

EFFECTIVE INTERPRETATION IN NATURE-BASED TOURISM AS A TOOL FOR SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

Purpose – The modern form of tourism encompasses not only the free movement of people but also the leisure time, which can be a major means of connecting with nature. For Bulgaria, as tourist country, to be on the international tourism market is of particular importance. Bulgaria has exceptional richness and diversity of natural environment and heritage. They are an advantage and a prerequisite for the development of tourism in all its sustainable forms, especially in protected areas. The present study aims to draw parallels between sustainability as a concept, the development of tourism in protected areas in Bulgaria, and the enhancements of tourists' nature-based experience through the toolkit of interpretation.

Methodology – The research methodology focuses on the identification of the effects of interpretation using an approach which combines traditional methods such as SWOT analysis and questionnaires applied to a selected protected area in Bulgaria and the nature-based tourism offered there.

Findings – The implementation of the research gave an opportunity to generate comparative analysis and evaluation of the tools of interpretation in the protected areas in Bulgaria, as well as to explore tourists' attitudes and to identify management approaches that will lead to the successful use of interpretation.

Contribution – Against the background of overwhelming globalization, the scarcity of natural resources, and the increasing pressure on destinations, the results of the study reveal the opportunities provided by the interpretation toolbox and the stimulating effect it has on the tourists, the tourism industry and local community in the regions in and around the protected territories in Bulgaria.

Keywords Sustainable tourism, environmental interpretation, protected areas

INTRODUCTION

The protected areas cover more than 12% of the world's land area (Chape, Harrison, Spalding & Lysenko, 2005). National and nature parks, as well as the other categories of protected areas, play an important role in protecting sensitive ecosystems worldwide. Regardless of their status, they are, by definition, land or water areas that are presumed to face threats now or in the future due to the impact that human activity renders them. Traditionally, it is accepted that the main objective of their management is to sustainably maintain the quality and characteristics of the natural heritage and the benefits concerning it (Ham, 1993). A substantial part of European countries gain their significant tourism boom due to their evidential sustainable potential (Stankova, Kirilov, Kaleichev & Vasenska, 2015). Bulgaria is also among the countries that rely on natural resources and the sustainability of protected areas for the development of tourism. By 2020, the protected areas in Bulgaria cover 584 563.2 hectares (Executive Environment Agency, 2020). However, although management plans have been developed for them, weaknesses in their management are still noticeable (Kirilov, 2018). Thus, with a growing demand

for nature-based tourism, it is becoming increasingly important to take adequate management measures to ensure their sustainability (Bushell, 2003). In this regard, the present study is an attempt to outline the opportunities in Bulgaria for undertaking active sustainable measures, concerning the management of tourism in the protected areas. In this connection, the main purpose is to draw parallels between sustainability as a concept, the development of tourism in protected areas in Bulgaria and the tourists' nature-based experience achieved through the tools of interpretation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainability and sustainable development are extremely important issues for modern society (Montanari, 2019). Speaking of sustainability and sustainable development, what should be pointed out first of all, is the development of the concept in the second half of the 20th century. By the beginning of the new millennium, the imperative of sustainable development has been widely implemented in the socio-economic, political and cultural life of modern civilization. This has affected all economic sectors, including the tourism industry. And this is well evident from the WTO's definitive framework, according to which sustainable tourism is the one that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities (WTO, 2020). In a narrower sense, sustainable tourism leads to the management of all resources in a manner allowing the answering of economic, social and aesthetical needs with preserved cultural integrity, fundamental environmental processes, biologic diversity and life-maintenance systems (Stankova, 2016). Sustainable tourism can be defined also as a process of interaction between tourists, their needs and hosting community, and the environment. While maintaining a high level of tourist satisfaction in this context, as well as providing experiences, there is a process of raising their awareness about sustainability issues and promoting sustainable tourism practices amongst them (Making Tourism More Sustainable - A Guide for Policy Makers, UNEP and UNWTO, 2005, p.11-12).

In view of all of the relevant connections, a focus point of sustainability, sustainable development, sustainable tourism, and enhancement of tourists' nature-based experience, satisfaction of local interests and the preservation of the environment can be achieved by interpretation.

Interpretation is much more than information. It is, above all, a theoretical and practical construction based on a combination of processes, bound by the selection, the presentation and the announced context of information in their relationship with the socio-cultural and environmental context and visitors who experience heritage. In etymological terms, of course, the meaning of "interpretation" comes from Latin and refers to the elucidation of the signification of something. The shortest explanation of the term is given by S. Ham (1992), who notes that interpretation is a simple approach to communication.

