to be invested on other working endeavors.

Local development based on ecotourism depends greatly on local community acceptance relating to economic changes. It is necessary to create an integrated planning framework that involves local and regional institutions working to organize visitation and tourism marketing to create visitation strategies during low visitation periods.

As stated by Davenport et al. (2002), it is clear that ecotourism, under certain circumstances, is able to contribute greatly either to natural areas conservation or to the local economy. Nevertheless, it is not the complete solution to the conservation challenges encountered at the present time.

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