

# VISITORS' PERSPECTIVES ON SUSTAINABLE TOURISM: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF NATIONAL PARKS IN KOSOVO, MONTENEGRO AND ALBANIA

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## Abstract

This study investigated tourists' opinions on destination experiences within National Parks (NPs) in Kosovo, Montenegro and Albania, focusing on visitor satisfaction with the destination. Data was collected in the field through 366 surveys to assess visitor perspectives. The statistical analysis included descriptive, qualitative, and quantitative methods. The results highlight variations in visitor ratings across destinations, with Montenegro generally receiving higher (positive) ratings than Kosovo and Albania. The most valued issues by visitors are the diversity and wildness of the landscapes, food and hospitality. At the same time, the least valued (negative) are road infrastructure, orientation signs and waste management in the park. The study highlights the importance of visitor feedback in formulating sustainable tourism strategies, emphasising the need for balanced growth and environmental conservation in destination management.

**Keywords :** Cross-border forests, environmental and Landscape Protection, Mountain tourism, Park management, Western Balkans

## Introduction

In the south of the Dinaric Mountains range, which includes the borders of Kosova, Montenegro and Albania, mountain tourism has increased during the last decades. This preceded the decision of each Western Balkan country in this border triangle to create their National Parks (NPs), motivated by a commitment to protect ecological and social-historical locations while promoting sustainable tourism practices. Four NPs and one regional park have been created within this region. Bjeshkët e Namuna is the largest NP in this region, with an area of about 63,000 ha. This park lies south and west of Kosova, along the border with Montenegro and Albania. Prokletije is a NP in Montenegro, with an area of about 16,000 ha. Valbonë and Thethi are NPs in Albania. These parks are also known as the "Albanian Alps" (Young 2008, Hasanaj and Kuqi, 2022). For residents, the creation of NPs helps not only in the protection of these areas but also in the promotion of ecological, social and cultural values (Platania & Rizzo, 2018).

After the end of the Balkan conflicts in 1999, the first cross-border cooperation materialised into initiatives promoting peace, tourism and environmental conservation. These initiatives were led by foreign organisations and local experts, activists and intellectuals. The Balkan Peace Park project, initiated in 2001, aimed to promote peace and sustainable development practices in the region through local residents' cooperation, create employment opportunities for residents, and respect the environment. These projects that continued year after year helped in the cooperation of local residents and the promotion of tourism, which is increasing every year (Young 2008, Stojkov and Nikolov 2008). Visitors' evaluation of their destination is critical in providing tourist services. Mountain tourism has its own specifics related to the terrain, logistics, safety and enjoying the scenic views during mountain visits (Nicoletta and Servidio 2012, Pomfret 2006). Considering tourists' satisfaction is important in formulating offers that match their preferences. Previous research shows a link between general life satisfaction and daily satisfaction in different areas such as health, work, family or leisure (Tokay et al., 2021, Correia et al., 2013, Doli et al., 2021, Bamwesigye et al., 2021, Bamwesigye et al. 2023). Pleasure derived from tourism experiences plays a key role in enhancing overall life and leisure satisfaction, a central tenet of individual well-being. Satisfaction is usually approached through two main perspectives: hedonic and eudaimonic (Uysal et al., 2016).

This study aims to evaluate the visitors' opinions about their destination. In the study, we presented two main Questions:

1: What is visitors' opinion about the destination they have visited?

2: Are there significant differences in the overall satisfaction levels expressed by visitors from Albania, Kosova, and Montenegro regarding the NPs they have visited?

## Material and methods

This study used a structured questionnaire of 15 questions to investigate tourists' opinions on destination experiences within National Parks (NPs) in Kosova, Montenegro and Albania. The questionnaire was designed to assess various dimensions related to the evaluation of the tourist destination, including road conditions, access to local culture, maintenance of cultural sites, cleanliness of the park, availability of souvenirs, quality of cuisine, accommodation, and quality of service, environment conditions and landscape assessments. Additionally, respondents were asked about their likelihood of revisiting the destination and recommending it to others.

For this study, we calculated a sample size of approximately 350 surveys, considering the estimated population size (200,000) of individuals who lived or have visited one of the NPs mentioned in the research. The interviews were conducted in the field, trying to get access and participation from a different group of respondents from the different NPs mentioned in this study. Targeting individuals who had visited NPs at least once, the study sought to capture a representative perspective on the experiences and preferences of this specific group of visitors.