Perceived in the context of communication, interpretation is part of the process of transferring meaning from one source to another. A transfer, however, in the presence of communication barriers, that needs an intermediary - a type of contact person, such as

the interpreter. An area where interpretation has traditionally been handled is ecology as a science of the structure and functions of nature in general, and the related study of the environment. However, the practices of interpretation of the environment have long existed, although the use of the term interpretation according to Aldrige (1975) began much later. For Aldrige, the main role of interpretation is to promote nature conservation. Among the pioneers in this field is the National Park Service of the United States which in 1919 began the specialized development of a range of activities for visitors. In 1957, following the publication of Freeman Tilden's work, "Interpreting Our Heritage", environmental interpretation gained even more popularity outside the United States. On this basis, the first interpretative programs of the Galapagos Islands were developed. At present, the development of interpretative philosophy and techniques includes not only those related to natural territories but also the whole range of cultural, artistic, historical and social aspects that constitute the heritage of a place, region or country, and which must be preserved for future generations. Meanwhile, authors from Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Australia were involved in the process of development of theoretical prerequisites. In Bulgaria, as a tourist country, talks about interpretation and its role in tourism supply and the possible expected effects in terms of sustainability are also getting more and more frequent.

As noted by researches (Tubb, 2003; Ham 2013), if well planned, interpretation helps to achieve the goals of sustainable development precisely through tourism. Tourists are influenced through the application of interpretative techniques or their inclusion in interpretative programs, thus raising their knowledge of the environment in which they reside and consequently enhancing their awareness, care and commitment to protecting it. This is also the reason why some experts (Orams, 1996) define this interpretation as a 'win-win' situation for environmental managers and tourists. The applied aspects of this process are well described by Moscardo (2004), who defines the role of interpretation as a contributing factor to sustainable tourism in three ways. The first considers interpretation as a means of interaction between wildlife and tourists. It emphasizes the educational element contained in interpretation, which is essential for tourists and their awareness of what rules to observe in nature for their safety and how to have minimal impact on the environment. Next, interpretation is considered as a means of raising tourists' awareness in general and hence their awareness of the environment. The third aspect focuses on the effect of the qualitatively presented interpretation for increasing the tourists's nature-based experience, placed in connection to increasing the commercial viability of tourist activities. In addition, the effective role of interpretation for sustainable development and tourism (in protected areas, in particular), can be supported by arguments from number of authors (Moscardo, 2008; Jafari, 2000; Weiler and Ham, 2001; Chen, Hwang & Lee, 2006).

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology is consistent with the outlined focus of the study. In an attempt for the identification of the effects of interpretation, it involves a combination of popular, but also of some specific quantitative and qualitative methods such as SWOT analysis, questionnaires, review of the legislation and specialized publications on the topic, as well as monitoring and synthesis.

As a widely used basic situational analysis method, the SWOT analysis was applied to reveal and predict the positive or negative impact of environmental factors. In the case of the current study, its focus was on the national and nature parks in Bulgaria and their management plans to reveal the external influences in question, as well as their intrinsic potential to use interpretation of nature-based tourism as a tool for enhancing sustainability.

The questionnaire survey method was conducted using a questionnaire with pre-formulated questions and pre-formulated answers. It was implemented in two consecutive periods (with a gap of one year) within one of the most popular protected areas in Bulgaria - Rila Monastery Nature Park. Two different questionnaires were used for the two surveys. The reason for this is that the first survey showed that there was no interpretation available in the Rila Monastery Nature Park and this actually affected the nature-based experience of the tourists who visit it. Summarizing and analyzing the results, the Park was advised to introduce interpretation as a tool in offering nature-based tourism. Therefore, the second questionnaire was designed to evaluate the effect of face-to-face interpretation.

Going into greater detail, the first questionnaire contained three sections with a total of 19 items. The first section provided general information about the demographic profile of the respondents. The second part examined the reasons for the visit and how information is obtained before choosing the specific destination. The third part included questions directly related to interpretation, its recognition as a term, and identification of effects on visitors that are characteristic for interpretation.

The second questionnaire was structured as an adaptation on Ham and Weiler's (2005) tool for evaluation of the interpretation. It was targeted at tourists who had taken part in an interpretive program and included three key questions with variations in responses within a framework of 11 indicators.

The results are derived using the Excel Pivot and SPSS software products. The synthesis is applied to the conclusions and summaries to outline some basic management approaches to the sustainable development of tourism in the protected areas and to increase tourists' experience within nature-based tourism and tourists' involvement to sustainability.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Territorial scope of the study within the protected areas in Bulgaria.

