

Challenges and Problems of Sustainable Development of Tourism in Protected Areas: Example of National Parks in Poland



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Abstract One of the most important global trends in nature conservation today is the desire to reconcile the interests of nature conservation with the various spheres of economic and social activity of man. Society is moving away from passive and conservative nature conservation to seeking active forms of protection that will ensure the integration of the function of ecological protected areas and their socio-economic development. Tourism is attributed a particular role in the process. The chapter presents contemporary challenges and problems of sustainable development of tourism in protected areas, both in theoretical and practical terms (on the example of national parks in Poland). In particular, the chapter analyses the theoretical aspects of the nature and principles of sustainable tourism development in protected areas, shows the system of protected areas in Poland, including the tourist potential of national parks to create competitive tourism products on the European market, identifies the main barriers to sustainable tourism development in national parks. The work uses the case study and the desk research method.

Keywords Sustainable tourism development · Protected areas · National park · Poland

1 Introduction

The natural environment is a value that is more and more appreciated in modern society, which results, among other things, in the growing pressure exerted by tourism on protected areas, including national parks. These areas have enormous natural potential to create attractive and competitive eco-friendly tourist products. The main element of this competitiveness is high biodiversity at the landscape, ecosystem, and species level. Poland is one of the European countries with the

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highest biodiversity index (Central Statistical Office 2017). The development of tourism in protected areas, with poor organization and management, can pose a significant threat to their natural capital. Tourism competes with other ecological, social, and economic functions in accessing scarce resources, resulting in specific problems and conflicts. Therefore, the development of tourism in protected areas requires changing the current model of tourism in favor of sustainable tourism, which will allow to integrate the various functions of protected areas, make tourism an active form of nature conservation, and an important instrument for local development. Meanwhile, the level of knowledge and awareness (among policy makers, public and private sector stakeholders, and the general public) concerning sustainable tourism and its development is still very low.

The main objective of the chapter is to present contemporary challenges and problems of sustainable development of tourism in protected areas, both in theoretical and practical terms (on the example of national parks in Poland). In particular, the chapter analyses the theoretical aspects of the nature and principles of sustainable tourism development in protected areas, shows the system of protected areas in Poland, including the tourist potential of national parks to create competitive tourism products on the European market, identifies the main barriers to sustainable tourism development in national parks. Identifying the main challenges, problems, and barriers to sustainable tourism development in protected areas will help to identify the directions of desired changes in tourism and its social, environmental, and economic environment.

The main research method used in the study is a case study describing the system of protected areas in Poland and tourism development in national parks. The Bialowieza National Park, which is an International UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, will serve as a special example. A complementary method is the analysis of existing data (desk research), including a review of the latest scientific literature on the sustainable development of tourism and protected areas, statistical data on tourism in national parks in Poland, as well as documents and reports on the development of tourism in protected areas.

2 Sustainable Tourism Development: The Theoretical Aspects

The concept of sustainable tourism is derived from the more general concept of sustainable development, which is one of the contemporary challenges of global development. Its essence is based on the equal treatment of three areas: economic, social, and ecological. The concept of sustainable tourism is variously defined in world literature. Generally, sustainable tourism can be defined as “*tourism 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*” (UNEP and WTO 2005, p. 12).

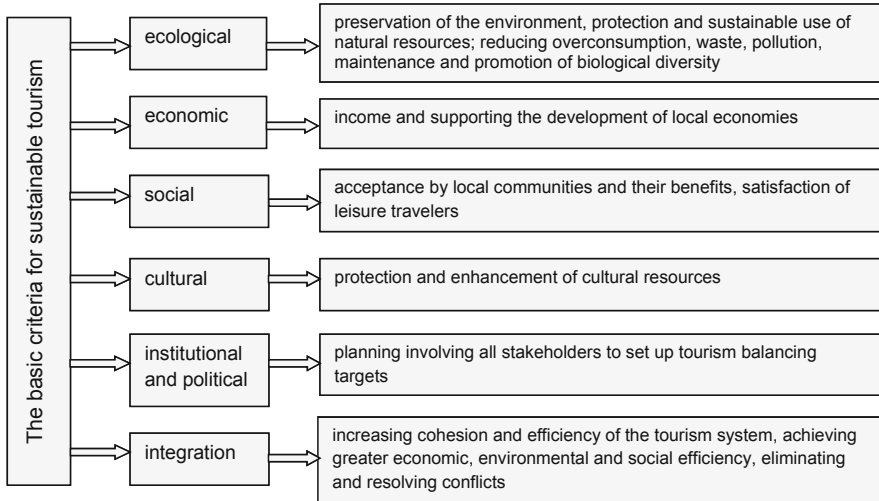


Fig. 1 The basic criteria for sustainable tourism. Source: Author's own study based on Dobrzański et al. (2014)

Research on sustainable tourism has been going on for many years (Eagles et al. 2002; Wiesmann et al. 2005; Plummer and Fennel 2009; Panfiluk 2011; Candela and Figini 2012; Jenkins and Schröder 2013; Mika 2015; McCool and Bosak 2016). Nevertheless, this concept is often unclear, which creates many research problems. These problems concern, among others, the ambiguity of the interpretation of this category, which affects the adopted research perspective; difficulties with the operational development of its theoretical assumptions in the research process (Mika 2015); problems of measurement and assessment of the degree of “sustainability” of phenomena and processes in tourism.