Field surveys were conducted over four months (June to September 2022) during 12 visits to the NPs. The questionnaire consisted of 27 questions. Only 16 questions about general data and visitors' opinions about the NPs were considered for this study.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarise and clarify the characteristics of the data collected. Measures such as mean, standard deviation, standard error of the mean and confidence intervals of the mean were calculated for each question in the questionnaire. These statistics provided a general overview of responses' distribution and central tendencies on the various dimensions assessed in the study. Additionally, graphical representations, particularly box plots, were used to visualise the responses' distribution and spot any distinct trends or variations across the surveyed countries. Boxplots facilitated the comparison of ratings and perceptions between visitors from Kosova, Montenegro and Albania, enabling a nuanced understanding of differences in visitor satisfaction levels across different destinations.

Overall, the methodology prioritised a robust and systematic approach to analyse visitor opinions, aiming to inform evidence-based decision-making in the formulation of sustainable tourism strategies and destination management practices in the region.

## Study area

This research project focuses on four NPs located within the Western Balkans: NP Bjeshkët e Nemuna (Kosova), NP Prokletije (Montenegro), NP Valbona Valley, and NP Theth (Albania). All four parks lie within the southern region of the Dinaric Mountains, a mountain range known for its karst topography. Karst landscapes are characterised by carbonate rocks, such as limestone, which have been sculpted by water erosion over time. NP Bjeshkët e Nemuna, established in 2013, extends to the municipalities of Gjakova, Junik, Deçan, Peja and Istog in Kosova, sharing the borders with Montenegro and Albania. Known for its rich biodiversity and significant geomorphological features, park management focuses on conservation and sustainability (Institute for Spatial Planning RKS, 2020). Prokletije NP, located in the west of Montenegro, is known for its high biodiversity and contains diverse hydrographs and flora, although human activities pose challenges to the fragile ecosystem (Djordjević Milošević et al., 2014). Valbona Valley NP, located northeast of Albania, attracts tourists with picturesque landscapes and outdoor activities but faces the delicate balance between economic development and environmental conservation. Finally, the NP of Theth, created in 1966, protects the natural biodiversity and cultural heritage in Albania, with tourism mainly concentrated in the summer due to the winter snow that prevents access (Keçi and Krog, 2014).

## Results and Discussion

### *Demographic characteristics of the respondents*

The demographic characteristics of the respondents, who represent residents and visitors, include variables such as country of residence, distance of residence from NP, and frequency of NP visits. Each variable has its categories, including the number of respondents (Frequency) and the percentage (%). Regarding the country of residence, the majority of respondents are from Kosova (43.72%), followed by Albania (23.22%), Montenegro (20.22%) and others (12.84%). The largest group is 50-100 km away (27.05%), followed by >150 km (24.86%), 100-150 km (19.13%), 10 -50 km (15.3%) and 5-10 km (13.66%). The frequency of NP visits varies, with the majority visiting rarely (39.36%), followed by annually (28.57%), once a month (10.79%), twice a month (9.04%) and those who live near or within NPs (12.24%).

### ***Visitors' opinion about national parks***

The assessment of visitors regarding their vacation experience within NPs is significant in this study, and the data serves as a valuable tool for analysing visitor preferences, identifying areas of higher and lower significance, and pinpointing aspects requiring intervention to address expressed dissatisfaction. There was also information on sample size, missing data, mean, standard deviation, standard error of the mean, and confidence intervals of the mean. The data show an overall positive average value. High values of standard deviation indicate high variation in the data.

Each question is depicted in a separate Box Plot, with the data segregated based on the geographical location of the respondents (Kosova, Albania, Montenegro) when the form was filled out. Data from respondents living outside these three countries are linked to the country where the interview occurred within the NP.

The study aimed to investigate the perceptions and experiences of visitors to different national parks (NPs) in Kosova, Montenegro and Albania. The results reveal nuanced differences and similarities between the three countries, providing insights into potential areas for improvement and strategic planning in the tourism sector.

The general opinion of visitors towards the visited areas is positive, with an average value of 6.72 out of 10 units. This perception is consistent with previous research evaluating the region's natural appeal and suitability for mountain tourism (Caso 2018, Veselaj 2010). Visitor ratings of the respective tourist destinations varied slightly between NPs, with Montenegro's Prokletije NP receiving the highest average rating of 7.8 out of 10, compared to Albania's Valbona and Thehit NPs (7.2) and Kosova's Bjeshkët e Nemuna NPs (6.8). Despite the variance, it is essential to note the wider range of data in Kosova, which affects the mean value, while the mean values remain stable across the three countries. The perception of natural beauty plays a major role in destination choice, with visitors often gravitating towards places that offer sights and experiences not usually encountered in their everyday lives. Research by (Kirillova 2014) supports this notion, emphasising the importance of the beauty of the landscapes and the attractiveness of the destination. Hospitality also appears as a crucial factor affecting visitors' perceptions, making them feel comfortable during their visit (Wong & Yeh, 2009). The locals, known for their warmth and hospitality, embody traditions that have left a lasting impression on travellers. Visitors have rated Kosovo higher than the other two countries regarding hospitality. This observation is supported by literature that highlights the outstanding hospitality of the local people, deeply rooted in the community's way of life and traditions (Lajçi et al., 2022).

