

The attitudes of stakeholders on the management of protected areas: views of the local people and visitors to the Prespa Lakes National Park, Greece

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Abstract

Protected areas are characterized by great ecological significance, due to the rarity of their fauna and flora, their biodiversity, as well as the geomorphologic formations. The integrated management of such areas requires appropriate planning in order to address any potential problems, which is why the opinions and preferences of visitors have a significant impact on the decisions taken by those responsible for the management of National Parks. The present research was carried out using a structured questionnaire, addressed to the local people and visitors of the Prespa Lakes National Park. Its objective was to examine the attitude of stakeholders regarding the protection - conservation of nature and the development of the region. More specifically, 236 questionnaires were collected from local residents and 400 questionnaires from visitors. The initial results have shown that the locals want the future growth of the region to focus mainly on tourism and agriculture. They believe that the development of the tourism sector will help to improve their financial situation. As regards visitors, they were very satisfied with the natural ecosystems of the area, and the rich fauna and flora; on the other hand, they were totally dissatisfied with the lack of public restrooms.

Keywords: visitor survey, protected area management, development, tourism

Introduction

National Parks are natural areas of great ecological significance and major scientific interest, due to the rare fauna and flora, their biodiversity, the geomorphologic formations, their water, atmosphere and their environment, in general. Their protection from any direct or indirect human intervention is vital, in order to allow nature to evolve undisturbed, according to its laws and under the influence of the abiotic and biotic environment, which does not include humans (Ganatsas et al. 2001).

The integrated management of these areas requires proper handling and the views and preferences of visitors and local inhabitants play an important role in the decisions taken by those responsible for the management of National Parks (Trakolis 2001, Papageorgiou and Kassioumis 2005). The complexity and particular features of the environmental problems that arise from the management of protected

areas have identified the processes and methods applied for citizen participation, as key instruments in resolving such problems (Beierle 1999). Thus, the participation of all relevant bodies and stakeholders is essential, in order to ensure that the implemented actions will arrive at the desired results. According to Walpole and Goodwin (2001), obtaining local support in protected areas is a key factor for the conservation of biodiversity. This paper is an attempt to contribute to the management of the Prespa Lakes National Park in an effective manner, by taking into account the views of the local population and visitors regarding the protection - conservation of nature and the development of the area.

Research methodology

The present research was carried out using a structured questionnaire, addressed to the local population and visitors of Prespa Lakes National Park. More specifically, simple random sampling was used to collect 236 questionnaires from local inhabitants and 400 questionnaires from visitors. Both research projects were carried out in 2010 using personal interviews and through the aid of structured questionnaires. For data processing, methods from descriptive statistics were used.

Results and Discussion

Views of the local population

As regards the individual characteristics of the local inhabitants, the majority are women and people over 41 years of age. Concerning their educational level, almost one in two has completed the Lower Secondary School (*Gymnasio*), while one in three is an Higher Secondary School (*Lykeio*) graduate. The majority of the sample are farmers, fishermen and self-employed professionals, and their annual income is over 8,000 euros. As regards the future development of Prespa region, the locals believe that it should mainly be based on tourism, and lesser on agriculture. In fact, almost nine out of ten consider tourism to be the most promising sector, while over 65% choose agriculture. It is worth noting that the inhabitants are not interested in the development of industry or cottage housing.

Prohibitions

The wishes of the local citizens, regarding the activities that should be prohibited in the core of the National Park's protected area, vary.

Table 1. Percentages regarding the local inhabitants' wishes, in relation to the prohibitions that exist in the core and peripheral zone of the protected area

Activity	Core		Peripheral Zone	
	To be prohibited (%)	Not to be prohibited (%)	To be prohibited (%)	Not to be prohibited (%)
1. Construction of villages – housing	88.5	11.5	24.7	75.3
2. Industry	95.3	4.7	78.3	21.7
3. Grazing	64.7	35.3	21.3	78.7
4. Logging	88.7	12.3	41.7	58.3
5. Hunting	89.4	10.6	51.9	48.1
6. Animal farming	71.5	28.5	17.0	83.0
7. Cutting-uprooting plants	87.7	12.3	65.5	34.5
8. Agriculture	65.5	34.5	14.0	86.0
9. Fishing	68.1	31.9	16.2	83.8
10. Forestry	57.9	42.1	14.9	85.1
11. Recreation	20.0	80.0	6.0	94.0

More specifically, almost nine out of ten wish for the following activities to be prohibited: the installation of industries, the construction of housing, logging, hunting, as well as cutting or uprooting plants. On the contrary, a large percentage, approximately 80%, believe that recreation activities should be allowed. As regards their knowledge of the activities that are prohibited in the peripheral zone, the majority of the locals wish for all activities to be allowed except for the installation of industries, cutting plants and hunting (Table 1).

