

QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT OF PREPAREDNESS AND POTENTIAL OF PROTECTED NATURAL AREAS TO SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of qualitative research focused on sustainable tourism in two protected landscape areas and a national park in the Czech Republic. It aims to determine the state of the art of sustainable tourism in these areas and to compare them from the point of view of the possibilities and potential of sustainable tourism development.

The paper uses data from structured interviews with key stakeholders (destination agencies, municipalities, regional governments and bodies offering services in tourism and mobility) and secondary data on tourism services provided in the studied areas. Using qualitative methods, we evaluate the awareness and preparedness of stakeholders and propose possible measures to strengthen sustainable tourism.

The presented research results are part of a comprehensive study to develop guidelines for the so-called "Mobility Plans for Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs)".

Key words: Large-scale protected areas, sustainable tourism, destination management

Introduction

Sustainable development constitutes a big challenge in all sectors, including services. It is well documented (see, e.g., Leung et al., 2018; Marion & Reid, 2007; Pásková, 2014; Zelenka et al., 2003) that the current form of tourism has a range of negative impacts on local communities and environment. To reduce these impacts, new more sustainable services have been developing under several concepts such as sustainable tourism, green tourism, soft tourism or slow tourism. The common features of these concepts are that tourists spend more time in one destination, get to know the community, try local food, buy local goods and use local services. Regarding transportation, sustainable transport modes represented by public transport, cycling and walking are preferred (Timoftej and Brůhová Foltýnová, 2022).

Large environmentally sensitive areas such as national parks or protected landscape areas might be ideal places for these kinds of tourism. Sustainable tourism goes well with protection of nature and landscape, and for this reason it should become the basis for further development of tourism in these areas.

An important question concerns the state of the art of sustainable tourism development and the potential of these services in large environmentally sensitive areas in Czechia. To answer this question, we use data from structured interviews with representatives of different stakeholders from three case study areas.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In the next chapter we describe the methodology and data used for this study. Chapter 3 provides the results and discussion of the qualitative research and the last chapter concludes.

Materials and Methods

Our research focuses on two categories of large environmentally sensitive areas. They are defined as national parks (IUCN category II, hereinafter NP) and protected landscape areas (IUCN category V, hereinafter PLA); for categorisation, see IUCN (2021). There are 4 NPs and 26 PLAs in the Czech Republic.

Our case study areas were chosen based on their representativeness and data availability so that they represent different kinds of recreational activities, protected areas and types of ecosystems: NP České Švýcarsko + PLA Labské pískovce, PLA Jizerské hory and PLA Moravský kras (for more, see Timoftej and Brůhová Foltýnová, 2022). The main features of the case study areas are summarized in Table 1. Key local stakeholders in each case study area were identified using questioning of local experts and the snowball approach and can be divided into three groups: state administration, destination services and service providers (local business). In total, we collected data from 45 stakeholders (see Table 2).

Tab. 1: Basic characteristics of case study areas

Protected area and year of establishment	NP České Švýcarsko and PLA Labské pískovce (2000)	PLA Jizerské hory (1967)	PLA Moravský kras (1956)
Object of protection	Sandstone rocks and surrounding biotopes	Beech forest, peat bog associations, mountain spruce forest, flowering and waterlogged meadows	Karst landscape
Area size	79.23 km ²	368 km ²	96.82 km ²
Change after 2021	Summer 2022 – large fire in NP České Švýcarsko (activities after the fire: parts of the park closed, accommodation vouchers including free transport for guests)		January 2022 – Moravský kras DMO (Destination Management Organisation) established
Type of tourism most frequently sought by clients in the area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rock areas • Boating (canyons) • Pravčická brána • Hiking • Wilderness, disorderliness compared to the German side of the park 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skiing route (cross-country) • Hotel-based events (weddings, business events) • Adrenalin cycling (cycle trails, downhill) • Cycling tours • Exploitation of mountains and nature alongside accessible city tourism, e.g., swimming pools, museums, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cave systems • Forest recreation • Cycling tours • Film tourism

Source: Web sites of protected areas, interviews with stakeholders

Tab. 2: Overview of interviewed stakeholders

	State administration / local/regional government	Destination services	Service providers	Total
NP České Švýcarsko and PLA Labské pískovce	9	3	6	18
PLA Jizerské hory	9	1	7	17
PLA Moravský kras	6	3	3	12
Total	24	7	16	47

Note: Two respondents completed the questionnaire as both destination services and service providers.

The interviews took place between October 2020 and June 2021 using face-to-face or online (videoconference) forms. The average time per interview was 60 minutes. The following topics were covered during the interviews: perception of the protected area and necessity to protect it; problems connected with tourism in the area; priorities for further development of tourism in the area; barriers and drivers of sustainable tourism development; feasibility of different regulation measures; and promotion of the area as a sustainable tourist destination.

