THE ROLE OF PROTECTED AREAS IN LOCAL PRODUCTS DEVELOPMENT: INSIGHTS FROM PRODUCERS IN THE POLISH CARPATHIANS

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Abstract

Purpose – The study examines how local producers incorporate the natural and cultural heritage of protected areas (PAs) into their products and promotional activities and explores the social and institutional factors shaping these processes.
Methodology – The study is based on a survey conducted in the Polish Carpathians among 64 local producers operating within or near PAs. Data were collected in 2025 through direct questionnaire-based interviews. Questions addressed the relationship between local products and PAs, as well as institutional support, cooperation, and local identity. Respondents were selected purposively through field recognition and snowball sampling, and the data were analysed using descriptive statistics and qualitative interpretation.
Findings – Local producers widely incorporate natural and cultural heritage into their products and promotion, but their activities remain individual and weakly coordinated. Cooperation among producers is more developed than with public institutions, yet it is predominantly informal. PAs remain marginal as institutional partners in local product development and territorial branding.
Originality of the research – The study contributes to research on PAs by examining their role as institutional partners supporting territorial branding and local product development. It shows that, although local producers effectively incorporate natural and cultural heritage into their products, the institutional and branding potential of PAs remains underutilised.
Keywords local products, protected areas, cultural and natural heritage, tourism development, place identity, Carpathians

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INTRODUCTION

Local and regional products – understood as food, crafts, and services rooted in the endogenous potential of a given territory – are increasingly recognised as key components of sustainable tourism development, particularly in rural and peripheral areas. They contribute to destination attractiveness by embedding local resources, traditions, and cultural meanings into market offerings, thereby strengthening place identity and supporting the differentiation of destinations (Trisoko et al., 2024; Vujko et al., 2025; Gonda et al., 2021). In this context, local products not only reflect but actively construct the identity and uniqueness of places, shaping their image and enhancing their visibility in competitive tourism markets.

In protected areas (PAs), such products can also link economic activity with place-based identity and heritage conservation, and the maintenance of natural values. However, the extent to which this potential is translated into local product development and promotion remains insufficiently understood. In particular, the role of local producers – as key actors mediating between resources, markets, and institutions – remains insufficiently explored. Their ability to recognise and mobilise local natural and cultural potential, place identity, and capacity to translate these assets into products and services are likely to be critical for the development of heritage-based tourism. Equally important are their cooperation practices and the extent of institutional support, particularly from PA authorities, which shape the conditions for developing and promoting local products. This points to a specific research gap concerning the mechanisms through which protected areas' natural and cultural resources, as well as their positive image and recognised environmental quality, are transformed — or fail to be transformed — into concrete product-development, branding, and promotional practices at the level of local producers.

In Poland the new paradigm of PA development, which assumes a stronger integration of conservation objectives with socio-economic development, has not yet been implemented in practice. Previous studies indicate that cooperation between PA authorities, especially national park administrations, and other local institutions remains insufficient and often fragmented (Zawilińska, 2025; Raszka & Hełdak, 2023). This weak institutional integration is also reflected in broader difficulties concerning the development of the national park system. For more than two decades after the establishment of Ujście Warty National Park in 2001, attempts to create new national parks in Poland remained unsuccessful, which illustrates the persistence of conflicts, governance barriers, and limited local acceptance of conservation initiatives. In this context, it becomes particularly important to identify the extent to which local producers recognise the resources of PAs, identify with their natural and cultural values, and use them in developing and promoting their products. It is equally important to examine what barriers they encounter when attempting to link their production activities with the cultural, natural, and symbolic values of these areas.

The aim of the study is to examine whether and how local producers incorporate the natural and cultural heritage of PAs into their products and promotional activities. It also seeks to identify the social and institutional conditions that shape these processes, including producers' awareness of local heritage, their cooperation practices, and the support provided by PA institutions and other local actors. The study examines several interrelated dimensions of local product development in the context of PAs.

The analysis covers the scope and forms of institutional support available to producers, as well as patterns of cooperation and networking among them. By addressing these issues, the research seeks to identify the key factors that facilitate or hinder the development of local products as part of a tourism offer based on PAs and their territorial resources.

To address the identified research gap and achieve the study aim, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1. Do local producers identify and draw on the region's natural and cultural heritage in the development and promotion of their products and services?
RQ2. Do local producers use the brand of certain PAs of the Polish Carpathians in promoting their products?
RQ3. What forms of institutional support are available to local producers in the development and promotion of their products and services?
RQ4. What is the scope and nature of cooperation between local producers and PA authorities in the development and promotion of local products and services?
RQ5. How are cooperation networks among local producers formed, and what are the main purposes and areas of this cooperation?