Without going into the discrepancy regarding the definition of the semantic scope of the concept of sustainable tourism, it should be noted that the concept of sustainable tourism should not be identified with a specific form of tourist traffic, but should be related to the organization and functioning of the tourism economy as a whole in a given area. In accordance with the overriding principle of sustainable development, sustainable tourism includes activities that are ecologically acceptable, economically justified, and socially desirable (both from the point of view of tourists, tourism organizers, and local communities). However, sustainable tourism should be perceived not as a narrow concept based on the search for balance in these areas, but an overarching paradigm that assumes many different paths of development, adapted to the conditions of a given place and the values of variables in time and space (Dobrzański et al. 2014). Following toward sustainable tourism development requires the fulfillment of certain criteria and rules. The basic criteria for sustainable tourism are presented in Fig. 1.

“The challenge of sustainable tourism development is to make use of tourism’s positive impacts, enhancing and channeling the benefits into the right directions,

and to avoid or mitigate the negative impacts as far as possible” (ETE 2009, p. 8). The most important success factors in defining pathways for nature conservation and protection are linking development and conservation, involving multiple stakeholders and applying participatory approaches (Wiesmann et al. 2005).

In recent years, there have been a number of guidelines regarding sustainable tourism development (objectives, principles, and criteria), regarding both the general and protected areas, developed by various international organizations, as well as being the result of many important international conferences and agreements. Among them, it is worth to mention in particular:

- Charter for Sustainable Tourism (UNESCO et al. 1995; GSC et al. 2015)
- The Berlin Declaration (1997)
- Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (WTO 1999)
- Guidelines on sustainable tourism development (CBD 2004; CBD 2007)
- Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism communication (Commission of the European Communities 2007)
- New political framework for the European tourism sector (Commission of the European Communities 2010)
- An EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020 (European Commission 2011)

The signing of the Berlin Declaration at the International Environment Ministers’ Conference on Biological Diversity and Sustainable Tourism was important for the sustainable development of tourism in protected areas in Europe. It contains general and detailed rules, the implementation of which will lead to sustainable tourism. The declaration was also signed by Poland, thus committing itself to implementing the priorities of sustainable tourism in the national economic policy of the country.

Recognizing the growing challenges of implementing sustainable tourism and increasing its contribution to sustainable development, the General Assembly of the United Nations has announced the year 2017 as “International Year of Sustainable Tourism Development.” This initiative has greatly contributed to the revival of global discussion and partnership for sustainable development (General Assembly of the United Nations 2016).

3 The System of Protected Areas in Poland

The contemporary dynamics of tourism development and development trends cause the increase of tourists’ interest in the natural environment and of pressure on the most valuable areas covered by legal protection. In Poland, the basic legal act, under which valuable natural areas are covered by legal protection is the Act of 16 April, 2004 on The Protection of Nature (Act 2004). It defines the goals, principles, and forms of protection of living and non-living nature and landscape. There are ten forms of nature protection in Poland (Table 1): national parks, nature reserves, landscape parks, protected landscape areas, Nature 2000 areas, nature monuments,

Table 1 Forms of nature protection in Poland in 2016^a

Specification	Number of objects	Area			
		In thousand hectares	In percent	In % of total area of the country	Per capita in m ²
All protected areas total		10,167.0	100.0	32.5	2645
National parks	23	315.1	3.1	1.0	82
Nature reserves	1493	168.3	1.7	0.5	44
Landscape parks	122	2518.3	24.8	8.1	655
Protected landscape areas	385	6997.5	68.8	22.4	1821
Documentation sites	167	1.0	0.0	0.0	0
Ecological areas	7205	53.0	0.5	0.2	14
Landscape-nature complexes	343	113.8	1.1	0.4	30

^aExcluding areas within the Natura 2000 network

Source: Central Statistical Office (2017)

documentation sites, ecological areas, landscape-nature complexes, plant, animal and fungi species protection. From the point of view of tourism development, national parks and landscape parks are of particular importance. All national parks are included in the European Ecological Network Natura 2000.

