

Hoge Kempen National Park (Belgium) – The economic impact of visitors as a crowbar for nature conservation

Johan Van Den Bosch, National Park Hoge Kempen, Belgium, johan@rllkm.be

In 2006 the first and only National Park in Belgium was established: “Nationaal Park Hoge Kempen” (Province of Limburg).

In a densely populated area, finding open space of more than 5000 ha was not easy.

It was even more problematic to find public and political support for a project with the aim to protect nature in an economic declining region (due to the closing down of the vast coal-mining industry). We were able to use nature conservation as a key issue in economic development of the broader region. Recently, the economic impact of nature of the ‘Hoge Kempen’ region was estimated at nearly 191 M.euro’s/year (1).

One of the key elements of this success was the establishment (in 2002) by the Flemish government of a multi-disciplinary team (*task force*) (2). This task force created a bridge between the public body protecting nature on one hand, and entities dealing with spatial planning, regional development, heritage, public transport, tourism, recreation etc. on the other hand. This task force was not limited to the park, but it also addressed issues in the surrounding areas. Another task of this team was to maintain a vast communication strategy for the public, thereby translating a governmental-, legislative-, spatial-, financial- and organizational complexity into one attractive message: *we protect sensitive and endangered biodiversity, “for the benefit and enjoyment of the people”* (Mission Statement of Yellowstone National Park, 1872).

Besides improving the natural heritage (defragmentation, removal of artifacts, restoration of heathland etc.), the Flemish Agency of Nature and Forestry established a cycling network in and around the park that includes a network of signposted hiking paths and paths for horseback-riding. Volunteers (‘Rangers’) also offer guided tours and entrepreneurs in tourism are trained to become park ‘ambassadors’.

Gateways to the National Park were designed as both multi-functional starting points (hiking, cycling etc.) and touristic attractions and now receive more than 300 000 visitors each year

These 5 gateways are situated outside the park (up to 3 km in some cases). In this way, sensitive ecosystems are protected from recreational pressure. By doing so, we were able to combine the best of two worlds: increasing the number of visitors in order to create economic benefits and lowering the impact on sensitive ecosystems in order to preserve nature for the future.

Research on economic impact of visitors

All visitors are electronically counted (in order to learn about seasonal and spatial spread, long term changes etc.) and specific questionnaires give insight into the willingness

of visitors to pay, travelling distance, duration and motivation of the visits, expenditure behavior etc. This makes ‘Nationaal Park Hoge Kempen’ one of the best documented cases on visitor behavior in Belgium (3).

Each year, an average of 270 000 (period 2005-2010) cyclists on the cycling network (= 240 km) of the broader region of the National Park are counted. A questionnaire (2004) pointed out that 80% of these cyclists are day-trippers, spending an average of 15.90 Euro/day.

20% are sleep-overs, and they spend 66 Euro/day (4).

In a similar way, hikers on the hiking paths (= 200 km) were electronically counted and sampled (N=650): on an average of 177 000 (period 2007-2010), 50% are local recreational hikers (spending 4.5 Euro/day), 34% are one-day tourists (spending 12 Euro/day) and 12% are overnight tourists (spending 13 Euro’s/day, costs for meals and accommodation excluded). One third of this group of overnight tourists indicated that the national park itself was the main reason of their stay. Money was spent on food and beverage (43%), visiting attractions (11%) and hiking maps (7.5%).

The average age of hikers in the national park is 52, and they typically drove 49 km (mainly by car) and stay 3 h 20 min. 90% say they will come back in the near future (an average of 6 times in 3 years). 40% use a hiking map and 12% have already used the ranger service (guided tour). This creates an economic benefit of the hiking component of the national park of 3 M.Euro/year (5).

The seasonal spread is also remarkable. While hiking peaks in (early) spring and (late) autumn, cycling is concentrated from May till September.

Another significant number is the number of visitors at the 5 gateway visitor-centers. All of these gateways were created as extensions and improvements of existing tourist attractions. Visitation increased by 80% (period 2005-2011) (3).

The total number of cyclists, hikers, participants on guided ranger-tours horseback riders and visitors of gateways resulted in an average of 725 000 visitors in 2011, which is an increase of 32% since 2005 (3).

The increase of tourists related to the establishment of the park in 2006 is also reflected in the number of overnight stays. During the period 2005-2009, the number of overnight stays in the 6 communities of the park increased by 13%. The overnight stays in Belgium in this same period increased by 3% (6).

All of this information demonstrates an economic benefit 24 M.Euro/year created by the park that is directly related to tourism and recreation. (3).

The most important aspect of the establishment of the park is the fact that these positive, measurable results directly influenced the political will to invest in the improvement of the natural conditions and the ecological resilience

of the park: transforming motorways into cycle-paths, an ecoduct to lower the impact of a highway, transformation of farmland, nature restoration in gravel- and sandpits and much more.

This project has re-connected nature conservation and tourism in a win-situation for both interests.

Badet. et al (2011), Hoge Kempen, Hoge Baten – Ed. Triple E – An. (2002), Masterplan Hoge Kempen – Ed. Regionaal Landschap Kempen en Maasland
Van Der Stock I. (2011), Economisch Effect Nationaal Park Hoge Kempen – Resultaten 2005–2011 – Not published report Regionaal Landschap Kempen en Maasland

An. (2002), Kwantitatief Fietsonderzoek- Toerisme Limburg – Not published data – 2004
An. (2009), Marktonderzoek over de economische impact van de wandelaars in het Nationaal Park Hoge Kempen – Ed. Market Analysis & Synthesis.
National Institute for Statistics of the Belgian government (2011)