

CHALLENGES OF PROTECTED AREA'S MANAGEMENT IN COOPERATION WITH TOURISM STAKEHOLDERS: A CASE OF LANDSCAPE PARK STRUNJAN

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Abstract: Protected areas are particularly sensitive places that require proper management. The development of tourism in protected areas is a challenging task. It presupposes good relations between the manager of the protected area and various tourism stakeholders. A selected protected area in Slovenia, the Landscape park Strunjan, has been chosen as a case study. Park Strunjan is located in a well-developed tourist environment and is easily accessible, which is one of the reasons for high visitor count by one-day visitors and holiday guests. However, this is a protected area, and it is thus necessary to introduce sustainable principles in its tourist development. The aim of this study was therefore to address the quality of cooperation of the protected area management with tourism stakeholders in the Landscape park Strunjan and determine whether it is possible to apply the integrated approach in the area. Four semi-structured interviews with the manager and the selected tourist stakeholders were conducted, alongside an analysis of tourist offer and visits. The results show that the destination is not yet sufficiently developed in the direction of sustainable tourism.

Keywords: tourism in protected areas, protected area management, sustainable development, Landscape park Strunjan, Slovenia.

INTRODUCTION

Several studies have presented win-win scenarios that can effectively link conservation practices and enhancement of ecosystem services (Chan et al., 2006; Reyers et al., 2012), namely provisioning services, supporting services, as well as cultural services, including tourism and recreation (Figuerola and Aronson, 2006; Lipej et al., 2020; Nikodinoska et al., 2015; Pueyo-Ros, 2018).

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Increasing demand for tourism and recreational activities in protected areas has many positive as well as negative consequences. Managers of the protected areas face a challenge of balancing policies that strengthen nature conservation and therefore limit the progress of tourism related activities, and tourism development plans. This represents the major challenge in their relationship with tourism stakeholders. The need for the implementation of the concept of sustainable tourism development in protected areas resulted in the development of integrated management of protected areas (Opačić and Koderman, 2020).

Protected areas are therefore specifically designed to protect and preserve biodiversity, natural and cultural values. According to IUCN¹² they are governed by prescribed rules of conduct and by various effective means aimed at maintaining long-term preservation. In most cases, protected areas are highly attractable to visitors and tourists not only because of natural and cultural attractions, but because of protective status. This can create a natural tendency to visit and discover these areas. Tourism can bring a negative impact, but with the right approach by protective area management together with stakeholders, various guidelines or methods of tourism management can be implemented to alleviate the pressure on the environment (Eagles et al., 2002; Leung et al., 2018).

Tourism in protected areas is certainly important both in terms of volume and in terms of direct and indirect income, as it is often the only activity on which the development (or survival) of local communities is based. Protected area managers (public or private), together with other stakeholders, have a duty to ensure the environmentally friendly development of tourism, which dictates the appropriate guidance of visitors, while facing several challenges: from determining the number and direction of movement of visitors to determining the permissible limits of the volume of tourist visits (Kerma and Vranješ, 2020).

The article discusses the above-mentioned issues in the case of Landscape Park Strunjan on the Slovenian coast and presents some of the most important results of the conducted preliminary research.

¹² IUCN - International Union for Conservation of Nature (About Protected areas): <https://www.iucn.org/theme/protected-areas/about/protected-area-categories>

METHODOLOGY

The methodological framework includes a review of relevant literature and sources in the field of sustainable tourism and tourism in the protected areas, as well as strategic documents related to the development of tourism in the Strunjan district area (Landscape park Strunjan as a tourist destination). The content analysis of a tourism supply and infrastructure in the park and its immediate vicinity included different sources (official websites and brochures of tourism and hospitality organisations or enterprises). We also analysed the available statistical data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SORS) for the field of tourism, supplemented by data obtained directly from local tourism organizations (Piran-Portorož and Izola).

The central part of the paper is dedicated to determining the quality of cooperation between the management of the Landscape park Strunjan and the local (tourism) stakeholders. To better understand their relationship and cooperation, semi structured interviews were conducted. After collecting all the data, we have summarised the results and suggested several possibilities for better development of sustainable tourism in the area.

LANDSCAPE PARK STRUNJAN

Landscape Park Strunjan is a protected area, and accordingly to the guidelines of IUCN (www.iucn.org/theme/protected-areas/about/protected-area-categories) it matches the criteria for category V – protected landscape / seascape.



Figure 1. The map of Landscape park Strunjan

It is located along the Slovenian coast, between the towns of Izola and Piran. The total size of the protected area is 428,6ha and (the marine part is 176ha large). In the park there are three nature reserves, nine valuable natural features and some local monuments / attractions of cultural heritage (see Figure 1). Landscape park Strunjan was established at the local level in 1990, and at the national level in 2004. The protected area has not been managed until 2008, when the Public institute Krajinski park Strunjan was established. There is one settlement in the park (a village of Strunjan), which counts about 400 inhabitants. Considering the size of the Landscape park Strunjan, it is one of the most populated protected areas in Slovenia (Javni zavod Krajinski park Strunjan, 2018).

