

An overview of national parks, recreational activities and visitor flows in Turkey

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Introduction

Tourism is an important sector with a contribution to worldwide gross domestic product (GDP) estimated at about 5%. The rate of employment tourism provides is estimated at 6–7% of the overall number of jobs worldwide (in direct and indirect terms) (UNWTO 2012). Tourism can support the protection of natural resources when local residents realize the value of their assets and want to preserve these resources. Tourism can also help the sustainable management of protected areas as an alternative for the growing number of travellers who are looking for different experiences to enjoy the natural environment. It is now accepted that despite problems tourism often creates opportunities for protected areas, tourism should be supported if its negative impacts are under controlled (WWF, 2011). Therefore, visitor impact management is ever more important as the number of tourists increases, and their distribution is often concentrated in major tourism destinations in ecologically vulnerable areas (Aloisi, 2002).

In Turkey, natural and biodiversity-rich areas are protected by several different statuses such as national park, nature park, nature reserve, nature monument, wildlife reserve, specially protected area, biosphere reserve and Ramsar site. As a result of the diversity of protection statuses, protected areas are managed under different laws, regulations or international conventions and by different authorities. Currently, about 5.3% of Turkey's land area is protected mainly and these designations focus on forest, wetland and mountain habitats and include 40 national parks, 31 nature reserves, 180 nature parks 80 wildlife reserves, 14 specially protected areas, 13 Ramsar sites and 1 biosphere reserve (MoFWA 2012, Lise 2012, OECD 2008).

Most of these areas are recognized as tourism destinations in Turkey. Recently, the government has been encouraging ecological and cultural tourism in protected areas as a part of the National Tourism Strategy 2023 document in order to reduce pressure on the coastal environment and create alternative income resources for the least developed regions by diversifying tourism products and locations.

This study is focused on national parks which have an important place in Turkey's protected areas system. Designation of the national parks in Turkey began with the Law on Forest in 1956 and the first national forest park of Turkey (Yozgat National Forest Park) was established in 1958 in Anatolia. The current Law on National Parks was enacted in 1983 and defines four types of protected areas based on the types of characteristics to be preserved. Nature reserves are strictly protected areas for the protection of habitats of rare and endangered species and scientific and educational activities are allowed. National parks have great

scientific, scenic and cultural significance at national and international levels. Nature parks are natural areas of characteristic vegetation and fauna, in which recreational activities are allowed. Natural monuments are sites of scientific interest or with outstanding natural features (e.g. ancient trees, waterfalls) (OECD 2008).

National parks in Turkey have four zones: a central zone which is strictly protected, sensitive use zone with limited activities, sustainable use zone where certain activities compatible with the purpose of the park are authorised, and controlled use zone where tourism and recreational activities are allowed (MoFWA 2012, Lise et al. 2012). This multi-functional structure of national parks that includes both conservation of resource and opportunities for tourism and recreational activities is a research issue for the sustainable management of protected areas. In this context, this study aims to provide clues for understanding recreational uses of national parks in Turkey by focusing on trends of visitors in national parks.

Methodology

The secondary data used in this research are exploratory. The data consist of official visitor records from the Ministry of Forestry and Water Affairs. Arrival patterns and number of visitors related to each of protected areas were obtained from these records that were kept by state officers between 2004 and 2011 at the entrance gates of each protected areas (including 176 different check points). The data were interpreted by applying frequency analysis. Although records were not kept regularly, they provide an opportunity to form some general conclusions.

Implications

National parks are assessed according to visitor records. Results reveal that in many areas visitor records have been kept regularly since 2010. But there is no visitor record at 15% of the protected areas including 7 national parks, two historical national parks and 17 nature parks.

When current data are analyzed, national parks are the most visited protected areas in Turkey, and the most visited protected area is a winter sport centre, Uludağ National Park in Bursa Province. Uludağ National Park was visited by more than 5 million people between 2004 and 2011. This is probably because of its close location to Istanbul which is one of the biggest metropolitan areas in the world with a population of more than 15 million. Antalya's protected areas received the second highest number of visits with more than 3,5 million visitors between 2004 and 2011. Antalya is a coastal city on the Mediterranean Sea and a very popular destination for European and Russian

tourists during the summer season. The Taurus Mountains extend along the Mediterranean Sea and host various protected areas that are designated for the conservation of their natural features. These areas are highly visited by tourists. Çanakkale Province holds two important historical national parks that attract many national and international visitors every year. Troy Historical National Park and Gallipoli Historical National Park together drew more than 3,4 million visitors between 2004 and 2011. During the last two years, the most recorded arrival pattern was the individual visitor, followed by private vehicles, private minibus, student, -overnight stay, bus, minibus, motorcycle, tent, guided, caravan. Although these visitor records supply important information, the quality of the records might be controversial and should be improved for reliable analysis in the future.

Conclusion

According to the results obtained in this study, it is possible to conclude that there are many opportunities for recreational and touristic use in the protected areas of Turkey and there are already various kinds of tourism activities such as

winter tourism, cultural tourism and mass tourism activities in the protected areas. One of the observations of this research is related to the legal regulations for protecting the natural areas. Unfortunately, these areas are not protected by one unified and comprehensive legislation but separate regulations which results in a difficulty in area management. Another observation about the current area management is that the visitor records for their arrival and the overnight stays are not kept regularly which makes it difficult to follow. However, it is crucial to have a regular visitor records to obtain the balance between recreational and touristic use and the protection of these areas, and without an effective area management it would not be possible neither to develop recreational and touristic activities nor to protect these naturally overwhelmed areas.

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