

The Potentials for Developing Cross-border Tourism between Poland and Slovakia in the Tatra Mountains

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Abstract: This paper presents the potentials for developing cross-border tourism in the Tatra Mountains. The area is situated in Central Eastern Europe, on the border between Poland and Slovakia. The new political situation (EU enlargement in May 2004) encourages closer cooperation between neighbouring regions and offers promising perspectives for tourism development. The entire mountain range is protected by two national parks – the Tatra National Parks (TANAP in Slovakia and TPN in Poland). The differences in management politics as well as varying infrastructure and the intensity of use have been analysed in order to identify potentials of developing cross-border tourism within the protected area. Additionally, visitors' expectations and opinions of park managers have been considered. As a result, tourist border-crossings and transnational trails have been pointed. The paper discusses the perspectives of the concept implementation as well as its potential influence on visitor flows in the Tatra Mountains.

Introduction

Transboundary co-operation in the field of nature conservation and protected areas management has become an important issue nowadays. As the natural processes are not tailored to political borders, the collaboration between neighbouring regions is necessary to manage transfrontier ecosystems successfully.

Numerous cross-border initiatives have already been taken on all over the world: ranging from the large wildlife parks in Africa like the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park of 35 000 km², through the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative along the Rocky Mountains, Australian Alps national parks cooperative management, the Alpine Convention in Europe, to the co-operation of small neighbouring protected areas like the Thayatal National Park (Austria-Czech Republic) or the Pieniny National Park (Poland-Slovakia).

The transboundary efforts share similar problems. These often are:

- legal and governmental differences that complicate coordination and implementation;
- barriers to communication, movement and information;
- social and cultural differences including language differences that inhibit the development of trust and a commonsense of community;
- economic disparities that constrain certain stakeholders' willingness or ability to participate in the process (Harris et al. 2001).

On the one hand international borders may cause difficulties in applying homogenous management strategies, on the other one, they can function as tourist attractions (Timothy 1995).

Especially for transfrontier conservation areas, having already sufficiently developed infrastructure, cross-border tourism is an interesting alternative to enrich recreational offer, without disturbing nature (Taczanowska 2002).

The Tatra Mountains belong to relatively small transboundary areas in Europe. In spite of its biogeographical unity, the mountain range is managed by two national parks: the Polish and the Slovak one. Due to the outstanding beauty of nature and a good accessibility, the area attracts several million of visitors every year (Czochański 2000). The national parks' managements are facing the problem of introducing limitations for tourists in heavily used regions. Satisfying the needs of visitors becomes more and more difficult. The proposal of crossing the border in the Tatra Mountains and offering 'new' trails to the visitors would be an attractive solution from the recreational as well as from the nature conservation point of view.

Identifying potentials for developing cross-border tourism in the Tatra Mountains was the objective of the MSc research, carried out by the author in 2002 in the Division of Landscape Studies, University of Agricultural Sciences in Warsaw, Poland.

Study Area

General information

The Tatra Mountains are situated in Central Eastern Europe (see Figure 1). The total area of the mountain range comprises 750km², of which three quarters belong to Slovakia and one quarter to Poland (Mirek et al. 1997). A characteristic feature of the Tatras is the tremendous differentiation of nature, linked to a great diversity of geological structure and relief (Krzan et al. 1994). The elevation ranges from 900 to 2 655 m above sea level (Nyka 2000).

Almost the entire area lies within the borders of two national parks – the Tatra National Parks (Tatransko Narodny Park in Slovakia and Tatrzański Park Narodowy in Poland). Additionally, since November 1992 the whole mountain range has the status of the UNESCO-MaB Biosphere Reserve¹ with the common strategy of nature conservation for both national parks. Although the transfrontier cooperation concerning environmental issues is very successful, the compromise on cross-border tourism is difficult to achieve.

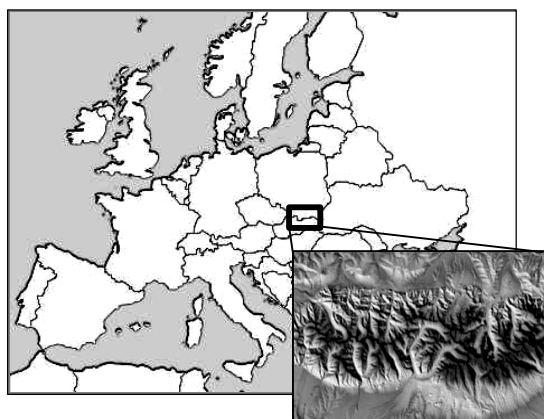


Figure 1. Study area – the Tatra Mountains.

