

ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF TOURISM EXPERIENCE THROUGH DESTINATION INTERPRETATION AS AN ASPECT OF COMPETITIVENESS OF PROTECTED TOURISM AREAS

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Abstract:

Contemporary tourism is going through incessant changes. Among major ones is the need for observing sustainability principles which represent foundations of competitive advantage. Protected areas would not exist without them. Also, due to their multifaceted objectives that involve protection and tourism usage alike, they are specific destinations that correspond to competitive advantage requirements. Simultaneously, they attract environmentally aware and quality oriented demand. Quality is required through the entire service provision chain so superb tourism experience is delivered. To that end, destination interpretation plays a crucial role and is an integral part of management plans of protected areas. However, it depends on the highly trained stakeholders no matter if they are management staff, local service providers or community members.

Keywords:

protected areas, sustainability, competitive advantage, interpretation, symbiosis.

INTRODUCTION

Observing the developments in the world in the last decade through the activities of the organizations dedicated to reducing poverty and improving people's living conditions, reducing negative impacts and elimination of the effects of the use of environmental resources, protection of biodiversity, mitigation of climate change and the like, as well as multinational companies from various sectors of the economy, it can be noticed that the world is moving towards the so-called "green economy". An example is TUI Group (2009, p. 80) which states that "consumers increasingly factor in the perceived ecological and social responsibility of companies in taking purchasing decisions" and directs itself towards the development of sustainable products adapted to the future needs, thus securing international competitiveness.

Entire destinations base their development strategy on the principles of sustainability. In order to create a sustainable tourism product, all stakeholders in the tourism industry must be bound together in following and applying the same principles and standards. The modern tourist demand can only meet its needs if equal commitment to quality and sustainability exists in the entire chain of service delivery, thus creating a superb travel experience. Protected areas represent destinations whose management is based on the principles of sustainability, according to the purpose of their declaration and use. The manner in which a protected

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area is interpreted to the visitors defines the quality of the travel experience.

BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION AS A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN THE TOURISM MARKET

In contemporary tourism, the concept of sustainability represents a foundation of market competitiveness, while in the future it will stand for a fundamental component of each product or service, based on the research of the needs of environmentally and socially aware demand. Such demand will increasingly direct the creation of tourism products. Accordingly, tourism as one of the most important economic and lifestyle drivers will become an integral part of the process of spreading environmental and social awareness on global, regional and local levels. The introduction and application of sustainability principles is not only about meeting existing regulatory requirements. It is also about market leadership, consumer satisfaction, and competitiveness (Lipman & Vorster, 2011, p. 78). Bearing in mind the existing presence of sustainability principles in business, as well as its anticipated dissemination through tourism and other sectors, there will emerge new opportunities for establishing new and re-directing existing businesses. Nature-based and biodiversity-based tourism products will be increasingly invested in, as well as ecological infrastructure maintenance, including protected areas. Lipman & Vorster (2011, p. 79-80) state that “we need to transform “classic tourism” dominated by considerations of growth and market share into “smart tourism” that is also inclusive, clean, green, ethical, and customer- and quality-orientated”.

Ever growing role and awareness of concern for biodiversity protection and application of sustainability principles can be seen through the fact that the year 2010 was declared International year of biodiversity, and International biodiversity day has been celebrated since 2002. Increased awareness of natural resources value can be regarded through its enhanced value in business. Strategic plan 2011-2020 together with Aichi Biodiversity Targets was adopted at Convention on Biological Diversity. One of the targets is to “reduce the direct pressures on biodiversity and promote sustainable use” (Convention on Biological Diversity, *n.d.*). It is also stated that the role of tourism for achieving the goal is crucial. On the other hand, “the prosperity of the tourism industry is directly dependent on healthy ecosystems and the many services they provide, whether these are related to ecotourism, beach holidays, skiing, or visiting national parks” (Marton-Lefevre & Borges, 2011, p.82).