The system of protected areas in Bulgaria, covering just over 5% of the total area of the country, is the basis for the development of sustainable forms of tourism (Kirilov, 2018). A total of 1021 protected areas have been designated in the country, including: 55 reserves, 3 national parks, 348 natural landmarks, 35 protected reserves, 11 nature parks and 569 protected areas (Register of Protected Areas, 2020).

Furthermore, Bulgaria ranks third in the EU as a share of protected areas of the European ecological network Natura 2000 (34%), preceded by Slovenia (38%) and Croatia (37%); followed by Slovakia (30%) and Cyprus (29%). All protected areas in Bulgaria have enormous tourist potential which combines preserved nature, exceptionally rich biodiversity, availability of various recreational and sports opportunities, rich cultural and historical heritage, accessibility, a wide network of maintained hiking trails, as well as thematic and interpretative routes.

The management of the protected territories in Bulgaria is based on management plans, whose regulation is introduced by the Protected Areas Act and the Ordinance on the development of management plans in protected areas (MOEW, 2020). In accordance with the legislative framework, protected areas' management plans have a single structure in which, as part of the cultural and socio-economic characteristics of their territories, the place and role of tourism have been explored. In view of the specifics of this study, the focus is on the management plans of national and nature parks in Bulgaria, with an emphasis on SWOT analysis of tourism opportunities in these protected areas and the finding of records concerning interpretation as a tool for enhancing sustainability.

The summary of the results in Table 1 shows that, in the management plans for the selected protected areas in Bulgaria, tourism has important place and high expectations are given to interpretation.

Table 1: SWOT analysis of the management plans for national and nature parks in Bulgaria

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Favourable geographical location, climate and relief which provide accessibility to natural and anthropogenic resources; - Unique nature and rich cultural and historical heritage with local, national and global importance; - Secured accessibility to and from the various entry points – asphalt roads, railways; - Constructed recreational buildings, visitor and information centers, attractive to tourists from both the country and abroad; - Overall state policy for environment protection and sustainable tourism development; - Different forms of interpretative materials available - brochures, books, maps, etc. Printed materials prepared by the Park Directorates; - Options to purchase souvenirs, tourist maps and other publications; - All Management Plans address the topic of interpretation; - All parks highlight the potential of interpretation as an opportunity for sustainable development of the protected area in relation to tourism. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Existing infrastructure is old and does not meet modern requirements and conditions; - Lack of information about the economic results of this sector; - Lack of unified methodology for visitor monitoring in protected areas and their impact; - Insufficiencies in personnel and administrative capacity in park directorates; - Lack of communication between the protected areas and the Ministry of Tourism; - Lack of clarity about the status of interpretative guides and tourist guides (rangers) from the park directorates; - Missing interpretative programs and interpreters; - Lack of training opportunities in the field of tourist interpretation; - Insufficient involvement and support on the part of the local population; - Insufficient experience of business and insufficiently developed tourist products (undeveloped market niches, low level of acquiring foreign experience and ideas); - Insufficient promotion of protected areas in the country as tourist destinations.

Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High unused potential for tourism development; - Opportunities to stimulate local community development; - Opportunities for offering ecological production through traditional livestock breeding and agriculture; - Opportunities for building unique tourist products and development of new markets at the national and global level; - Opportunities for interpretation development through project activities for the establishment of sustainable tourism offers in and around the protected area. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Drastic decrease in biodiversity as a result of unregulated tourist flows; - Raising risks of fires, pollution, over-construction; - Inefficient use of existing tourist resources due to the lack of interpretation of natural, cultural and historical heritage; - Lower nature-based experience of tourists due to a lack of understanding of the environment specifics in which they reside when visiting protected areas; - Reduced attractiveness of protected areas as tourist destinations for practicing sustainable tourism.

Source: own research

All protected areas have sufficient resources to develop sustainable forms of tourism. Nevertheless, there is a certain contradiction regarding the fact that, although interpretation is considered a potential opportunity for the development of the protected area and for the improvement of tourists' nature-based experience, it has not been sufficiently harmonized with other regulations relating to different parks' activities. In addition, only two of the protected territories have working positions related to interpretation - Pirin and Rila National Parks. In the rest of the protected areas, the role of the interpretative guide or expert interpreter is performed by the experts responsible for public relations and educational programs, biodiversity or tourism.

As already stated, the inference of the details of the research is achieved by directing the survey to a specific protected area - Rila Monastery Nature Park.