In Poland national park covers an area of outstanding value for the environmental, scientific, social, cultural, and educational, with an area of not less than 1000 hectares, which is the protection of the whole nature and qualities of landscape. The national park created to preserve biodiversity, resources, objects, and elements of inanimate nature and landscape values, restoring proper state of natural resources and components and reconstruct distorted nature habitats, plants, habitats of animals and habitats of fungi (The Protection of Nature Act 2004). National parks are supervised by a minister responsible for environmental issues.

All the Polish national parks comply with International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) requirements: 15 parks were assigned to the second category, two parks (Ojcowski and Wigierski) were awarded fifth class, and 6 newest parks (Biebrzański, Bory Tucholskie, Górz Stołowych, Narwiański, Magurski and Ujście Warty) have not been classified by IUCN—WCU yet and. National parks in Poland have a high international status (Central Statistical Office 2017):

- Nine national parks UNESCO has acknowledged as biosphere reserves: Babiogórski, Białowiecki, Bieszczadzki, Bory Tucholskie, Kampinoski, Karkonoski, Poleski, Słowiński, Tatrzański, whereas Białowiecki National Park has been recognized as world heritage site
- Seven parks have been covered by RAMSAR convention (a convention on wetlands of international significance, especially the ones which fulfill the role of a living environment for waterfowl): Biebrzański, Narwiański, Karkonoski, Poleski, Ujście Warty, Słowiński and Wigierski

National parks have a rich and diverse tourist potential (natural and cultural), which means that in the majority of them tourism can be a leading, complementary, or additional field of economic activity. One of the key resources of protected areas in Poland is the high biological diversity at the landscape, ecosystem, species, or genre level that allows the creation of unique and competitive tourism products (not only on the domestic market, but also international). Some national parks in Poland constitute specific “banks of genes and species” on a European scale, because they contain the largest, and often are the only, European refuge locations for many species. Poland is one of the European countries with the highest biodiversity index. Biodiversity in the future may constitute a branded tourism product of Poland that creates its positive image in the world as a country that protects the “natural heritage of Europe” (Foundation of Environmental and Natural Resources Economists 2005). A good example is Białowieża National Park. The Białowieża Forest includes the last primeval forest fragments at the Central European Plain; hence it represents the model object for forest ecosystems of Poland and Europe. The woodland of the Forests includes mixed, multilevel, and centuries-old stand. The natural and cultural heritage of the region and, above all, the rich and unique tourist attractions of the forest environment constitute a great potential to create new products. Forest and its functions (promoted by various forms of education concerning the environment and forestry) may be the core of the integrated tourist product of the Białowieża Forest—“Forest Heritage of Europe.” In 2015, within the framework of the implementation of the “Białowieża Forest—Forest Heritage of Europe” program (involving the State Forests, the National Fund for Environmental Protection and Water Management, Białowieża National Park, and local governments), a concept of such a product was developed, consisting of a wide variety of “tourism products” (mainly in the segment of environmental-educational tourism). The idea is to create new partial products, which will be linked thematically by a common idea (Kiryluk 2016).

Natural landscapes and biodiversity are becoming more and more appreciated by tourists. This causes tourism growth in protected areas, both in Poland and around the world. In 2016, Polish national parks were visited by about 13 million tourists (Table 2; Fig. 2), including the largest number in such parks as: Tatrzański (3.6 million), Karkonowski (2 million), Woliński (1.5 million), Wielkopolski (1.2 million), and Kampinowski (1 million) (Table 2).

4 The Primary Barrier to the Tourism Development in Protected Areas

Tourism in protected areas, on the one hand, can provide an opportunity for socioeconomic development and, on the other, it can be a threat (Fig. 3) and cause degradation of the natural environment. This leads to the loss of the value of natural values and landscape values, for the protection of which the parks have been established.

Table 2 Tourism in national parks in Poland in 2016

National park	Tourist routes in km		The number of tourists	
	Total	For renovation	In the thousands	Per 1 h
Total	3741.3	246.3	12,900.2	1636.7
Babiogórski National Park	49.0	–	114.0	34.0
Białowiecki National Park	44.3	–	163.4	15.6
Biebrzański National Park	498.9	68.0	41.0	0.7
Bieszczadzki National Park	465.0	30.0	487.0	16.7
National Park “Bory Tucholskie”	93.0	5.4	34.5	7.5
Drawieński National Park	241.3	–	16.0	1.4
Gorczański National Park	169.0	2.5	80.0	11.0
National Park Gór Stołowych	109.0	–	286.0	46.0
Kampinoski National Park	550.0	58.7	1000.0	29.5
Karkonoski National Park	121.0	34.0	2000.0	336.0
Magurski National Park	94.0	–	50.0	2.6
Narwiański National Park	55.0	–	20.0	0.3
Ojcowski National Park	37.4	2.5	428.0	199.5
Pieniński National Park	35.0	1.5	931.0	393.0
Poleski National Park	114.0	–	44.0	4.5
Roztoczański National Park	29.3	–	186.7	22.0
Słowiński National Park	165.7	25.0	323.4	15.0
Świętokrzyski National Park	41.0	8.0	144.0	18.9
Tatrzański National Park	275.0	10.0	3683.1	174.0
National Park “Ujście Warty”	16.7	–	43.2	5.3
Wielkopolski National Park	215.0	–	1200.0	158.0
Wigierski National Park	272.6	–	125.0	8.3
Woliński National Park	50.1	0.7	1500.0	137.0