The demand for responsible tourism will continue to grow, and such products will gain increased market differentiation and competitiveness, thus penetrating into new markets. Possibilities for starting tourism-linked businesses that lean on biodiversity and natural resources will become more diverse and numerous (according to the study *The Time for Biodiversity Business*, IUCN, 2009). The benefits arising from them belong both to the sector of tourism and nature conservation simultaneously. Those destinations and businesses setting the trend will most certainly gain a competitive advantage (Marton-Lefevre & Borges, 2011, p. 83).

Serbia as a relatively new market can take advantage of this opportunity in time, creating a modern and sought-after tourism product in order to gain a competitive advantage in today’s tourism market. An important role in achieving such a goal may be developing tourism products closely related to protected areas, from which benefits can be drawn for both the preservation of environmental resources that are used in the provision of such services, and responsible tourism sector including all the involved stakeholders.

PROTECTED AREAS TOURISM COMPETITIVENESS THROUGH STAFF TRAINING AND DESTINATION INTERPRETATION

Forces of competitiveness

“A nation’s competitiveness depends on the capacity of its industry to innovate and upgrade” Porter states (1990, p. 73). If needs and requirements of today’s tourism demand characterized by ever-growing increase of environmental awareness and the fact that “ecotourism is one of the fastest-growing segments in the travel industry” (Hawkins, 2004, p. 220) are taken into account, Serbia can achieve its competitiveness through the development of nature-based tourism, including protected areas.

According to Porter (1990, p. 79-82), factor conditions, in order to be translated to competitive advantage, should be specialized and tied to specific industries. Protected areas represent a specialized tourism product, if there is adequate infrastructure within and on the approach to them and the local population and workforce are trained to provide highly specialized services. If high-quality is achieved, foreign competitors will find it more difficult to imitate them. In addition, strong competition on a local level can trigger innovation in a constant struggle for competitiveness, so individual companies within the protected areas should use their current shortcomings as an incentive for innovation, rather than as an opportunity to circumvent it.



Regarding demand conditions, the role of domestic demand can often be decisive. It offers companies a clearer picture of the modern needs of tourists, and the companies that detect them earlier have the advantage of adequately meeting them before the competition does. Most visitors to national parks in Serbia are domestic tourists, so by following their needs, potential needs and demands of foreign tourists can be revealed.

Related and supporting industries are of specific significance if they incite innovations and advancement, and even more so if strong business connections exist among them. Therefore, joint management of protected areas and decision-making by protected area management, as well as local communities and service providers on the local level is necessary. Proper distribution of the benefits from the provision of services will provide good business relations and cooperation at the level of protected area as a tourism destination. "Suppliers and end-users located near each other can take advantage of short lines of communication, quick and constant flow of information, and an ongoing exchange of ideas and innovations" (Porter, 1990, p. 83). That is particularly significant in the case of tourism destinations such as protected areas. Their visitors can search for specific experiences, *i.e.* gastronomic, so the local food providers will have a market, while restaurants and hotels will be able to provide their guests with the expected service, thus reacting promptly to the newly-formed demand needs and requirements. Consequently, all tourism service-provider stakeholders in protected areas operate in a symbiosis.

In this context, motivation of individuals to work and acquire new skills is significant for achieving competitive advantage. Consequently, if all destination stakeholders operate in interdependence and have equally divided benefits, motivation is guaranteed. "A nation's success largely depends on the types of education its talented people choose, where they choose to work, and their commitment and effort" (Porter, 1990, p. 84). Thus, the creation of close ties with educational institutions dealing with education of tourism staff at all levels that incorporates the principles of sustainability and encourages creativity and innovation can be the basis for creating professional and modern staff that know how to provide visitors of protected areas with services they require and deliver them better than the competition. Under the right circumstances, it should stimulate the entrepreneurial spirit, establishment of new businesses and creation of vacancies. This is the way to increase domestic rivalry which creates pressure for constant advancement of the sources of competitive advantage.