Rila Monastery Nature Park is located in the south-west region of Bulgaria, in Rila Mountain. Its altitude varies from 750 m in the lowest parts of the park to 2713 m asl. The special status of the park is determined by the Protected Areas Act (MOEW, 2020), but it is also important to note that the conservation of the Rila Monastery Nature Park, essentially as an IUCN Category II protected area, is consistent with the spirit and purpose of these national and international documents which are basic for nature conservation.

Rila Monastery Nature Park is a protected area of great biological diversity with national and international importance. The park includes 85 different types of habitats, representing 21 % of the habitats in the country established under the CORINE program, the presence of 4 habitats without analogue in the classification of habitats of the Palaearctic, and 22 European threatened habitats requiring specific conservation measures under Resolution No 4 (06.12.1996) and 28 habitats included in Annex 1 to the EU Habitats Directive (MOEW, 2020). Rila Monastery Nature Park is one of the three most important territories in Bulgaria for the conservation of the alpine type of birds, a key part of the international network of ornithologically important sites of worldwide importance for the birds of the alpine biome. (Management Plan of Rila Monastery Nature Park, 2004). At the same time, tourism is the most significant activity on the territory of the park, as well as the most significant potential source of sustainable income

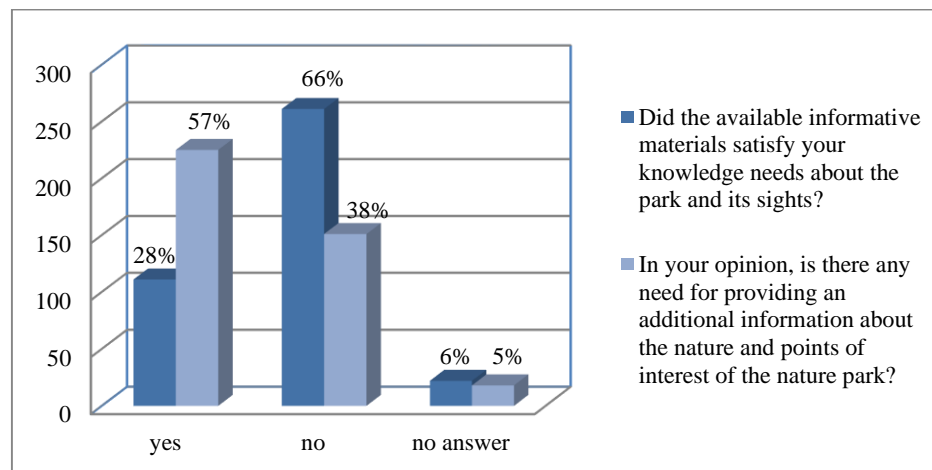
for private landowners and sites from the service field. The park is the second most visited protected area in the country, after Vitosha Nature Park. Besides, many tourist routes of local, national and international importance pass through the park. Over the past three years, the park has been visited by a total of 10,000 people, with an average annual visitor number of 3,200, according to the obtained information from the park's visitor center.

Data collection and analysis of results

Using the questionnaire survey method, two separate surveys were conducted among tourists in the Rila Monastery Nature Park. The first survey was conducted between July and September 2018. Questionnaires were distributed in and around the visitor center of the park on the principle of simple random selection. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed - 300 in Bulgarian and 200 in English, of which 394 were properly filled and returned. The aggregate profile of the respondents shows that 55% of them were men and 45% were women. The majority are Bulgarians - 62%; the foreigners are 38%. The Bulgarian tourists are from all age groups. Foreign tourists are middle-aged or older. More than half of the respondents – 64 % point vacation and recreation as the main reason for visiting the nature park. 30% of the respondents know the area well and come often, while for the others the destination is new and they come for the first time.

At this first study, the analysis of the results was particularly influenced by the obtained answers to two of the questions, namely: “Did the available informative materials satisfy your knowledge needs about the park and its attractions?” and “In your opinion, is there any need for providing additional information about the nature and points of interest of the park?”. It was found that for 66% of the respondents, the information brochures and attractions provided by the park were not sufficient and did not have the expected cognitive effect on tourists. More than half of the respondents (57%) also noted the need for additional information about the park's attractions. (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Nature-based experience of tourists in the Rila Monastery Nature Park



Source: own research

The results clearly show that the lack of additional information about the nature and points of interest in the park is recognized as a weakness that influences tourists' experience and attitudes towards the environment of the protected area in which they reside.