Results and discussion

State of the art of tourism in case study areas

Stakeholders in the different areas assessed the current situation in tourism most commonly as “some things are set up well and others need changing”. Those from PLA Moravský kras expressed satisfaction with the current situation more frequently than the others. Respondents in all the case study areas agreed that current problems associated with tourism include inadequate coverage of the tourism season throughout the year (meaning, among others, concentration of tourists and associated negative impacts on the area at certain times of the year and uneven incomes for local businesses).

Stakeholders in NP České Švýcarsko and PLA Labské pískovce included among the problems concentration of tourism pressures on a few sites across the area and little use of public transport (PT) although it is provided sufficiently. Problems mentioned in PLA Jizerské hory included insufficient accommodation capacity in the high season, occasional conflicts between walkers and cyclists on the same routes, the need to set a carrying capacity for certain areas, and insufficient infrastructure in some places. Current problems in PLA Moravský kras include uneven distribution of tourism in the area, increasing one-day tourism at the expense of multiple-day trips, illegal camping and cars entering areas out of bounds. Besides, respondents mentioned lack of conceptual planning of sustainable tourism, including the need to unify its perception and content across stakeholder types so that it is provided jointly and in a coordinated fashion. Opinions of stakeholders from the different areas on how tourism affects environmental protection are summarized in Table 3.

Tab. 3: Which environmental values does tourism affect the most, and how?

České Švýcarsko + Labské pískovce			
	Public administration	Destination services	Service providers
Comments:	Transport (delineation of parking areas) Cycling trail signage and checks of movement along marked paths Possible fires (caused by tourists) Widening of paths and trampling	Interference with game Littering Cultural values should not be suppressed at the expense of nature protection	Disrespect to bird nesting Littering
Jizerské hory			
	Public administration	Destination services	Service providers
Comments:	Industrial activity on Polish side (mines, factories) Problematic area in winter – extreme traffic	Problematic area in winter – extreme traffic Parking along roads Illegal camping in the wild Most visitors act considerably, only a few cause problems, but they are highly visible (litter, wrong parking)	Advantage of paved roads (no excessive erosion) Inappropriate parking Snowmobiles / quad bikes Infringement of landscape character – lookout towers Tourism brings new services for visitors (paths, closeness to destinations, etc.)
Moravský kras			
	Public administration	Destination services	Service providers
Comments:	Problems with tourist behaviour: littering, campfires, cars entering inappropriate places	Lack of compromise between nature protection and tourism Litter	Visitors entering out of bounds endangers protected sites

Source: Data from interviews with stakeholders

When asked about their perception of the NP or PLA status of their area, the overwhelming majority of the stakeholders replied that the positive effects prevail. In their opinion, the PLA/NP establishment caused more interest in the area (prestige) and the necessary nature protection. On the other hand, it caused increased local traffic or restrictions on construction activity in some areas, which they see as negative.

Only a few stakeholders perceived the protected area status negatively, explaining it with actions of environmental protection authorities (excessively one-sided nature protection to the detriment of spatial development).

It is clear from the stakeholders' statements that aspects affecting tourism are perceived differently in the different areas, meaning that they are site-specific. There is agreement across the areas concerning transport and mobility, particularly parking (land occupation for parking areas, parking

outside designated areas, unpermitted entry) and unacceptable behaviour of visitors (littering, illegal campfires, entry out of bounds, illegal camping, fire hazard).

Potential for sustainable tourism development in case study areas

Almost all the stakeholders (across the stakeholder categories) perceive sustainable tourism as appropriate for the areas, but there are a number of factors that hinder full functioning of sustainable tourism in the area (see Table 4). There are some first heralds, however, such as the new Hřebenovka (“Ridgeway”) product in České Švýcarsko (inspired by the Way of St. James – offers of accommodation and food from locals). They also include the offer of regional food and certified products from NP České Švýcarsko and free PT for multiple-day visitors. PLA Moravský kraj is perceived by its stakeholders as an area where *“a lot is now ready, and tourism could function according to the sustainable development definition after weak points of the current situation are removed”*.

Tab. 4: Stakeholders’ opinions on barriers to and opportunities for sustainable tourism in case study areas

Barriers	Opportunities
České Švýcarsko + Labské pískovce	
Lack of clearly defined products and parameters Lack of good infrastructure and transport service for sustainable tourism	Current seasonality is a problem – offer of sustainable tourism has to work year-round Non-existent limits for tourism Little activity of NP administration – more support necessary
Jizerské hory	
Perception of Jizerské hory as a place for performance sports (goals and achievements) not as valuable environment for observing landscape and nature	There will always be some who seek sustainable tourism and some who consume the area; both types of tourism need to be preserved Greater role of awareness raising and education
Moravský kras	
Lack of safe cycling trails	Expansion of safe cycling trails is in progress Greater involvement of Nature House is in progress – awareness raising, information, relationship to nature