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Local products play a growing role in development strategies by linking economic activity with the preservation and valorisation of natural and cultural heritage, often within the framework of territorial brands and quality certification schemes designed to enhance product credibility, support rural economies, and promote environmentally responsible practices. PA managers increasingly use local products to advance the dual objectives of conservation and local development (Butzmann & Job, 2017; Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2016; Pamukcu et al., 2021). As such, local products can generate meaningful income and support local livelihoods, while also incentivising conservation-friendly practices and contributing to the multifunctional development of PAs and their surrounding territories (Knaus et al., 2017). Previous research indicates that visitors to PAs show considerable interest in local products and that certification positively influences their perception and appreciation of these products (Zanchini et al., 2025).

A substantial body of research highlights that local products enhance destination attractiveness and tourism development through multiple mechanisms. They shape destination image, stimulate motivation to visit, and strengthen tourist engagement, particularly when they are authentic, well-integrated, and community-based (Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020; Pizzichini et al., 2020). Unique foods, handicrafts, and cultural practices have been shown to increase tourist interest and visitation intentions (Gonda et al., 2021; Pamukcu et al., 2021; Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2016). At the same time, authenticity – closely associated with local culture, traditional knowledge, and natural resources – has become an increasingly important dimension of contemporary travel, influencing tourist satisfaction and, in some cases, constituting a motivation in itself (Zhang et al., 2025; Susiang et al., 2025). However, the economic effects of local products remain uneven and depend on factors such as branding, governance arrangements, market access, and the ways in which local resources are managed and valorised (Knaus et al., 2017).

While the literature generally emphasises the positive role of local and regional products in tourism development, their effects are not uniform and may vary across contexts (Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020). For example, research conducted in Poland indicates that, although consumers express positive and emotional attitudes toward traditional products – valuing their taste, naturalness, and perceived health benefits – these attitudes do not always translate into consistent purchasing behaviour. In particular, geographical indications and quality labels, intended to enhance product credibility, play a relatively limited role in consumer decision-making. Moreover, traditional products are often perceived as relatively expensive, which may reduce purchase frequency and weaken consumer loyalty (Rudawska, 2014).

Against this background, the role of PAs in socio-economic development remains a subject of ongoing debate. On the one hand, their natural and cultural assets increasingly serve as drivers of tourism and rural development, generating income, employment, and broader spillover benefits (Gupta et al., 2023; Buongiorno & Intini, 2021; Mika et al., 2015), with nature-based tourism representing one of the fastest-growing segments of the tourism market (Silva et al., 2023). On the other hand, regulatory restrictions related to nature conservation may limit economic activity, generate conflicts, and reduce local acceptance of PAs (Duvivier et al., 2025; Zawilińska, 2025). Empirical evidence suggests that PAs can effectively support local development, but only when tourism is strategically planned, well-governed, and aligned with sustainability principles (Job et al., 2017; Duvivier et al., 2025; Trišić et al., 2022). In this context, local products appear to offer a particularly promising mechanism for linking conservation objectives with local economic development. Evidence from European regions, particularly the Alps, shows that their integration into territorial branding and support by park authorities can contribute to coherent, place-based tourism offers and strengthen the economic functions of PAs (Knaus et al., 2017). However, despite growing interest in both local products and PAs as instruments of sustainable tourism and rural development, relatively little attention has been paid to how the image, attractiveness, and symbolic value of PAs are actually used to support the development and promotion of local products based on their natural and cultural resources (Albaladejo-García et al., 2024). In particular, there is still limited empirical knowledge on whether PAs function only as spatial contexts for local production, or whether they are actively mobilised as territorial brands, institutional partners, and sources of market value for local producers.

Within this broader context, the Polish Carpathians represent a particularly relevant case. The region is characterised by high natural and cultural diversity and a dense network of PAs, covering over 70% of its territory (including six national parks, 13 landscape parks, three UNESCO biosphere reserves, as well as protected landscape areas, Natura 2000 sites, and smaller forms

of site-based protection). At the same time, it remains largely peripheral, with relatively weak socio-economic indicators. In such contexts, local resources – and the ability to activate them – play a crucial role in development processes (Bański & Kiniorska, 2021). Tourism based on natural and cultural assets is therefore widely seen as a key development pathway in the region. However, the presence of such resources does not automatically translate into effective development outcomes (Kubal-Czerwińska et al., 2022). The extent to which local products contribute to linking conservation objectives with tourism and local economies depends on how these resources are mobilised, governed, and embedded within broader institutional and market frameworks.