The analysis and the conclusions drawn from the questionnaire survey were provided to the Rila Monastery Nature Park Directorate. A specific recommendation was made to the park: to introduce interpretation as a tool in offering nature-based tourism. As it was considered essential and necessary, the park developed an interpretative route designed to meet the higher needs of tourists for specialized information. The route is accessible to children, the elderly, as well as to people with disabilities. It is marked, including direction signs, as well as "Entrance" and "Exit" boards and boards on specific stops, where the attention of visitors is focused on the natural phenomenon that can be observed at that point. The route is also served by a specially trained interpreter.

In the course of the initial study, a second questionnaire was developed for the survey. It was specifically designed for evaluating the effect of interpretation and consistent with the Ham & Weiler (2005) model.

At the second phase the questionnaire was distributed in the period May - August 2019 using Rila Monastery Nature Park visitor center. A total of 130 questionnaires were distributed to Bulgarian and foreign guided organized tourists. Of these, 38 were returned correctly filled. Frequency analysis was used to set the profile of the respondents: the majority of them were foreigners - 63%; the Bulgarians were 37%. All of the tourists were middle-aged; the group of men slightly outnumbered the female respondents.

In total, 11 indicators (derived from Weiler & Ham scale (2005, 2010) were examined. Taken together, they cover the scope of three main categories of emotional states and related effects within interpretation, namely: cognitive, affective and behavioural.

The processing of the results (Table 2) revealed that the interpretative program conducted at the Rila Monastery Nature Park on the developed interpretive route had a positive effect on the tourists' experiences and no extremely negative evaluations were observed. Interpretation had influenced tourists significantly and was positively perceived by them, even if they were not aware of its specifics in advance.

Table 2: **Indicators and obtained results – second questionnaire survey**

Indicator		Reliability (Cronbah`s alpha)	Obtained visitors' results
A	Impact on appreciation of indigenous connections to nature	.95	56% Very high impact 24% High 10% Med-high 8% Medium 1% Low 1% No impact
B	Elaboration (provoking visitors to think)	.88	50% Very high impact 38% High 8% Med-high 3% Medium 1% No impact
C	Positive attitude toward nature conservation	.73	67% Very high impact 22% High 3% Med-high 7% Medium 1% Low
D	Positive global evaluation of interpretation at site	.84	68% Very high 22% High 7% Med-high 3% Medium
E	Desire to participate in additional ivterpretative activities	NA	71% Yes 29 % No
F	Desire to purchase a memento or souvenir related directly to site story	NA	34% Yes 64% No
G	Desire to stay longer	NA	66% Yes 34% No
H	Desire to return for repeat visit	NA	82% Yes 18% No
I	Positive word-of-mouth advertising	.90	70% Very high 20% High 6% Med-high 4% Medium
J	Visitors found it relevant and meaningful to their lives	.67	58% Very high impact 34% High 4% Med-high 3% Medium 1% No
K	Visitors provoked to interact with the guide (interactive experience)	NA	In 46% of cases interpretative guide initiated interaction; In 31 % of cases visitors initiated interaction.

Source: Ham & Weiler (2005) and authors' own research data

Checking the internal consistency of the results (on Cronbah's alpha) outlined the relevance of the study. Thus, it clearly highlighted the possibilities of interpretation and the effects it has on tourists' nature-based experience in the relation to sustainability. It was further found that guided interpretation was more powerful, especially because the interpreter can demonstrate environmentally friendly behavior and be perceived as a model of induced tourist behavior. This is an especially important remark with regard to protected areas. Undoubtedly, the nonpersonal interpretation approach is appropriate too, but only if there is no opportunity for an interpreter to be present on site.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be summarized that the study outlined some specific findings and recommendations. First of all, the protected areas in Bulgaria have significant tourist potential. But it is noteworthy that in the country, there are not many studies which explore the effect of environmental interpretation on tourism. The example of the Rila study can be taken as a pilot one, and indicative for Bulgaria. Despite the existence of management plans and other key documents for the protected areas, sustainability placed in relation to the tourism supply needs additional measures. As second, the main activities that need to be realized in the coming years are connected to the conservation of biodiversity in national and nature parks as a major resource for nature-based tourism and the maintenance of appropriate infrastructure. Moreover, assuming that the attractiveness of a destination reflects its visitor's feelings about its perceived ability to satisfy their needs (Dimitrov, Stankova, Vasenska & Uzunova, 2017), the development of interpretative routes will provide prerequisites for enhancement of tourists' nature-based experience and awareness. Thirdly, a regulatory framework for the activities of tourist guides and interpreters should be created to facilitate communication between tourists and nature in the protected areas so that a wide range of sustainability aspects can be ensured.

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