Source: Data from interviews with stakeholders

3.3 Priorities for further development of tourism in case study areas

In addition, we inquired about priorities for further development of the areas in relation to tourism. The respondents were asked to order defined priorities (nature protection, economic development, tourism distribution in space and time, development of soft tourism, information and awareness and environmental education) by importance from the greatest (1) to the least (6). The responses indicate (see Figure 1) that nature and its protection is perceived as important (especially in small and busy areas such as PLA Moravský kras), but distribution of activity in space and time is regarded as the most important (more than half the stakeholders in all the case study areas ranked it as most important = 1, or very important = 2). There is thus a clear effort to mitigate the greatest stress on the area and distribute the tourism more evenly rather than restrict it.

Conversely, economic development is perceived by local players as unimportant – in fact, 80% of the stakeholders in PLA Moravský kras ranked it as the least important (6), while only 10% regarded it as the most important (1). Even if some other development priorities received fewer marks 1, they were also less frequently assessed as the least important. For example, the priority “information and awareness” was regarded as important and unimportant by the same proportions of respondents. Another interesting assessment was that of “environmental education, behaviour” – 40% of respondents in NP České Švýcarsko ranked it the least important.

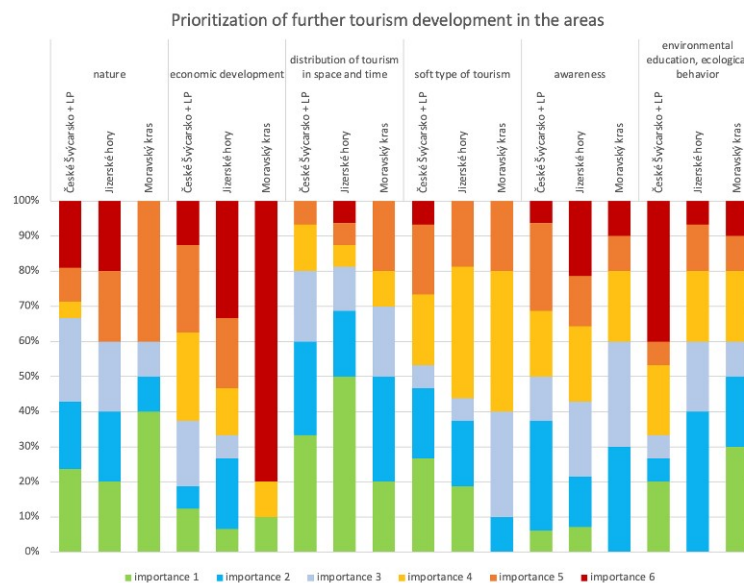


Fig. 1: Prioritization of further tourism development in the areas
Source: Data from interviews with stakeholders

Possible implementation of measures to support sustainable tourism in case study areas

The respondents were presented with 5 categories of measures (adopted from Milano, 2018) as follows: (i) extended seasonality in the area; (ii) promotion of less visited sites (better distribution of visitors in space); (iii) stricter regulation of car traffic (restricted access to cars, e.g., by reducing parking places or better alternatives to the car); (iv) more diversified services; (v) visitor regulation by introducing fees for entering the most tourist-important parts of the PLA/NP. The respondents were asked to assess the possibility of implementation of each category of measures in their area. Figure 2 summarizes their answers.

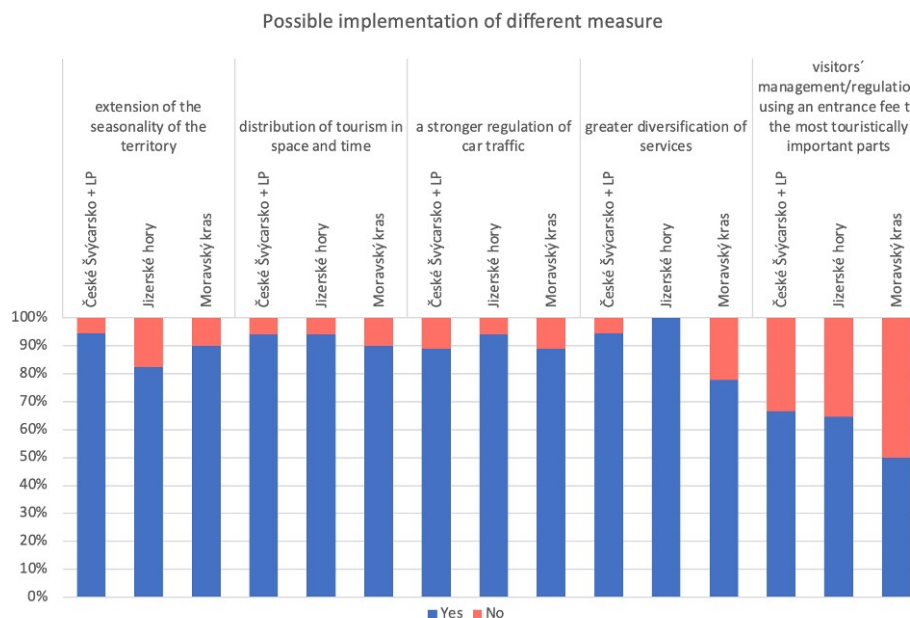


Fig. 2: Possible implementation of different measures
Source: Data from interviews with stakeholders