Tourism development and its impact

As regards the existence or non-existence of the National Forest, more than nine out of ten citizens express the view that it should continue to exist and that the area should not be declassified. Concerning the reasons for which tourism must be developed, 97% approximately state that it will improve the financial situation of the inhabitants. Seven out of ten observe

that if tourism continues and further develops, their culture will improve, and internal and external migration will be prevented. Furthermore, 88% believe that tourism will contribute to the creation of new jobs, and promote construction works in the area.

Visitors' views

After an examination of the individual characteristics of the visitors, and more specifically, their gender, we observe that there is a predominance of women (50.8%), and people aged over 30 years. Of those questioned, 31.8% are graduates of technological institutes, and approximately four out of ten are university graduates. Regarding their family status, over half are married, three out of ten are single, and 15.5 % are either widowed or divorced. Finally, concerning their occupation, most are employed in the public sector, while 11% are unemployed or pensioners, and finally, three out of ten are workers, students or housewives.

Satisfaction, motivation and reasons to visit the National Park

Visitor satisfaction as regards the National Park area was examined. It was found that approximately half the visitors state that they are satisfied with the area, 22% state they are minimally satisfied, while 3.8% state they are not at all satisfied, possibly because they had a totally different perception of the area. As regards their satisfaction in relation to the characteristics of the area, it is observed by the results that less than half are relatively satisfied with the information and services provided by the inhabitants and local bodies. Several of the visitors are interested in the local fauna and flora when visiting the area. Thus, almost half of them state that they are satisfied with its existence. Furthermore, the roads are a reason for which many people avoid visiting the area, since the results show that four out of ten visitors to the area state that they are not satisfied with their construction and maintenance. As regards tourism infrastructure, 50% of those questioned believe that there is sufficient accommodation available. Since the Prespa National Park is a wetland with rare bird species, visitors are given the opportunity to observe the birds from special infrastructure. Four out of ten visitors state that they are very satisfied with the existence of these observatories. In addition, the Prespa area is a mountainous region with rich flora, which is why it seems that over half are impressed by the natural beauty of the landscape. An important question addressed to the visitors, was also the main reason for which they were visiting the Prespa area. Four out of ten visited the area for cultural events, to eat at a local restaurant, and for recreation purposes. In addition,

three out of ten visit the area mainly in order to observe the wildlife and landscape, and for walking in nature. Furthermore, several chose the area for hunting and fishing and, finally, about 10% chose to visit the area for entertainment (Table 2).

Table 2. Percentages regarding the main reason for visiting the National Park

Main reason for visit	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1. Entertainment	39	9.8
2. Recreation	78	19.5
3. To eat at a local restaurant	76	19.0
4. Hunting/fishing	54	13.5
5. Educational	8	2.0
6. Nature walks	22	5.5
7. Wildlife and landscape observation	29	7.2
8. Photography/Video/Painting	6	1.5
9. Cultural events	81	20.2
10. Forest and its diversity	3	0.8
11. Other	4	1.0
Total	400	100

Conclusions

A study of the views of visitors and of the local inhabitants can serve as a useful tool for those responsible for the policies applied in the region. Such a study becomes more necessary in areas such as the Prespa Lakes National Park, where expected growth must be combined with the conservation of biodiversity. The local residents positively view the characterization of this area as protected, since they are able to attract large numbers of visitors in this way, and improve their financial situation. They wish for the development of agriculture and animal farming to continue. However, the Park's Management Body will have to set up an informative programme for the local population regarding the activities allowed in the various zones of the National Park. Visitors to the area express their satisfaction, mainly because of the rare fauna and flora, which gives them the opportunity to photograph the various species and local landscape. Nevertheless, they believe that the bad state of the roads and lack of public restrooms are factors that discourage people from visiting the area.

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