Finally, the four groups of factors shown in Porter's diamond of competitiveness cannot function independently. For example, in a protected area to which visitors come primarily because of the specific features and preserved nature, it alone cannot be the only reason to create loyalty. It will be necessary to meet their needs through a variety of activities offered, especially those unique to special-interest tourism. Therefore, specially trained guides who will provide an authentic experience through the appropriate form of interpretation are necessary. Accommodation facilities must comply with the requirements of visitors of such specific destinations, with the obligatory observance of the principles of sustainability. Local communities should be familiar with visitors' tourism needs and included in their fulfillment.

The state, on the other hand, must provide an appropriate framework and conditions for running a business, managing resources in protected areas, their inclusion in the country's tourism development strategy, in its promotion, even in the process of brand creation. Therefore, not only that all factors shouldn't operate independently, but should be mutually reinforcing. Factors given in the competitiveness diamond should be viewed as parts of a system that stimulate one another to develop. Based on Porter's factors for achieving competitiveness, other system models for destination competitiveness dealing with tourism specifics (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003) are derived.

Specific protected areas management objectives

Broadly viewed, objectives of sustainable tourism for protected areas should be divided into (Federation of nature and national parks of Europe, as in Eagles, Bowman & Tao, 2001, p. 36): environmental, cultural, economic and social objectives (visitor satisfaction and enjoyment; demonstration of alternatives to mass and package tourism and promotion of sustainable tourism everywhere). Visitor satisfaction through recreation and education represents an integral part of protected areas objectives, as primary, secondary or potentially applicable in different protected areas categories (Table 1).

Education and training of service providers in protected areas

Protected areas, which have the role of tourism destinations, exist and operate in a world characterized by constant change. In order to keep pace with the times and meet both visitors' and conservational needs, they must have managers and staff that are ready to adapt



Table 1. Protected areas management objectives according to categories

Management objective	Protected area category						
	Strict nature reserve	Wilderness area	National park	Natural monument	Habitat/Species management area	Protected landscape	Protected area with sustainable use of natural resources
Tourism and recreation	-	2	1	1	3	1	3
Education	-	-	2	2	2	2	3

Key: 1 = primary objective; 2 = secondary objective; 3 = potentially applicable objective; -- = not applicable

Source: adapted from Davey, A.G. (1998, p. 49)

to them. Qualified, competent and committed staff are central to the success of protected areas that depend on their willingness, competence, skills, capability, and adequate resources (Kopylova, Danilina, & Valentine, 2011, p. 1). It is very important that the protected area management employs people with appropriate skills, or encourage existing staff to acquire them. Eagles, Bowman & Tao (2001, p. 59) provide a list of tourism competencies that must be present within protected area management: understanding visitors' needs and wants, service quality management, leisure pricing policy, leisure marketing, tourism and resource economics, finance, tourism management and interpretation.

Kopylova, Danilina, & Valentine (2011, p. 2) believe that formal university education today is generally not tailored to the needs of in-the-field protected areas professionals and that short-term courses are the only possibility for protected areas staff to acquire the needed competences. Davey (1998, p. 34) agrees additionally stating that there is a need to build research capacity in universities, especially in integrative and multidisciplinary approaches to environmental management, particularly in developing countries, as well as that it is desirable that university and protected area personnel working together so that both managers and researchers better understand the capacities, priorities and constraints both parties encounter.

Eagles, McCool & Haynes state that (2002, p. 148-149) "by applying well-ordered and professional approach to human resource management in protected areas field, the skills, knowledge and attitude of park personnel will be enriched and the overall quality of work performed will improve", while dividing human resource management

into three overall branches: training, organizational and career development. They also emphasize the role of staff training and believe it should be strategically planned in order to provide meaningful learning experience for employees and volunteers.