It turns out that the stakeholders regarded most of the measures as implementable in their areas. The only exception is introduction of entrance fees, which is not regarded as realistic particularly by stakeholders in PLA Moravský kras, where entry to the caves is already paid. Promotion of less visited sites (better distribution of visitors in space) was regarded as the most easily implementable category of measures – it was perceived as highly realistic in all the selected areas.

Stakeholders' opinions on introduction of fees bring a wide range of views:

- *If a fee were collected, it should be adequately reflected in the services offered and quality of infrastructure (parking, toilets, etc.).* (service provider representative, České Švýcarsko)
- *The use of revenues from the fees would have to be transparent.* (service provider representative, České Švýcarsko; state administration representative, Moravský kras)
- *The fee could regulate tourism, but its amount would have to be set appropriately.* (destination service representative, České Švýcarsko; state administration representative, České Švýcarsko)
- *The fee should go directly to the self-government (municipality).* (service provider representative Jizerské hory; state administration representative, Jizerské hory)
- *The fee could hinder some groups from visiting.* (service provider representative, České Švýcarsko; state administration representative, Jizerské hory)
- *The fee would be suitable only as a voluntary fee.* (3 service provider representatives, Jizerské hory)
- *The process and form of the fee collection has to be set correctly, as well as collection rules and inspection.* (self-government representative, Moravský kras)

The statements indicate all the stakeholders' cautious attitude to this instrument. Although about a third of the respondents regard it as unrealistic, even those who view it as realistic note a number of problematic aspects of entry charging and the need to ensure transparency of using the funds collected, as well as the need to carefully design the collection and inspection system. Besides, stakeholders from PLA Jizerské hory mentioned that the fee could be voluntary; the experience from the area comes from the current voluntary fee for entering the arterial cross-country ski route. The fee could regulate tourism, but might also affect some low-income groups of visitors, for whom the set fee amount could be prohibitive.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to use structured interviews with various types of stakeholders to identify their opinions on the current situation in tourism, its environmental impacts and priorities and tools for possible sustainable tourism development in large-scale protected areas of the Czech Republic.

Statements by local players in three case study areas indicate that the current situation in environmental protection is perceived positively, and they also agree on the necessity of nature and landscape protection. At the same time, they are aware of problems associated primarily with seasonality of tourism, and see tourism distribution in space and time as one of the main paths towards better sustainability.

Moreover, the data obtained indicate that sustainable tourism and its further development enjoy support of all the stakeholder types approached in the studied protected areas. They did not see any fundamental barriers to its further development.

The players' agreement across the areas is an opportunity for promoting sustainable development. The areas need better coordination of activities and faster support to sustainability of tourism, which has to be emphasized and implemented in system settings, strategic documents and legislation, including interpretation plans. Given the massive problems caused in the areas by traffic, development of mobility plans for the areas could be beneficial. The plans could be central documents assisting destination organizations and nature protection organizations in setting suitable conditions for sustainable movement and stay of visitors. (A methodology for mobility plans will be drawn, titled "Mobility Plans for Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs)", which will be available in mid-2023; for more, see Brůhová Foltýnová et al., 2022). Better setting of primary conditions and documents will help players in the areas implement specific activities of measures, and thus strengthen and accelerate their sustainability.

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Souhrn

Příspěvek prezentuje výsledky kvalitativního výzkumu zaměřeného na udržitelný cestovní ruch ve třech CHKO a jednom národním parku v České republice. Cílem výstupu výzkumu je zjistit stav udržitelného cestovního ruchu v těchto oblastech a porovnat je z hlediska možností a potenciálu rozvoje udržitelného cestovního ruchu.

Příspěvek využívá data ze strukturovaných rozhovorů s klíčovými zainteresovanými subjekty (destinační agentury, obce a krajské samosprávy a subjekty nabízející služby v cestovním ruchu a mobilitě) a sekundární data o službách cestovního ruchu poskytovaných ve zkoumaných oblastech. Pomocí kvalitativních metod vyhodnocujeme informovanost a připravenost zainteresovaných stran a navrhuje možná opatření k posílení udržitelného cestovního ruchu. Prezentované výsledky výzkumu jsou součástí komplexní studie k vypracování pokynů pro tzv. „Plány mobility pro environmentálně citlivé oblasti (ESA)“.

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