

PERSPECTIVES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF ECOTOURISM IN NATIONAL PARK PELISTER¹

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ABSTRACT

Words practices for ecotourism and its expansion as a new form of tourism offer are based on untouched nature in protected areas and national parks, improving the natural and cultural potentials they have as tourist destinations.

The large number of activities and contents that integrate ecotourism can be summarized as: Every form of tourism based on nature and whose basic function is observation and residence with maximum respect for the nature, tradition, local community and the prevailing culture of that space. (Novaković- Kostić, R, 2016)

The main goal of this scientific paper is to identify and evaluate the perspective for developing ecotourism as a tourist offer in the national park Pelister initiating a tourist offer in the other national parks in the Republic of Macedonia.

KEYWORDS: ecotourism, Pelister National Park, tourism, destination

¹Review paper

INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism as a concept was introduced in the 60s of the last century and represents a sort of counterbalance to mass tourism and its forms that in many facets seriously harm the environment. It was discussed by ecologists in the 1970s and accepted by researchers from the field of tourism in the 1980s. It was considered to be a sector with great potential, has marked rapid growth since the 1990s and continues to be the fastest growing element of the tourism offer in global terms. (Higham, J., ed., 2007).

Ecotourism as a term is first mentioned by the Mexican ecologist Hetzer who defined his four basic components in the mid-60s of the last century. According to Hetzer, ecotourism needs to comprise: minimal negative effect on nature, minimal impact to and maximal benefit for the culture of the local community that accepts the tourists, maximal economic benefits for the local community, maximum pleasure and relaxation for tourists (Fennell, D. 2003).

In 1991, The International Ecotourism Society set out principles that are accepted by the scientific institutions, a large number of non-governmental organizations, governments, companies and those principles are:

- Minimizing the negative impacts on nature and culture that can cause harm to the destination;
- Emphasizing the importance of operating responsibly, which functions in cooperation with local authorities and the population, with the aim of meeting local needs and creating the benefit of protection;
- Direct revenues from the protection and management of natural and protected areas; Emphasizing the need to create plans for regional tourist zones and plans for managing visits intended for the natural regions and parts which have been designated to become ecotourism destinations;
- Aspiration to ensure that the development of tourism does not go beyond the boundaries of accepted changes to the social environment;
- Relying on infrastructure that is built in accordance with the environment, minimizing the use of fossil fuels, preserving the local flora and fauna and integration with the natural and cultural surroundings.
- Educating the travelers on the importance of protection;
- Emphasizing the use of environmental and social studies, as well as a long-term monitoring program aiming to assess and minimize adverse impacts.

The Encyclopedia of Tourism defines ecotourism as responsible travel to natural areas and visits to relatively untouched natural communities with the intention of

enjoying and appreciating nature and all cultural values (past and present) that promote protection, have low negative visitor impact and enable useful active socio-economic involvement of the local population. (Jafari, J 2000)

Ecotourism most often encompasses environmentally sustainable travel and visits to enjoy nature, which promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact and involves participation of the local population. It usually focuses on small-scale activities in well-defined areas, often in some protected areas, as well as on retaining the local traditional economy as a major employer. The ecotourist is a responsible tourist who consumes local food, uses local transport, lives in a way the local population lives and respects their culture and does absolutely nothing that can cause harm to the local environment and local community. (Методијески, Д., Голаков, К.,2013)

The development of tourism is a product of interactive relations in various spatial, economic, social, psychological and legal relations. In this context, it should be accepted that tourism experiences a sublimated impact on the various resources. The basic approach is an important factor for determining the differentiation of the basic types. Alternative tourism, on the other hand, enables securing, in an optimal manner, significant values in the development and use of basic resources. (Мариноски, Н., 2009)

According to the specificity of the offer and the size of the demand, we divide tourism into massive and alternative. Mass tourism is characterized by an increased level of participation from tourists and the non-sustainability of natural and cultural values, as well as a large number of social and cultural influences that negatively impact the destinations. Alternative tourism, on the other hand, is aimed at smaller accommodation facilities, greater participation from the local community, sustainability, mutual relationships with the social and cultural values and greater interaction between hosts and tourists. The most important characteristics of mass and alternative tourism are shown in the table below. (Weaver, D., 2001)