Crossing the border

Crossing the Polish-Slovak border on tourist trails is regulated by the bilateral agreement between the governments of Poland and Slovakia signed in July 1999. So far only one tourist border-crossing has been opened in the Tatra Mountains. It is situated on the Rysy peak at the altitude of 2 500 m above sea level. Apart from Poles and Slovaks, 33 other nations are allowed to cross the border there. A valid passport is required during transnational trips. Crossing the border is allowed exclusively for tourist purposes within specified seasons and hours: July–September, 7am–7pm (Euroregion Tatra 2004).

The new EU member states (including Poland and Slovakia) are not automatically joining the group of Schengen countries², therefore free movement across the international border is not possible at the moment.

Methods

In order to define similarities and differences in tourism management and recreational use between both national parks, comparative analysis of the Tatra National Parks have been made. Basing on present regulations and existing studies following objects were compared: tourism function placement in management strategies, zoning and infrastructure, legal and spatial conditions for different user groups, visitor load, risk management.

Additionally, in the summer season of 2002 a survey concerning visitors' needs and expectations has been conducted. Totally, 180 tourists have been interviewed in the border region of both national parks.

Next, the potential tourist border-crossings and transnational trails have been pointed. Following, strengths and weaknesses of those possibilities have been identified. In the end problem areas and critical management issues have been discussed.

Selected Results

Comparison of TPN & TANAP

Nature protection is the highest priority of the both Tatra National Parks. Tourism is an important, however not a leading function there and it is heavily constrained by nature conservation requirements.

Zoning and tourism infrastructure

Although the mountain massif is divided between two countries, the common, homogenous core zone, comprising the most valuable and least transformed areas has been established (Krzan et al. 1997).

Existing tourism infrastructure may be adopted for cross-border tourism purposes. There is a well developed marked trails network, with several 'meeting points' of the paths along the international border (Table 1). The mountain chalets and hotels offer approximately 1 200 beds, so that vast majority of visitors stay in the towns and villages situated at the foot of the mountain range. The park managements do not envisage further development of infrastructure.

Table 1. The Tatra National Parks in numbers TPN in Poland and TANAP in Slovakia (Sturcel 2001, Nyka 2000, Czochanski 2000).

	TPN	TANAP
Total area (ha)	21 164	75 405
Area of the mountains (ha)	17 500	61 000
Hiking trails (km)	273.7	577
Trails density (m/ha)	13	7,6
Chalets	8	14
Settlements	-	+
Total number of visitors (mln)	1.9	4
Visitors in the mountains (mln)	1.9	0.9

Regulations

The analysis of present legal and spatial possibilities of trails integration indicated that cross-border tourism can only apply to *hiking* in summer season (Jul–Oct) and *climbing* (no seasonal limits) (see Figure 2). According to the current regulations, in spite of adequate terrain conditions it is not possible to consider winter ski activities in terms of cross-border tourism. Due to the risk management and nature conservation reasons winter tours above the chalets in the Slovak Tatras are not allowed (Nyka 2000).

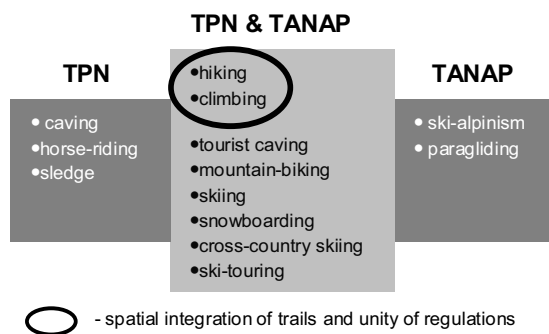


Figure 2. Activities allowed in the Tatra National Parks.

Visitor load

Significant seasonal and spatial differences in the recreational use are observed in the region. 65% of the total visitors load concentrates in the summer season (Czochański 2000). From the transnational tourism perspective, crucial are differences in visitors load between neighbouring regions. The biggest disproportion is observed in the Kasprowy Wierch massif, where from the Polish side approximately 2500 tourists per day are approaching the summit, while from the Ticha Valley (Slovakia) only four tourists per day were observed (field observations, Aug 2000).

Risk management

Regulations concerning mountain rescue and visitors safety allow for developing transnational trails, with the uniform risk management strategy.

Visitors' expectations

The results of the survey confirmed the importance of cross-border tourism issue in the Tatra Mountains.

Great majority of the interviewees visit the parks for hiking purposes (98%), one fifth of the visitors practice rock or ice climbing. Many visitors (82%) propose opening tourist border-crossings as a change in tourism organisation within the national parks. Tourists, asked about willingness to cross the international border there, are strongly interested in the idea (96%). Most of the visitors would prefer several-day trips, with overnight stops in the Polish as well as in the Slovak Tatras. Interviewees interested in other activities would be glad to do transnational mountain-bike or ski-touring trips, cross-border climbs and paragliding.

It was also found that seven hours distances are optimal for Tatra-hikers and the trips should not exceed 11 hours.