Natural and cultural values

Landscape park Strunjan has a distinct character with significant ecological, biological, cultural and scenic values. The protected area consists of three nature reserves in which stricter protective guidelines are implemented. Nature reserve Strunjan is located at the northern part of the protected area. The most prominent part of the reserve is a flysch cliffside that stretches up to 80m high, and above the cliff one can find typical Mediterranean vegetation. The nature reserve stretches further into the sea, protecting maritime life and biodiversity. Nature reserve Strunjan-Stjuža is located at the western part of the protected area, and it consists of the Stjuža lagoon and the Strunjan saltpans. Both landmarks are man-made, but still of exceptional nature conservation importance. This is a site that birds use as a nesting and feeding ground, besides that it is a habitat for crabs, various fish species and halophyte plants. The third nature reserve is a natural monument of pine tree alley. It consists of approximately 110 pine trees, which were planted there in 1935 (Javni zavod Krajinski park Strunjan, 2018).

Strunjan is the only settlement on the Slovenian coast that has preserved a typical settlement pattern that is not condensed but stretched, which means that the homesteads are scattered along the countryside. Homesteads are surrounded by field terraces, which are most often supported by dry-stone walls without biding agents. Some buildings are valued as ethnological monuments, these are subject to specific guidelines to preserve a distinct appearance and architecture. Saltpans and salt production represent a key value to the area, because of the cultural value and traditional tools and methods that are used to produce the salt (Figure 2). Fishing and agriculture in the landscape park represent an interaction of people with nature, which gives a distinct character to the area and an important cultural role (Javni zavod Krajinski park Strunjan, 2018).



Figure 2. Traditional salt harvest in Strunjan

Tourism in Landscape park Strunjan

Strunjan is located in one of the most developed tourist regions of Slovenia, which means that surrounding micro destinations (particularly coastal towns of Izola, Piran and Portorož) have a high visitor count. The area is easily accessible by various means of transport, which can – among other factors – create a substantial environmental impact. Tourism infrastructure and tourist offer have already been developed before the idea of a protected area appeared. In the initial period, tourism did not develop in the direction of sustainable development, but with the establishment of the Landscape park Strunjan and its official management (Public institute) the sustainable approach became a high priority (Javni zavod Krajski park Strunjan, 2018).

Tourism supply in the protected area and its proximity includes the resorts with hotels, campsites, restaurants and various leisure facilities, small private providers with restaurants, inns and apartments. Hotels create most of the overnight stays (71%), followed by the apartments and camps (13% each), while other accommodation types create 3% of the overnight stays (LTO Portorož and LTO Izola, 2021). Beside accommodation facilities, there is a diverse infrastructure that supports tourism activities: walking paths, education trails, beaches and snorkelling areas. In addition, there is more than 600 public parking spots (Občina Piran, 2017; Komunala Izola, 2016), which may encourage mass tourism in the peak of the season (Figure 3).

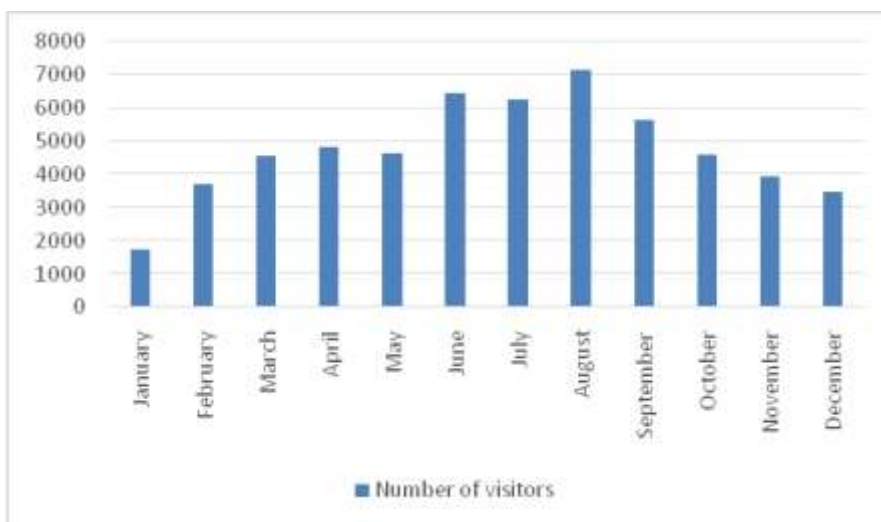


Figure 3. Number of visitors by months in 2019 (source: LTO Portorož)

According to the information from the management of the park, there are more than 300,000 tourists and/or visitors per year. Most of the tourist providers advertise that they are located in the protected area, and their services include local cuisine, wellness treatment and congress facilities. In general, tourist offer attracts different segments of tourists, such as seniors, families, active leisure tourists, congress guests, nature-based (eco)tourists and education visitors.