Table 1, Characteristics of mass and alternative tourism

Characteristics	Mass tourism	Alternative tourism
Scale and type	High, package arrangements	Low, individual arrangements
Length of stay	Short	Long
Seasonality	High and low season	No season
Origin of	Several dominant markets	No dominant markets

tourists		
Attractions	Purpose-built, commercialized, intended for tourists	Authentic, partly commercialized, for tourists and local population
Accommodation	Large facilities, concentrated, international architecture	Small facilities, dispersed, local architecture
Ownership	Corporate	Local
Role of tourism	Dominant	Supplementary
Multiplicative effect	High	Low

Differentiating between mass (conventional) and alternative tourism imposes different divisions of alternative tourism to the following forms of alternative tourism: cultural, educational, scientific, adventure tourism and agritourism. As can be observed in the picture below, all forms of alternative tourism actually represent tourism that takes place in nature or ecotourism.

Tourism can be presented as ecotourism only if it constitutes the following six principles:

- Imposes a type of use that minimizes negative impact to the environmental and local community;
- Increases awareness, understanding of the environment and cultural systems and involves visitors in the problems affecting those systems;
- Contributes to the preservation and management of legally protected and other natural areas;
- Maximizes the early and long-term participation of the local community in the decision-making process that determines the type and quantity of tourism;
- Economic and other benefits for the local community that do not replace but supplement traditional customs (agriculture, fishing, social organization, etc.)
- Provides special opportunities for the local community and nature tourism staff to visit and utilize the natural environments and train for the "wonders" that visitors come to see. (Fennell, D., 2008)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the requirements of this paper, exploratory (qualitative) research was done that contributed to gaining insight into the essence of the problem with the aim to better understand the situation and the need for developing ecotourism in the Republic of Macedonia. Exploratory research mostly falls into the category of research that result in descriptive results (Будиноски 2010). Part of the research consists of collecting appropriate and relevant literature and using secondary data sources.

The fundamental method used in the research is content analysis. Content analysis is a research method used to systematically evaluate the content of the researched phenomenon, in our case, the ecotourism content of the National Park Pelister. Also, several informal and unstructured interviews were conducted with the National Association for Incoming Tourism in Macedonia (NAITM) and its members that have ecotourism in their offers in order to obtain first-hand information related to the research topic.

PERSPECTIVES FOR DEVELOPMENT OF ECOTURISM IN THE NATIONAL PARK PELISTER

The National Park "Pelister" is located between the Prespa valley and the Pelagonija valley. It was the first to be declared a national park on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia in 1948. The area of this national park is 10,400 hectares and it comprises part of the mountain Baba; its highest peak Pelister (2,601 meters) and several other noted peaks on this mountain with a height of over 2,000 meters. The park possesses a large number of anthropogenic and natural assets that are of particular importance for tourism.

The famous German phytogeographer August Grisebach was the first botanist to visit this mountain (June 30th to July 3rd, 1839), discovering and describing several new species, previously unknown to science, which were published in his famous study "Spicilegium florum Rumelicae et Bithynicae" (1843-44), in which for the first time floral data are cited about Pelister Mountain, and in general about the territory of Macedonia. Among these, of particular importance is the Macedonian Pine (*Pinus peuce* Grisebach), which forms wide and biologically vital populations in the height range of 700-2200 m. and represents the country's floral trademark. Many foreign and domestic botanists, florists and phytocenologists show interest in the flora of this mountain today just as they did in the past. This botanical treasure has been gradually uncovered in their papers, and knowledge of its floro-vegetative characteristics is constantly increasing. (<http://park-pelister.com/za-nas/istorija-i-kultura.html>)

In the table below, 20 categories have been considered and their presence and efficiency in the three national parks (NP) in the Republic of Macedonia. Each of the categories is rated with a different number of points. The points are marked with a star sign (*). The NP who is the weakest in that category receives one star, and the NP that has the largest lead in that category is marked with three stars. One star is worth 1 point, two stars are 2 points and three stars are 3 points.

Table 2 Comparative analysis of national parks in the Republic of Macedonia

		Pelister	Galicica	Mavrovo
1	Eco-accommodation	*	**	***
2	Web page	*	**	***
3	Eco packages	***	*	**
4	Unique flora	***	*	**
5	Unique fauna	**	*	***
6	Active ecotourism	*	***	**
7	Accommodation capacity	**	*	***
8	Road infrastructure	*	**	***
9	Road signalling	*	**	***
10	Tourist location	*	***	**
11	Tourist equipment	**	*	***
12	Infrastructure	**	*	***
13	Visitor turnout	**	*	***
14	Accessibility	*	***	**
15	Specificity	**	***	*
16	Highest peaks	**	*	***
17	Territory (size)	*	**	***
18	Cultural treasure	*	***	**
19	Ski slopes	**	*	***
20	Speleological uniqueness	*	***	**
	Total points	32	37	51

Source: (Ponev, B., 2015)

The Pelister National Park boasts rich flora and endemic species that can only be found there and are its most valuable trump cards in the comparative analysis.