The appreciation of local culture and access to cultural sites showed a wide data distribution, with Montenegro showing a more positive trend. However, the challenges in maintaining cultural objects were evident, where Kosova scored the lowest average and Montenegro the highest. These findings underline the importance of cultural preservation and sustainable tourism development (Arslan & Kaymaz, 2020).

The food quality received positive reviews overall, with nuances in the distribution between the three locations. Accommodation quality showed mixed ratings, with Montenegro demonstrating more homogeneous data compared to Kosova and Albania. Visitors enjoy the originality and freshness of the local cuisine, trying to immerse themselves in the gastronomic delights of the region, which offer an authentic experience.

Service quality and staff competence were generally perceived positively, with Montenegro showing slightly higher ratings. These factors enhance visitors' experiences and satisfaction during their stay (Wong & Yeh, 2009).

Perceptions of the natural environment and landscape diversity were positive in all three countries, with some minor differences emphasising the importance of nature-based tourism. However, challenges such as infrastructure development, waste management, investments and environmental protection were identified, indicating the need for more detailed studies and strategic planning with sustainable practices.

The results illustrated visitor ratings for tourist destinations, showing little variation between national parks. Prokletije NP of Montenegro received the highest average rating (7.8 out of 10), followed by NPs Valbone Valley, Thehi (7.2) and NPs Bjeshkë e Nemuna of Kosova (6.8). More so, focusing on road conditions and directional signs, responses were uniform across countries, with Kosova showing a wider distribution of values due to a larger group of respondents but maintaining consistent averages and medians. The study on visitors' experience with local culture showed a wide range of data (2 to 10), with a positive trend in Montenegro. Kosova and Albania show positive skewness in their distributions, with Montenegro showing a more homogeneous distribution. Regarding the availability of souvenirs and handicrafts, Kosova showed a wide range of responses, Albania rated more positively, and Montenegro showed outliers but still reflected a positive rating. The food quality, in general, was very positive, and there were different distributions in the three countries.