2. METHODS

The study draws on survey research conducted in the Polish Carpathians among local producers operating within or in the buffer zones of PAs. The empirical material consists of 64 interviews with producers of local products and services, carried out in 2025. Data were collected through direct questionnaire-based interviews conducted either face-to-face or by telephone, depending on respondents' availability and accessibility**.** The questionnaire was organised into thematic blocks corresponding to the key analytical dimensions of the study and directly linked to its aim and five research questions. It was developed by the authors based on previous research on PAs (Mika et al., 2015; Zawilińska, 2025) and local development and was reviewed in consultation with a representative of the Landscape Parks Complex of the Małopolskie Voivodship and a local producer. These blocks covered: producers' awareness of local natural and cultural heritage and their sense of place identity; the relationships between local products and PAs; the scope and forms of institutional support; cooperation with PA authorities; and patterns of cooperation among producers. Each thematic block included both Likert-scale questions and open-ended items, allowing respondents not only to assess selected issues in a structured manner, but also to elaborate on their experiences, perceptions, and practices.

The identification of respondents was a challenging stage of the research process, as there is no comprehensive database of local producers operating in PAs and their buffer zones whose products or services are based on natural resources, cultural heritage, or traditional production practices. The study targeted producers offering products or services rooted in local natural and cultural potential. Since many such producers have limited online visibility or are not present on the Internet at all, respondent identification required field recognition, local knowledge, and the use of a snowball sampling approach, in which contacted producers and local actors indicated further potential respondents. The interviewees represent a wide range of activities, from traditional crafts to tourism-related services. Their offerings include handicrafts (e.g. woodcarving, traditional leather goods such as *kierpce* and carters' gloves, ceramics, painting, regional embroidery, and patchwork), food products (e.g. natural ice cream, honey, fruit and vegetable preserves, bakery and dairy products, cold-pressed oils, and wines from local vineyards), as well as services such as agritourism linked to local products, activities related to traditional herbal knowledge, workshops on cultural heritage and nature conservation, and gastronomy based on regional products.

The study follows an exploratory research design based on a purposive sample of local producers. Such an approach is appropriate when the objective is to identify patterns, relationships, and barriers within a specific group of respondents rather than to test causal hypotheses or statistically generalise the findings to a broader population (Haenssgen et al., 2021). For closed-ended questions, basic descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated to present the distribution of responses and to identify general tendencies in respondents' assessments. Open-ended responses were analysed using thematic analysis and qualitative content analysis to complement the quantitative findings and support their interpretation.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Producers' awareness of local heritage and place-based identity

The results, based on self-reported measures, indicate a high level of awareness of local natural and cultural heritage among producers, accompanied by a strong sense of responsibility for the development and preservation of their region. Most respondents perceive their activities not only in economic terms but also as embedded in the broader context of maintaining local identity and safeguarding place-specific values.

This is reflected in high mean (M) responses for individual items (M=4.1–4.5 on a five-point scale), indicating that respondents perceive themselves as having good knowledge of the natural environment, history, and cultural heritage of their region, including an ability to identify its distinctive features and locally specific elements of heritage. They also report being aware of the spatial distribution of PAs, being able to indicate their location within the region. At the same time, low standard deviations (SD=0.8–1.0) point to a high level of agreement among respondents.

Beyond the cognitive dimension, the results point to a strong value-based and attitudinal orientation among producers. The highest agreement concerns the value of local heritage, emotional attachment to place, and the intention to link products with the region (M=4.7; SD=0.6–0.8). Respondents strongly affirm that natural and cultural heritage should be protected and want their products and services to contribute to the region's positive image. This orientation is complemented by a strong sense of responsibility, with 80% declaring responsibility for local or regional development.

This orientation is also reflected in production practices. The relatively high mean (M=4.1) indicates that many respondents regard their activities as connected with local traditions, customs, or crafts, although the high standard deviation (SD=1.4) shows considerable variation. Several respondents emphasise that their role extends beyond production to disseminating knowledge about production processes, traditions, and heritage. They position themselves as intermediaries and, in some cases, regional 'ambassadors'. These responses came mainly from the more actively engaged subgroup (M=3.6; SD=1.3). Strong place attachment is also reflected in respondents' calls for the responsible use of natural resources.

Although these assessments are based on self-reported measures and may therefore be subject to a degree of positive bias, they nevertheless indicate that producers perceive themselves as knowledgeable and locally embedded actors, for whom awareness of natural and cultural heritage constitutes an important foundation for their activity.

3.2 Linking local products with protected areas and their values

The results indicate a moderate level of direct linkage between local products and PAs and their environmental or cultural resources. Slightly more than half of respondents (56%) declare that their products are linked to nearby PAs (Fig. 1). These connections are often general, referring to landscape attractiveness, the use of local natural resources in production (e.g. honey, preserves, and herbal mixtures), or design elements inspired by local flora, while explicit references to specific PAs remain limited.

