

A neglected component of Turkish National Park system: “Quality of the recreation experience”

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The parks and protected areas are increasingly important in modern society since they protect natural and cultural resources and enhance the quality of life by providing opportunities for recreation to an expanding population (Manning 2009). Recreational use of the parks and protected areas should bring solutions for the protection of resources and provide quality for the recreation experience. The principal measure of quality in outdoor recreation has traditionally been visitor satisfaction which is affected by situational variables (physical setting, social setting, management setting) and by subjective evaluations (socioeconomic and cultural characteristics, experience, attitudes and preferences, norms) (Manning, 1999). The capability of the resource base and the recreation setting to provide for recreational use raises the concept of carrying capacity (Pigram and Jenkins 1999) which refers to the amount and type of use that can be accommodated in parks and related areas without unacceptable impacts to park resources and/or the quality of the visitor experience. Best possible recreation conditions can be provided through the formulation of management objectives and the development of associated indicators and standards of quality (Manning 2001).

National park designation in Turkey initially started in 1956 with the “Forest Law”. Nearly 30 years later in 1983 the “National Parks Law” was adopted to establish the criteria for the selection and designation of national parks, nature parks, natural monuments and nature reserve areas of national and international value (Resmi Gazete 1983). To date, 40 national parks have been designated with a total area of 897,657 hectares (Ministry of Environment and Forestry 2009). A long term management plan for each park was prepared to determine the conditions of access, protection, development, management and services to be provided within the park area (Anonymous 1969). However, the management plans were not utilized and they were functioned only as inventory tools when needed (Cirik 2007). They included nothing about visitors, their management or the quality of recreation experiences. The demands of potential or actual visitors have never been integrated into the Turkish national park system, except in a recent circular (Çevre ve Orman Bakanlığı 2007) which was prepared to establish the rules for visitor management and nature tours, but still from the resource protection point of view. Therefore the quality of recreation experience has been a neglected part of Turkish national park system. This problem raises the need for establishing a recreation framework for managing outdoor recreation for the national parks of Turkey.

Several contemporary park and outdoor recreation frameworks have developed particularly for the parks in the U.S. such as Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) (Stankey et al. 1985), Carrying Capacity Assessment Process (CCAP) (Shelby and Heberlein 1986), Visitor Impact Management (VIM) (Graefe et al. 1990) and Recreation Management Planning Process (Manning 1999). In 1992, the U.S. National Park Service began developing a similar planning and management framework ‘Visitor Experience and Resource Protection’ (VERP) that focuses on visitor use impacts on the visitor experience and the park resources (National Park Service 1997). VERP has nine integral elements as follows:

1. Assemble an interdisciplinary project team.
2. Develop a public involvement strategy.
3. Develop statements of park purpose, significance, and primary interpretive themes; identify planning constraints.

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4. Analyze park resources and the existing visitor use.
5. Describe a potential range of visitor experiences and resource conditions (potential prescriptive zones).
6. Allocate the potential zones to specific locations in the park.
7. Select indicators and specify standards for each zone; develop a monitoring plan.
8. Monitor resource and social indicators.
9. Take management action.

The quality of a recreation experience is a component that has to be established for Turkish national park system. The park planning and management strategy has to be shifted from resource protection point of view to a dual approach considering both resources and recreation quality. On the other hand, conflicts with the local communities have been one of the major issues of the national park protection worldwide. VERP is a contemporary management framework that has strong public involvement strategy. VERP is considered suitable for the Turkish national parks but it has to be adapted to local conditions.

The interdisciplinary team could be created mainly with the environmental scientists who are specialized in the outdoor recreation. A public involvement strategy could be easily developed for the national parks that include rural settlements. However the implementation process could be problematic because of the accumulated problems and issues. Arguably the most important part of VERP is the park purpose and planning which has been under threat of tourism developments in Turkey. The four steps up to monitoring can be scientifically and technically completed according to the planning principles. The monitoring process could be a weak point of the system since continuity is an actual problem of national park agencies. This paper aims to evaluate the possibility of adapting VERP in detail for Turkish national parks.

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