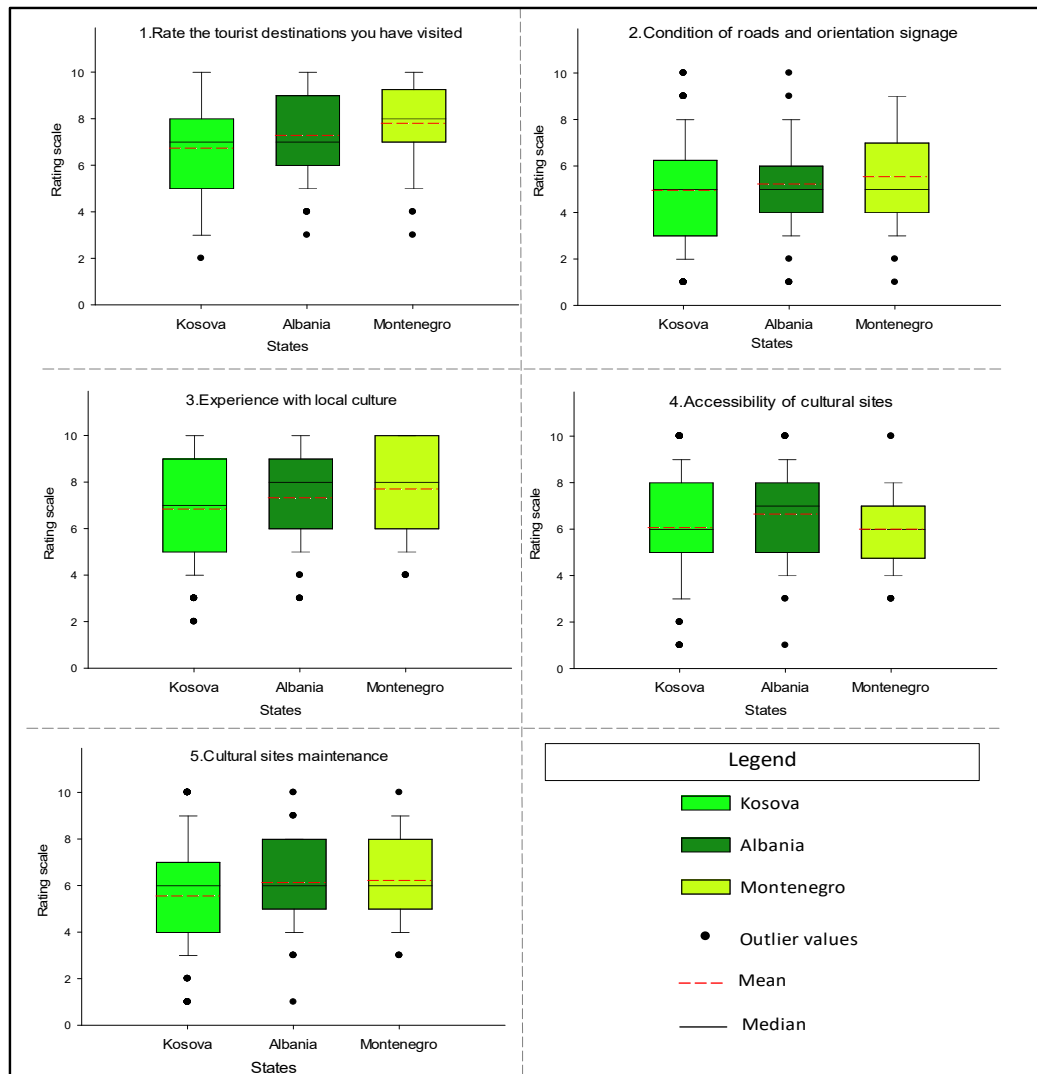


Fig. 1: Evaluation of visitors for the destination based on their country.

The quality of accommodation assessed highlights different ratings, with Kosova showing a negatively skewed distribution, Albania showing the lowest-ranking suburbs, and Montenegro showing more homogeneous data. Opinions of the level of service in the tenth chart are primarily similar between Kosovo and Albania but differ in Montenegro, with more concentrated values. Service personnel competence and helpfulness Ratings show consistent distribution across the three countries, with Montenegro's average rating slightly higher. While Albania exhibits many outliers, they are relatively more concentrated in Kosovo and Montenegro. Evaluating perceptions of the interest and diversity of the landscape, with unanimous positive feelings in all three countries, although Kosova shows more differences with lower values compared to Albania and Montenegro. Examining the willingness to recommend the destination to friends reflects the trends observed, with similar patterns and the addition of lower values, particularly evident in Montenegro.

## Conclusion

The changes in visitors' perceptions in the surveyed areas are minimal, with Montenegro slightly surpassing Kosova and Albania in the evaluations. Kosova was rated higher in terms of hospitality than other countries in this study. In particular, questions that receive relatively negative feedback from visitors include questions about road infrastructure, warning signage, park cleanliness, and maintenance of cultural sites. Despite these challenges, the park's overall evaluations are positive and have minor differences. Further research efforts are essential to understand better the current state and true needs of local residents and visitors. Such studies will provide insights for informed decision-making and strategic planning in managing the national parks under consideration. This study will

serve as a basis for decision-makers to make the most accurate decisions regarding policies and effective initiatives aimed at the sustainable management of national parks.

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### **Souhrn**

Tato studie zkoumala názory turistů na zážitky v národních parcích (NP) na Kosovu, v Černé Hoře a v Albánii a zaměřila se na spokojenost návštěvníků s destinací. Údaje byly shromážděny v terénu prostřednictvím dotazníků, jejichž cílem bylo posoudit názory návštěvníků na NP. Statistická analýza zahrnovala deskriptivní a kvantitativní metody. Výsledky poukazují na rozdíly v hodnocení destinací ze strany návštěvníků, kdy Černá Hora měla obecně o něco vyšší (pozitivní) hodnocení než Kosov a Albánie. Pokud jde o pohostinnost, návštěvníci uváděli příznivější zkušenosti s Kosovem, které hodnotili lépe než zbylé dvě země. Nejvíce návštěvníci oceňují rozmanitost a divokost krajiny, jídlo a pohostinnost. Zároveň méně (negativně) hodnotili silniční infrastrukturu, orientační značení a nakládání s odpady v parku. Studie zdůrazňuje význam zpětné vazby od návštěvníků při formulování strategií udržitelného cestovního ruchu a zdůrazňuje potřebu vyváženého růstu a ochrany životního prostředí při řízení destinace.

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