At the same time, a much larger share of respondents (75%) indicate that local natural, landscape, and cultural values have influenced the creation or character of their products. These influences are reflected in product design, naming, materials, and production practices. Examples include the use of local plant motifs, references to traditional patterns and crafts, and the continuation of region-specific production techniques (e.g. sheepskin-based products, traditional foods, or craft forms). Some respondents also emphasise efforts to preserve disappearing elements of local heritage, such as traditional architecture or everyday objects, e.g. carriage driving gloves once produced in the region and elements of highlander costumes (RQ1). In some cases respondents indicated that environmental conditions, such as topography or microclimate, have influenced business decisions, including the establishment of vineyards or the provision of tourism services. This suggests that while PAs are not always explicitly invoked, their values are often indirectly embedded in local production.

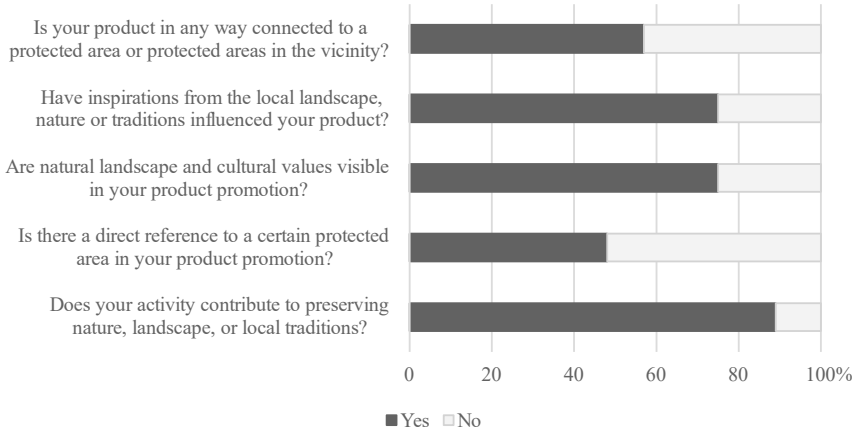
A similarly high share of respondents (75%) declare that natural and cultural values are incorporated into product promotion (RQ1). These are communicated through various channels, including product names, visual identity, packaging, websites, and storytelling. Producers frequently use landscape imagery, regional symbols, and references to tradition in their marketing, including symbols related to specific products (e.g. an ear of grain as a symbol of an old mill), mountain landscapes on product labels, or local floral motifs on souvenirs. Some respondents also emphasise the role of direct communication with customers, highlighting their efforts to convey knowledge about local traditions and places worth visiting.

Only 31 respondents (48%) declared that they explicitly mentioned their location within or near a protected area in promotional activities. Of this group, 13 instead referred to broader territorial units or general environmental attributes, such as regions, valleys, or 'clean areas', or could not provide the correct PA name. Others made no such references despite operating within PAs or buffer zones. Thus, although natural and cultural values are widely incorporated into promotion, PAs themselves are infrequently used as explicit marketing assets (RQ2).

The results also show a strong perceived contribution of local production to the preservation of natural and cultural heritage. A large majority of respondents (89%) declare that their activities support the protection of local values. This is most commonly expressed through the continuation of traditional practices, the use of natural and locally sourced materials, environmentally friendly production methods, and educational or promotional activities aimed at increasing awareness of local heritage. However, these contributions are articulated predominantly in relation to cultural heritage and tradition, while references to environmental protection in terms of biodiversity or landscape conservation remain relatively limited. In some cases, respondents also point to broader environmental impacts, such as maintaining traditional landscapes (e.g. through grazing or agriculture) or supporting biodiversity.

Overall, the findings indicate that local producers frequently draw on natural and cultural values in developing and promoting their products. However, explicit references to PAs remain relatively uncommon, and respondents more often emphasise cultural heritage and traditions than environmental protection or biodiversity.