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While it enjoys good conditions and a network of eco-trails that allow for walks in the untouched areas and educational opportunities, the Pelister National Park lacks eco-accommodation capacities that are in very small numbers and cannot meet the needs of tourists who love eco-tourism and its sustainability, which is often the reason for one-day visits.

Many world studies confirm that the most important priority of tourists is preserving the environment as "the most important element in the offer" when deciding the destination for travel. The study found that for as many as 97% of winter tourists and 98% of summer tourists the most important aspect of their vacation was the nature, after that the kindness of the population, the safety and appearance of the place (Novaković- Kostić, R., 2016).

According to the management team of the National Park, Pelister is visited by 30000 visitors, most of whom are Macedonians from Bitola and its surroundings, while 15% of tourists are foreigners from the Netherlands, Israel, Italy, Poland, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Albania, Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia.

Visitors to NP Pelister come mostly during the summer period, of which 40.3% for walking, 37.9% for recreation, 12.1% for sport, 7.3% for education and 2.4% for other needs in the national park. (Dimitrov, N., Koteski, C., 2016).

According to the National Association of Incoming Tourism in Macedonia - NAITM, the number of interested foreign tourists in ecotourism and alternative forms of tourism is continuously growing from year to year with a much higher ratio of the number of tourists in Macedonia. Foreign tourists are mostly interested in nature focussing on national parks, the flora and fauna that they offer, the cycling and hiking trails, as well as the eco-tours that often have an educational role at the request of tourists. According to them, the shortcomings that arise while organizing and visiting of the eco-tours are the lack of adequate tourist guides for ecotourism, the lack of eco-accommodation capacity in or near the Pelister National Park, insufficient mapping of the terrain and the poor education of the local population in these forms of tourist offers.

However, according to NAITM, the Pelister National Park represents a unique opportunity to develop this form of tourism, which should be a basic offer, complemented by ecotourism infrastructure, promotion and education to enable a large number of tourist visits from Macedonia and the world.

The need to improve eco-trail infrastructure, eco-accommodation capacity, waste selection, eco-guides and the lack of promotion are very important for developing this tourist offer in the Pelister National Park. It is these new forms of tourist offer that will need to attract a new target group of tourists who through ecotourism will visit and stay at the tourist destination.

CONCLUSION

Due to living dynamics of and stressful urban environments, tourists are increasingly rejecting the concept of long vacations stationed in one place without typical activities. Because of work obligations and living dynamics, a trend has arisen of several daily vacations to different destinations that are of an adventurous and exploratory character, woven in unpolluted ecological areas. Learning about the local values, history, culture, tradition and gastronomy from the destination being visited is the highest criteria for tourists when choosing a destination and it is precisely ecotourism that is the unbroken thread through these tourist offers.

The protected areas in the Republic of Macedonia cover about 8.7% of the territory of the country. Most of them belong to national parks with about 4.4%, followed by natural monuments with around 2.5% and the multi-purpose area Jasen around with about 1.1% of the national territory. A relatively small area (0.5%) is covered by strict nature reserves, while at least 0.1% is covered by areas with special natural features and separate plant and animal species. (Јаневски, Јб. 2017). According to the planned development for protecting the natural heritage of the Republic of Macedonia, another 194 sites and objects of nature are expected to be protected by 2020, which will increase the number of protected sites and facilities to 263, that is, a total of 296 963 km² or 11.5% of the territory of the country. Pelister National Park has ideal conditions for developing ecotourism and alternative forms of tourist offers with still untouched nature and perception of tourists as an undiscovered tourist destination. Ecotourism as a modern concept with its positive results in global and regional frameworks of tourist destinations needs to be strongly integrated into every state tourism strategy. The need for a serious approach and building a national eco-tourism strategy in Macedonia should be a priority in planning future strategic steps in the tourism sector that will enable us to exploit the potential at our disposal allowing for continued positive growth.

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