INTERVIEWS WITH THE SELECTED STAKEHOLDERS

Cooperation among different stakeholders in protected area is crucial for the further successful development of sustainable tourism in the park. Mutual interest, common projects, and harmonised objectives can lead to successful cooperation. Tourism-related stakeholders can be divided in public sector (municipalities, state agencies, LTOs), private sector (hotels, tour-operators, owners of restaurants, etc.), tourist individuals / visitors and local population (Interreg Central Europe CEETO, 2019; Byrd, 2007). Management of the Landscape park Strunjan already cooperates with various stakeholders on the local, national, and international levels. Most of the cooperation refers to other public institutes and organizations, while the least cooperation relates to private sector. The manager of the park is a public institution whose main goal is the protection of natural environment, while tourist companies (private sector) primarily concern about generating profit. This fact can lead to different ideologies about the environment, which is later reflected in

miscommunication and different development goals (Jamal and Stronza, 2009). Furthermore, lack of experiences in management of different interest groups can impact on the cooperation, financial issues, and lack of good practices (Czernek, 2013). However, in the case of Landscape park Strunjan, a very successful cooperation between the management of the park and tourism / hospitality providers represents a European project CEETO, which is based on development of sustainable tourism and should be the proper guideline for the future projects (interregcentral.eu/Content.Node/CEETO.html).

To understand the current cooperation and the possibilities of future cooperation, four semi-structured interviews were conducted. On one side an interview with the manager of the Public institute Landscape park Strunjan was conducted, and on the other side the interviews with the representatives of the Belvedere Hotels, Sosič House Apartments and the local restaurant "Pod Trto". All interviews were conducted in spring 2021. Our aim was to interview more representatives of tourism and hospitality providers, but their response would be rather weak. Some representatives have refused the collaboration and the others wouldn't even respond to our invitation.

Our findings show that the cooperation between the management of the protected area and the interviewed hospitality providers has been established and is pretty solid. This cooperation is based on the small-scale projects, and most of the communication is done separately, meaning that the stakeholders are (still) not mutually collaborating but rather cooperate separately with the management of the park. Management is spending most of the funds on protection and conservation, and not so much on tourism development. Of course, this is in line with the primary goal of the protected area: to preserve the natural and cultural values. A step forward toward collaboration should be done by tourism and hospitality providers. Protection guidelines of the Landscape park Strunjan do not cause an obstacle to tourism development. On the contrary, it can represent an added value for tourism stakeholders. Namely, the fact they are located in the protected area is successfully used for the marketing purposes. Some of the obstacles and lack of cooperation arise due to the different understanding and misconception about sustainable tourism development. The LTOs of Portorož and Izola can help overcome these problems since they represent the interests of tourist providers, and they understand their role in tourism which allows easier communication. The interviewed representative of the hotel resort is aware of sustainable development measures. To some extent the resort is implementing sustainable tourism, and it also finds important to cooperate with the management of the park. The other two interviewed

hospitality providers understand the need for sustainable development, but they do not implement sustainable tourism goals. However, all interviewees have suggested they are ready to cooperate and participate in the future projects.

But how and in what form? A business network needs to be established first to further connect stakeholders through co-creative meetings and workshops, helping them to implement ideas and co-financing the potential projects. One of the possible solutions is also cooperation within the EUROPARC Federation (www.europarc.org), which is a community of the European protected areas that have a common goal of sustainable tourism development. Exchange of different (innovative) ideas, know-how and solutions for similar difficulties could be implemented and altered to solve potential problems in the Landscape park Strunjan.

CONCLUSION

Landscape park Strunjan is located in a well-developed tourist destination of Slovenian Istria and is easily accessible, which is – in addition to natural and cultural attractions – one of the reasons for high visitor count by one-day visitors and holiday guests. In protected areas in general it is necessary to introduce sustainable principles in tourism development. Only by this approach, tourism can have a positive impact on protected (natural and cultural) environment.

In our case study we focused on possible cooperation of various stakeholders that operate in the protected area for the benefit of local community and tourists or daily visitors (the park management, municipalities of Izola and Piran, institutes of nature and culture conservation from the public sector, and tourism and hospitality providers from the private sector). All of them may have quite different interests and views. However, everyone must be aware of the importance of the protected area in which they operate. In the context of sustainable tourism development, networking and cooperation with the park management is essential. Many factors can hinder sustainable development, one of which is stakeholders that are not ready or willing to cooperate. Such also refused to take part in the interviews. On the other hand, there are many who are ready for the constructive collaboration and solving of identified problems. Public parking for example: most of the parking spots are located in the middle of the park. This is closely related to the monitoring of tourists and daily visitors which should be better performed. Management of the Landscape park Strunjan could use modern ITC to properly monitor the visitation, in order to also better understand the impact of tourism in the protected area. As far as

networking and joint stakeholder promotion in the park is concerned, the brand “Landscape park Strunjan” needs to be further strengthened. Co-branding and integrative tourist offer should be developed to strengthen the cooperation between stakeholders. Potential visitors and tourists must be properly informed about the regulations in the park. It still happens that many of them are not even aware that they are in the protected area.

We may conclude that tourism in the Landscape park Strunjan is heading towards sustainability. Nevertheless, one of the key factors for successful future development of tourism in the park is better involvement and cooperation between the crucial stakeholders and management of the protected area.

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