Although tourists demonstrate strong interest in the idea, just 13% of the interviewees have already crossed the border on the Rysy peak. The others consider doing a transnational trip in future.

Potential border-crossings

Basing on the analyses, potential border-crossings have been pointed along the ridge (see figure 3). Next, all trails, accommodation possibilities and accompanying attractions within the reach of the crossing have been identified. Following, distances along the cross-border trails have been checked.

These steps as well as findings of the analyses resulted in identifying problem areas (see Figure 3), where:

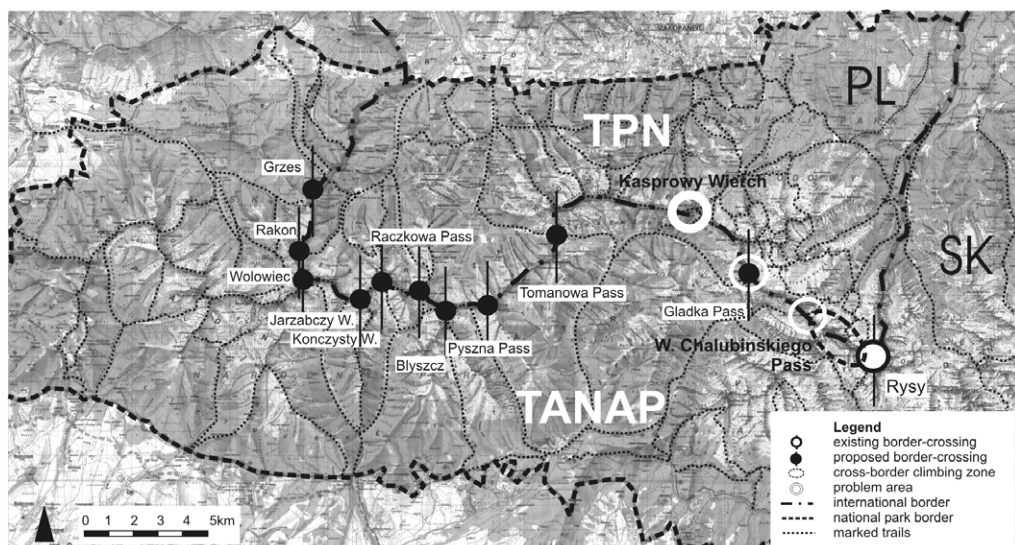


Figure 3. The potential tourist border-crossings in the Tatra National Parks.

- quality of natural resources may be endangered by radical changes in visitor flows;
- length of the cross-border trip exceeds desirable distance;
- existing infrastructure need to be extended.

Kasprowy Wierch massif belongs to the most problematic areas. As mentioned before, huge disproportion in visitor numbers between the Polish and the Slovak side may cause a danger to Ticha Valley, currently one of the wildest and less visited sites in the Western Tatras.

Conclusions and discussion

Visiting national parks is often constrained by numerous restrictions. In the Tatra Mountains there is an opportunity to open 'new' areas, basing on present infrastructure and keeping existing regulations.

The major problem that inhibits development of cross-border tourism there is significant difference in the visitor load between the Polish and the Slovak side. While the TPN management (Poland) is very interested to develop this kind of tourism, TANAP does not hide anxiety about the increase of visitor numbers in the Slovak Tatras (Graniczne... 2004).

This study showed however, that a widely believed opinion, concerning decreasing the volume of visitor load in the Polish Tatras due to the opening new tourist border-crossings, is not well founded. Long distances of the proposed routes as well as domination of an one-day 'loop' trip model, allow to assume that number of transnational tourists would not significantly change the current pattern of visitor distribution in the Tatra Mountains. Considered changes in tourism organisation would have qualitative, rather than quantitative meaning.

As the *changes of visitor flows* are the major discussion point while considering cross-border tourism development in the Tatra Mountains, it seems emerging to carry out additional studies concerning distribution of visitors in both national parks. Applying simulation tools for examining potential cross-border trails' functioning would be highly desirable, in order to estimate consequences of possible decisions more effectively and to encourage further discussion between park managers and stakeholders in both countries.

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¹ UNESCO-MaB Biosphere Reserves – are areas of terrestrial and coastal ecosystems promoting solutions to reconcile the conservation of biodiversity with its sustainable use. They are internationally recognized, nominated by national governments and remain under sovereign jurisdiction of the states where they are located. Each biosphere reserve is intended to fulfil three basic functions, which are complementary and mutually reinforcing: a conservation, development and logistic one (<http://www.unesco.org/mab/>).

² Schengen countries – The name "Schengen" originates from a small town in Luxembourg. In June 1985, seven European Union countries signed a treaty to end internal border checkpoints and controls. At present, there are 15 Schengen countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Greece, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain and Sweden (<http://www.eurovisa.info/SchengenCountries.htm>).