Figure 1: **Linking local products and their promotion with protected areas**

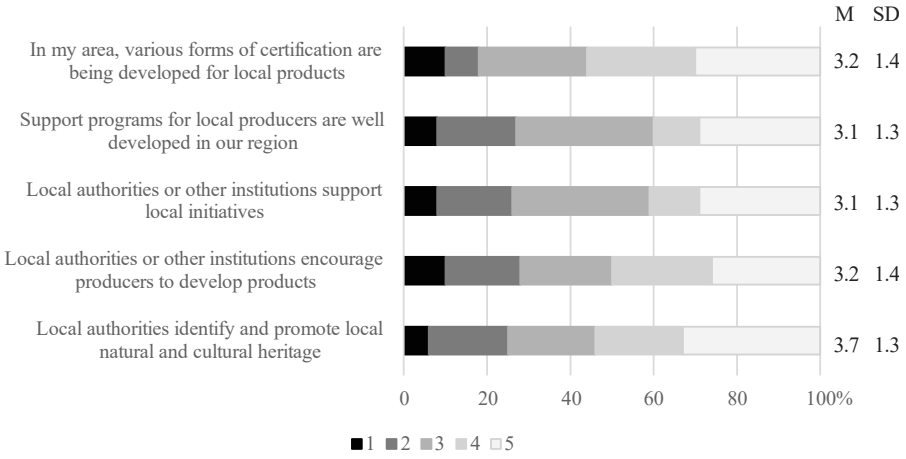


Source: Own elaboration

3.3 Institutional support and cooperation in the development of local products

The results indicate a moderate and uneven level of institutional support for the development of local products. Respondents generally perceive local authorities as recognising and promoting the importance of natural and cultural heritage (M=3.7 on a five-point scale), while slightly lower evaluations concern more operational forms of support, such as encouraging producers (3.2), fostering cooperation (3.1), and the development of support programmes (3.1). Similar levels are observed for certification and quality schemes (3.2), suggesting that although elements of institutional infrastructure are present, they are not consistently perceived as well-developed or fully effective (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: **Assessment of institutional support for local product development (scale 1-5)**



1 – I completely disagree, 5 – I definitely agree; M – mean, SD – standard deviation
Source: Own elaboration

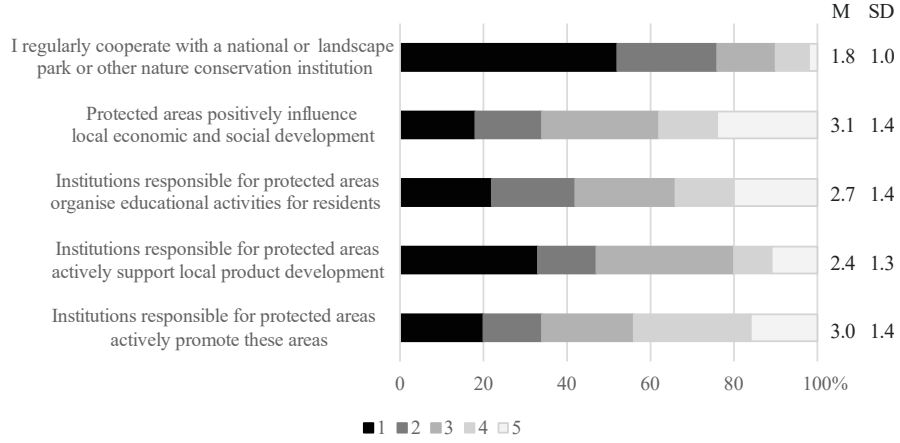
Qualitative responses show that support is often selective and event-based, mainly taking the form of fairs, festivals, workshops, promotion, training, funding opportunities, and certification. Local Action Groups (LGDs), agricultural advisory centres, cultural centres, and NGOs emerge as the most tangible sources. Many respondents nevertheless describe this support as limited, irregular, and dependent on particular leaders or projects rather than systemic solutions.

Respondents rated certification systems at an average of 3.2 (SD=1.4). Local brands and quality schemes were generally viewed positively, although only 26 of 64 respondents held a certificate. Initiatives included Made in Karpaty, Żywiecki Raj, Śliwkowy Szlak, Zagórzańskie Dziedziny, Lokalna Marka Ziemi Pszczyńskiej, and Bieszczadzka Heca, usually implemented by Local Action Groups or associations. Supporting activities included training, workshop space, promotional materials, knowledge sharing, and infrastructure development. Participants in branding initiatives emphasised benefits for business development, identity, and regional image, while others noted their limited number, reach, and coordination (RQ3).

The role of institutions responsible for PAs is assessed as relatively limited and uneven. Respondents moderately agree that these institutions promote their areas (M=3.0) and contribute to local development (3.1), but give lower ratings to direct support for local products (2.4), educational activities (2.7), and regular cooperation with producers (1.8) (Fig. 3). Open-ended responses suggest that interactions with PA institutions are sporadic, indirect, and largely limited to educational initiatives

(primarily focused on environmental education), or occasional joint events, rather than structured or long-term partnerships. In many cases, respondents report no contact or lack of awareness of such activities. Nevertheless, a small number of respondents point to more positive examples, including participation in educational programmes, joint promotional events, or collaboration with PA institutions in organising workshops or local initiatives. Overall, these examples remain isolated and do not indicate the presence of a consistent and intentional support framework provided by PA institutions for local producers (RQ4).