However, not only the members of protected area management need to possess the appropriate skills to carry out activities. Other stakeholders, in particular providers of tourism and other services, based on natural and cultural resources of the protected area, should be included. Still, many people entering the ecotourism sector have a remarkable lack of business skills and necessary knowledge, especially in terms of identifying viable market opportunities, business planning, marketing and finance management skills (Weaver, 2001, p. 566-568). Due to the fact that these entrepreneurs are often members of the local community, and in order to ensure the quality of services and visitors experiences throughout the entire system of service provision, it is necessary to make available opportunities for all stakeholders, especially the local population, to acquire necessary skills and knowledge. It is imperative to ensure education opportunities for local communities not only for the purpose of economic benefits and increase in prospect of employment, but also for altering their attitudes and behavior, which would consequently lead to observance and application of practices that will ensure the preservation of natural and cultural resources of the area for which it is protected.

Due to the vast network of relevant stakeholders and to the benefits which derive from it, education and training are important means of protected areas management and must be included in the management plan.



Interpretation

“Interpretation is a means of communicating ideas and feelings which help people understand more about themselves, their culture and their built or natural environment” (Interpretation Australia Association, 2008 in Wearing & Neil, 2009, p. 97), *i.e.* about the protected area they wish to visit. Its purpose is multifaceted. The first is raising awareness of cultural and natural resources of a protected area, as well as respect for them and understanding the area, which leads to greater visitor satisfaction with their recreational experience. However, interpretation can also be a powerful means of management. Activities that visitors engage in are hereby directed to be acceptable so management objectives can be achieved, and visitor behavior is changed so as to minimize the negative and maximize positive impacts on the environment. This is a path towards creation of positive public relations for the protected area management and staff members, which can be useful for carrying out new policy initiatives (Eagles *et al.*, 2002, p. 108). Whether interpretation will lead to a change in attitude is largely dependent on the availability and effectiveness of resources required for ensuring materials that the general public can understand and that can keep their interest on the site and upon return (Wearing & Neil, 2009, p. 99).

Interpretation does not start when tourists already reach destination, but much before. It can play a crucial role in the decision-making process on which destination to visit since a potential tourist wishes to know what can be expected on the destination. “It is critical that suitable expectations are set in advance, so that upon arrival the visitor is aware of what can and cannot be experienced” (Eagles *et al.*, 2002, p. 109). When at destination, tourist’s needs for various types of information become more complex, more detailed. Another positive aspect of interpretation is that it does not directly impose the behavior rules and policies, but indirectly affects increased appreciation about the area, emotional connection with it, as well as voluntary changes in behavior and attitudes that can be long-lasting.

There are various interpretation techniques. According to Eagles, McCool & Haynes (2002), they are divided into three groups: personal services (trained staff, guides *etc.*), non-personal services (technology aids, publications, films *etc.*) and supporting activities and facilities (visitor centers, outdoor amphitheatres, nature trails, information boards *etc.*).

Visitor centers are useful for creating a “big picture” historical facts and processes that cannot be described

on site. They usually include a shop of souvenirs, maps and guidebooks. Educational centers, which may be contained within visitor centers, have the role of providing educational services and often include classrooms or workshops where corresponding activities may take place. Exhibitions may be a comprising part of visitor/ educational center, museum or can be mobile “mini-centers” or exhibitions. Marked trails are paths with special interest locations with appropriate signage and usually offer a map or recorded audio which explains the area, which allows visitors freedom of movement at their own pace.

Publications, websites and DVDs are a cost-effective way to reach large numbers of people. Publications can be in the form of brochures, flyers, maps, books, posters, postcards, calendars *etc.*

