

The myth, reality and future of tourists' and travel industry responsibilities: A model for sustainable tourism in protected areas and its applications in Bulgaria

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Introduction | The responsibility towards the nature's pristine beauty and its bond with tourism has been embraced by Bulgarian intellectuals and governmental bodies ever since the first organized tourism club was founded by Aleko Konstantinov in 1895 (BTU, n.d.) and the first protected territory was established in 1931. Fast-forwarding to the beginning of the 21st century, the regulatory framework of the Bulgarian government, the European Commission and the local administrations seem fully sufficient to satisfy the highest requirements for environmental and cultural heritage protection in the numerous areas, representing 5% of national territory.

Numerous studies and projects financed by different national and international programs aim to lead the travel industry towards a sustainable future and to destinations in need of protection of their natural and cultural environments. The rising global movement of responsibility towards protected areas and clean natural environment, authentic cultural experiences and sensible attitudes to the local communities' living traditions, adds to economic and socio-cultural prosperity to all stakeholders in the tourism product formation.

On the opposite end of the equation, sometimes social activists demonize the travel industry stakeholders and their activities: controversial investments or tourism product formation initiatives perceived as damaging the nature or the cultural environment, are often used for political disputes and lead towards clashes between the economic interests of the local communities and preservationist movements. In the process of mediating these conflicts, some administrative and legislative decisions are harming the economic and socio-cultural sustainability.

Objectives | The objective of this study is to trace the myths and realities of different stakeholders positions in the process of tourism product-formation and consumption in the light of responsible attitudes

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towards the natural and socio-cultural environments in destinations, part of protected areas in Bulgaria. Serving as a situation and needs assessment analysis, this research will help the shaping of a model for sustainable tourism development of different types of tourism at destinations affected by policies and strategies for protecting the natural environment in the country.

Methodology | Based on the analysis of the current situation of tourism demand and travel industry offer to destinations located in three national parks (Central Balkan National Park, Rila National Park and Pirin National park), two natural parks (Vitosha, Strandja), and five natural reserves (Kaliakra, Kamchia, Sreburna Lake, Yulen), this work outlines the trends in the tourists' needs and motivations to choose destinations and tourism products that clearly show responsibilities towards the natural and cultural heritage. Tourism spending patterns at destinations in protected areas will be analyzed and juxtaposed with the declared responsibilities towards environmental preservation and authenticity both in visitors' opinions, as well as reflected in policy and strategic documents and political and social activists' groups' statements. Statistical data, published administrative and legislative acts and decisions will serve as a base to analyze the responsiveness of national and local governments to (de)regulate the market relationship between the supply and demand for responsible tourism to destinations located in protected area.

Main Results and Contributions | Tourism to destinations included in the protected areas continues to grow in its various forms. Rising numbers of tourism products of recreational travel to the Black sea secluded beaches, ski, adventure, gastronomy, and other types of tourism to ecologically clean rural regions and preserved cultural heritage sites, are outlining a clear trend of an overall interest towards the off-beaten paths. Unfortunately this process of gearing the tourism supply towards the protected areas rich in natural and cultural resources for sustainable tourism development is clashing with opposite interests of politically motivated groups. The study will make a case that there is a need of a model to mitigate these conflicts and to serve to policy makers and strategists at all level of government in the (de)regulation planning. With a balanced approach, the model will provide a possible solution to tackle the divide between the interests of the tourists, local communities' economic and socio-cultural needs and political activists, and thus support the development of sustainable tourism industry, while protecting the natural and cultural environments of the country. By extracting a business model for future dynamic stakeholders network interactions, the study will contribute to the scholarly research in the domain of strategic planning in tourism, and can be applied in several countries and territories, where the tension between different economic, political and socio-cultural interests is creating obstacles for the sustainable development of communities and travel industry.

Limitations | Business models based on a specific area application might not prove sufficient for their implementation in other countries. The mixed nature of the protected areas in Bulgaria, including natural environment, tangible and intangible heritage may pose a problem in applying the model in regions where this mix has different characteristics.

Conclusions | Both the local and the international tourism in Bulgaria to destinations located in protected areas is rising with unprecedented growth rate in the last ten years. Concerns about nature and cultural heritage preservation, safeguarding local traditions and live cultures provoke legislative and administrative decisions with unclear end. The proposed model for sustainable tourism development in

these areas is aimed to catalyze economic prosperity, while accounting for all interests in the preservation of nature and culture for the future generations (UN, 2015).

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