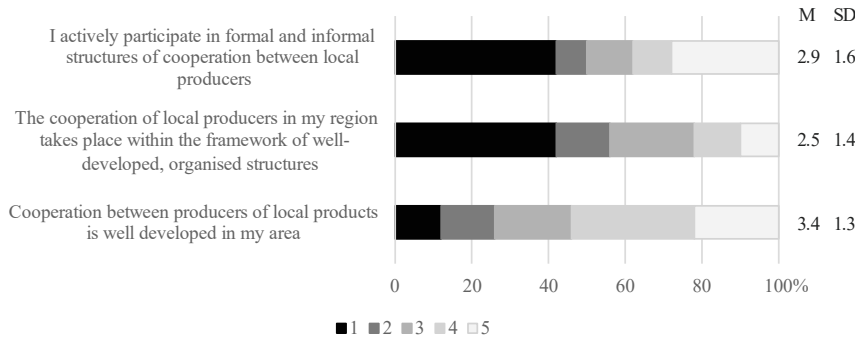
Figure 3: **Assessment of activities and support provided by protected area institutions for local producers (scale 1-5)**



1 – I completely disagree, 5 – I definitely agree; M – mean, SD – standard deviation
Source: Own elaboration

The results indicate a moderate level of cooperation among local producers (M=3.4; SD=1.3), accompanied by low institutionalisation (M=2.5; SD=1.4) and moderate individual engagement in cooperative structures (M=2.9; SD=1.6) (Fig. 4). Producers cooperate more intensively with one another than with public institutions, but mostly informally. Formal structures are limited and unevenly developed, and 60% of respondents are unaware of them. Identified examples include local tourism brands and producer associations such as Discovering Gorce, Honey Trail, and Łącko Fruit Trail, although only a few are described as active. Some respondents also refer to initiatives that are no longer operating and emphasise the need for stronger joint promotion.

Figure 4: **Assessment of cooperation among local producers (scale 1-5)**



1 – I completely disagree, 5 – I definitely agree; M – mean, SD – standard deviation
Source: Own elaboration

Examples reported by respondents confirm that cooperation is predominantly informal and embedded in personal networks. It includes mutual promotion, exchanging or selling one another's products, client recommendations, joint workshops, fairs, tastings, combined tourism offers, knowledge exchange, and occasional collaboration in applying for external funding. At the same time, the limited durability of existing initiatives and the lack of more coordinated and structured collaboration remain evident (RQ5).

4. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that natural and cultural heritage is widely incorporated into local products and their promotion, confirming its central role in shaping place-based offerings. Local producers frequently draw on landscape, traditions, and regional identity to create products that reflect the specificity of the area. This aligns with existing research highlighting the importance of authenticity and heritage in enhancing destination attractiveness and supporting tourism development (Zhang et al., 2025). Authenticity – most often associated with local products, food, culture, and natural values – has become an increasingly important element of travel and significantly enhances tourists' satisfaction (Susiang et al., 2025). Furthermore, cultural authenticity influences tourists' revisit intentions (Zhou et al., 2022; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010).

At the same time, the findings suggest that local products include elements of local heritage (e.g. traditional leather goods such as kierpce and carters' gloves, ceramics, regional embroidery, and patchwork), embedding elements of the local environment and culture into market offerings, thereby creating products with the potential to support heritage-based tourism. Most of the products offered are deeply grounded in tradition and, in some cases, in natural resources, indicating that producers recognise local assets and translate them into local products and services. However, this potential remains only partially realised. The activities undertaken by producers are largely individual and intuitive rather than strategically coordinated. Most producers operate independently, without shared marketing tools, and only a few are involved in local brands or producer associations, indicating that existing forms of cooperation remain limited in scale and lack systemic support. This contrasts with contemporary approaches to local product development, which emphasise alignment with customer preferences and local needs, as well as strategic investments in branding, marketing, and compliance with quality and safety standards (Thuy & Dat, 2024).

Similar observations have been reported regarding local producers across the broader Carpathian range. Research by Nycz et al. (2025) indicates that while these producers are highly skilled craftsmen, experts in local traditions and crafts, and authentically draw on these resources in their production practices, they often face challenges in effectively communicating and promoting these values to potential customers. Consequently, the cultural and symbolic potential of local products is not fully leveraged in market contexts. This is partly due to the small-scale, family-based nature of these businesses and limited capacity for advanced marketing activities. As the authors further argue, because local heritage — understood here as "Carpathianness" — constitutes an integral part of everyday life, producers may find it difficult to identify and emphasize elements that are attractive to visitors. Features perceived by tourists as distinctive are often regarded by producers as ordinary aspects of daily life rather than as potential marketable assets. Finally, while significant effort is invested in recreating local traditions and production methods, there is a systemic lack of institutional tools to equip producers with contemporary promotional and digital communication competencies.