“Face-to-face interpretation is considered to be one of the most powerful and worthwhile interpretive techniques available because it can be continually tuned to the type of visitor(s) participating... and the particular interest of each group” (Wearing & Neil, 2009, p. 102). It is provided by protected area staff members, tour operators or individuals/ private companies. Activities may include guided tours, theater plays, events simulations and the like. Interpreters are people who should be trained to provide specialist type of service. In order to fulfill its function, the interpretation has to be effective. To that end, certain principles should be respected. First of all, interpretation involves language translation of technical science or related fields into terms and ideas that people who are not scientists can easily understand. However, it should not be limited to that. According to Ham (1992; Wearing & Neil, 2009, p. 95), “interpretation should be entertaining and interesting to those people... Interpretation is pleasurable, relevant, organized and thematic” (Ham, 1992). Interpreters, *i.e.* those who convey information and educate visitors, should create personal connection with visitors. In order to do so, they need to be plausible and compassionate. In addition, they should present the whole picture using stories, legends, myths or scientific discoveries. Narration should take place at the appropriate location which is connected to it, combined with corresponding activities, thus emphasizing the importance of the site. Finally, effective interpreters include diverse media in their narration, as well as physical activities and narration techniques which stimulate senses and emotions.

Interpreters are, in a sense, tourism destination ambassadors since they are often the first contact a tourist makes with the destination and they contribute towards creating tourist’s perception of it. “There is some debate



as to whether a local guide (*i.e.* one who is native to the destination country or region or even local community being visited) is “better” than a foreign guide” (Weaver, 2001, p. 553). If they are local, they are closest to the destination hosts, as well as a source of knowledge, experience, tradition, and they round off visitors’ overall impression of the destination, while “foreign” ones may be more sensitive to visitors’ needs, perceptions and frameworks of understanding.

Finally, interpretation should have a theme, not just a topic (Weaver, 2001, p. 556; Ham, 1992, p. 36-47). If possible, a unique theme under overarching topic should be chosen, and combined with sub-themes, activities and the like facilitate bonding of the tourist and destination, as opposed to transmitting loosely related pieces of information. “All the various types of services must be coordinated within an overall interpretive plan” (Eagles, McCool & Haynes, 2002, p. 109).

Likewise, various stakeholders must be included: area staff administration, local residents and providers of tourism and other services in the destination; universities and scientific institutions that can contribute to educational work; and local, regional and national destination management organizations. Interpretation must, therefore, be carefully planned in line with other management objectives and take an important place in the management plan of a specific protected area. In this way, the chance that the visitor returns to the destination increases as a result of visitor’s satisfaction, and it is the most direct indicator of tourism product quality.

CONCLUSION

Biodiversity simultaneous protection and sustainable usage lies at the foundations of contemporary tourism competitive advantage. Protected areas are specific in their multifaceted management objectives, among which tourism, recreation and education play important roles. Specific tourism product of protected area corresponds to specialized competitiveness factors necessary for achieving competitive advantage. This specifically applies to presence of all the necessary skills and knowledge with all stakeholders involved in providing such products/ services. Among such, also necessary for achieving recreational and educational objective of protected areas, destination interpretation is essential.

There is evident connection between quality of tourism services in protected areas and interpretation, *i.e.* quality strongly depends on how well interpretation is planned and delivered. On the other hand, interpretation cannot be considered effective if certain principles

are not carefully observed and appropriate techniques applied. To that end, protected area management need to provide the whole array of stakeholders throughout the area tourism services provision chain with the same perspective, beliefs, attitudes and behavior. Those can be achieved through carefully planned and organized education opportunities for protected areas staff as well as local service providers and indirect local community that benefits from the protected area. This particularly translates to the destination interpretation aspect of the visitor experience creation. Who, how, when, where and with what means delivers interpretation should be an integral part of management plan of the entire protected area. Interpretation, through its powers, is a hidden, not-so-obvious restriction framework for visitors, controlling them while satisfying their recreational needs. Therefore, it is considered a potent management tool.

Increasingly environmentally-aware and quality-oriented demand specifically interested in protected areas tourism product will reward such destinations through loyalty and adding to its increased competitiveness. However, those protected areas that fail to provide the overall quality tourism service through carefully designed and delivered interpretation aimed at achieving ultimate and incomparable travel experience to visitors will be superseded by competitors.

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