These findings may reflect broader structural conditions that extend beyond individual producers. They suggest that local product development remains weakly embedded in regional governance frameworks and lacks integration with broader development strategies. In particular, the potential of PAs to support and enhance local product development remains largely untapped. While PAs in the Carpathians are increasingly expected to support local development and deliver tangible benefits to surrounding communities, and this orientation is gradually being adopted by park authorities, its practical implementation remains limited (Zawilińska, 2025). As a result, local products and PAs function largely in parallel rather than as interconnected elements of a coherent territorial development system.

Importantly, the benefits associated with PAs continue to be perceived primarily through tourism and tend to concentrate in locations with well-developed tourism infrastructure (Mika et al., 2015; Warchalska-Troll, 2019). This limits spillover effects for local producers whose activities are not directly linked to mainstream tourism services. The weak interactions observed between local producers and PA authorities, as well as the limited use of PAs' image in product promotion, confirm that PAs are rarely perceived as active development partners. This situation reflects broader post-socialist legacies, including top-down governance models, conservation-related restrictions, limited traditions of participation, and a history of conflicts, all of which constrain cooperation and reduce the effectiveness of institutional support mechanisms (Kőszegi et al., 2022; Meessen et al., 2015; Mika et al., 2015; Strzelecka et al., 2023).

Evidence from other European regions highlights alternative approaches. In contrast, in Western Europe, including the Alpine region, PAs are more explicitly positioned as instruments of regional development, where the support and promotion of local products constitute an important component of their strategic activities (Getzner, 2010; Hammer, 2003, 2016; Weixlbaumer et al., 2020). In Switzerland, for example, PAs are established through bottom-up initiatives supported by a nationally coordinated framework, which combines conservation goals with diversified socio-economic development and places strong emphasis on branding, certification and support for local producers (Gerber, 2018; Hunziker & Hofstetter, 2020). Empirical evidence from the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve Entlebuch demonstrates that labelled products can generate measurable economic effects, including employment in agriculture and forestry (Knaus et al., 2017). Similar outcomes have also been observed in the Rhön Biosphere Reserve in Germany (Knaus & Backhaus, 2014).

Comparable mechanisms can also be observed in other European contexts, where PAs actively engage in branding and partnership-based approaches. In Italian national parks, park-related brands such as L'Oro dei Sibillini, Gargano Qualità, and Dolomiti Bio are actively developed by park authorities as tools to support local producers. Studies examining tourists' motivations for purchasing local food products highlight the important role of promotional messages, while also showing that the small scale of production often limits producers' ability to invest in marketing strategies (Pizzichini et al., 2020). In this context, PA branding serves as an effective mechanism for increasing the visibility of both products and producers. A similar approach is implemented in Spain, where a system based on co-management and territorial branding has been developed within PAs. Management typically involves regional park authorities, local governments, and private stakeholders, often linked to broader sustainability or rural development programmes (Pérez-Calderón et al., 2020). In practice, PAs use their official designations and logos (e.g. "National Park", "Biosphere Reserve") as labels of high environmental quality (Blanco-Cerradelo et al., 2022). Research on the functioning of local brands in Spain also points to the importance of open innovation, co-creation, and citizen participation, with both residents' and tourists' perceptions contributing to brand management (Cruz-Ruiz et al., 2022; De San Eugenio et al., 2019).

In contrast, more centralised models can be found in France and Germany, where PAs are embedded in nationally coordinated branding systems. In France, national and regional parks operate under common brands (Esprit parc national and Valeurs parc naturel régional), with general principles, certification criteria, and visual identity defined at the national level, while park authorities are responsible for implementation and cooperation with local stakeholders (Esprit parc national, 2026; Leroux & Majd, 2018). Similarly, in Germany, all national parks, biosphere reserves, and nature parks operate under a shared umbrella brand – Nationale Naturlandschaften – which standardises visual communication, supports joint tourism marketing, and strengthens the recognition of PAs as attractive destinations. Access to the brand requires regular evaluation based on criteria developed by the organisation at the national level, ensuring consistent standards of educational and tourism services. The brand is implemented through partnership programmes with local businesses, while a shared visual identity system (corporate design) enables smaller parks to benefit from the recognition of a nationwide umbrella brand (Arnegger et al., 2025).

Comparable approaches are emerging in Central and Eastern Europe, although they remain less developed. In Hungary, a national initiative led by the Ministry of Agriculture introduced the umbrella brand Nemzeti Parki Termék, under which certification is granted to producers whose products meet defined environmental and traditional production criteria (Nemzeti Parki Termék, 2026). However, existing research indicates that broader institutional conditions – including limited experience with co-management and participatory governance – continue to constrain the development of such initiatives (Kovács et al., 2020; Kovács et al., 2021). Similar conclusions have been drawn from the research conducted among local producers in the Ojców National Park regarding the possibilities of developing a local brand based on the park's values (Brańka, 2025). More broadly, the development of branding systems in PAs across Central and Eastern Europe remains at an early stage, reflecting historical and institutional constraints that hinder the effective implementation of such approaches.

Across these diverse institutional arrangements – whether decentralised and partnership-based (as in Italy and Spain) or more centralised (as in France, Germany, and Hungary) – a common feature is the presence of coherent mechanisms that enable PAs to act as catalysts for territorial development and product promotion. Research indicates that community-based local and regional products in PAs can support rural livelihoods, reinforce cultural identity, and create incentives for conservation when embedded in territorial brands and co-management structures. Against this background, the findings of this study suggest that only initial conditions for such integration are currently in place in the analysed region. These include the attractiveness of the area, the recognition of natural and cultural heritage by local producers, and an emerging willingness to develop cooperation networks. However, the limited involvement of PAs as institutional actors and territorial brands, together with the lack of broader support mechanisms, may constrain the development of local products and, in turn, hinder the creation of coherent heritage-based tourism experiences.

At the same time, the results indicate that while key components necessary for the development of local products are present, they remain insufficiently coordinated. In particular, the weak integration between producers, PAs, and supporting institutions limits the transformation of dispersed, individual initiatives into structured and recognisable territorial offerings. In this context, the experience of other European countries suggests that the development of shared branding frameworks, quality schemes, and partnership-based governance arrangements may play a crucial role in strengthening these linkages. The findings point to the importance of governance arrangements linking producers and protected-area institutions in supporting local product development.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings demonstrate that local producers effectively embed natural and cultural heritage in their products, drawing on landscape, traditions, and local identity to create place-based, tourism-oriented offerings. However, a clear asymmetry emerges: while heritage is widely utilised in products, PAs play only a limited role as institutional partners and promotional assets. Their potential as actors supporting local development and as territorial brands therefore remains underdeveloped.

Weak integration between producers, PA authorities, and supporting institutions may limit the creation of coherent heritage-based tourism experiences and distinctive territorial identities. Consequently, local products contribute less than they might to destination attractiveness and conservation-oriented economic activity. This contrasts with more integrated European models in which PAs coordinate local actors and support branding and cooperation. Strengthening collaboration among producers, PA institutions, and local authorities, and expanding the role of PAs in product promotion, could better align tourism development with conservation objectives. The limited use of PA brands is consistent with previous research indicating that a participatory model of protected area management has not yet been fully developed in Poland (e.g. Mika et al., 2015; Zawilińska, 2025). Under such a model, PAs would act not only as conservation institutions but also as partners in local development.

The study contributes to the literature by showing that the relationship between PAs and local product development depends not only on the use of natural and cultural resources, but also on the institutional and governance arrangements that shape cooperation, branding, and territorial development. It highlights the contrast between the widespread incorporation of heritage into products and the limited role of PAs as active partners and territorial brands. The development potential of PAs therefore depends not only on their environmental and symbolic value, but also on their capacity to participate in collaborative, place-based governance. This raises a further question concerning the factors that determine the capacity, forms, and effectiveness of cooperation and network-building among entrepreneurs, local authorities, and PA institutions.

The findings should be interpreted in light of the study's methodological limitations. As the study is based on a purposive rather than representative sample, the findings provide exploratory insights and are not intended for statistical generalisation. However, respondents represented diverse activities – including handicrafts, food processing, agrotourism, and heritage- or nature-related workshops – and were dispersed across the Polish Carpathians, providing valuable insight into local product development in PA contexts. The study also relies on producers' self-reported perceptions and experiences, which provide valuable evidence on the issues examined, although they may also reflect subjective assessments.

Further research should examine the institutional, organisational, and social conditions shaping cooperation among PA authorities, local governments, producers, and organisations involved in tourism and rural development. Particular attention should be paid to legal, administrative, financial, and organisational constraints, as well as to the governance arrangements, institutional capacity, strategic interest, coordination, leadership, marketing resources, and trust needed to support effective collaboration and local branding. This is especially important in peripheral rural regions, where tourism may be one of the few realistic development pathways and where stronger integration of local resources, actors, and territorial narratives could support more sustainable and resilient economies.

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DATA AVAILABILITY

The dataset supporting the findings of this study will be available in the RODBUK repository.

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