Source: Central Statistical Office (2017)

The primary barrier to the development of the tourist function in protected areas is the natural resilience of the natural environment to anthropogenicity. It depends on the potential of the individual environments and determines the amount of their use and tourism development. The resistance of the environment to anthropopressure is most often determined in Poland on the basis of vegetation, and mainly forest communities. Forest communities belong to the most sensitive links in the natural system and have a priority role in shaping and protecting biodiversity (e.g., due to the diversity of habitats, the function of a refuge for many species, an important link connecting other ecosystems). The admissible thresholds of tourist use in Poland are determined by means of two indicators of natural absorptivity and tourism capacity.

The challenge is the sustainable exploitation of biodiversity in protected areas and the fair distribution of benefits resulting from the use of its resources. It is therefore important to plan and manage tourism in protected areas that will reduce the negative effects of tourism development in the long term. The main objective of tourism management in protected areas in relation to the environment is to regulate the

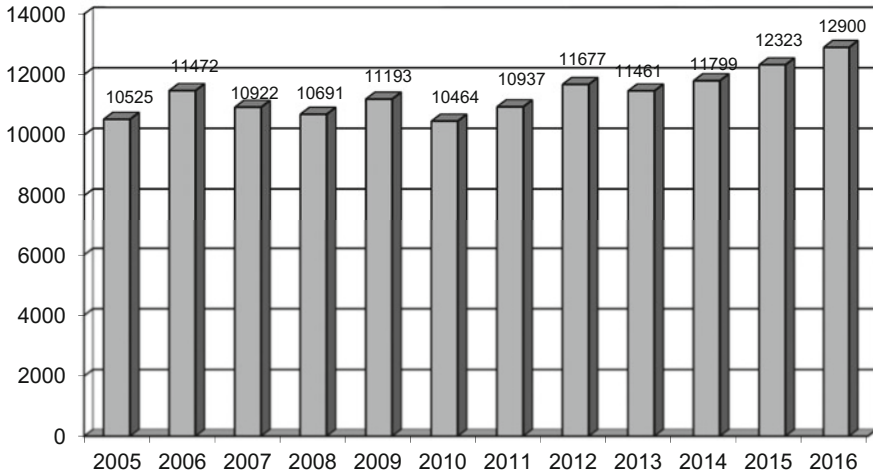


Fig. 2 Tourist traffic in national parks in Poland in years 2005–2016 (in the thousands). Source: Author’s own study based on data of the Central Statistical Office (2017)

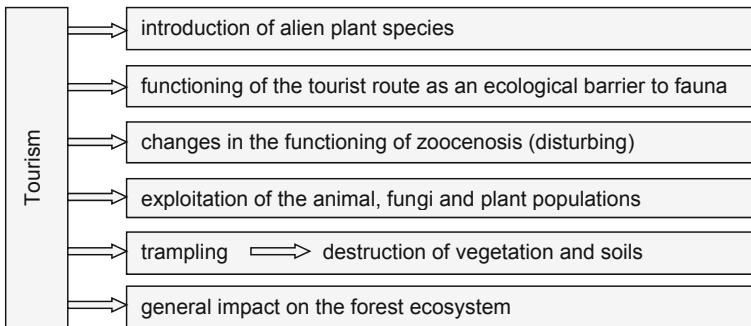


Fig. 3 The models of tourism impact on nature. Source: Author’s own study based on Pawlaczyk (2002)

touristic use of these areas in quantitative, qualitative, spatial, and temporal terms. The protection of biodiversity resources and sustainable exploitation is an important challenge not only for managers of protected areas, but also for the tourism sector (CBD 2007).

The main problems of tourism development in protected areas in Poland include:

- Excessive pressure of tourism on the most attractive ecosystems causing degradation of nature and landscape, inadequacy of the forms of tourism to the existing natural conditions
- Lack of developed or up-to-date protection plans for some areas, as well as for the study of absorbability of tourist regions and their tourist capacity

- Chaos in spatial development and lack of effective instruments for shaping spatial order (e.g., established architectural norms)
- Unsatisfactory organization of tourist activities in parks, lack of specialized units dealing with tourism monitoring in parks, lack of effective supervision and control over compliance with applicable regulations
- Location of parks within many administrative units with different management methods and the lack of a coherent development strategy of the integrated tourist product of the area
- Social conflicts resulting from the divergence of objectives and interests of different groups of users of protected areas (e.g., strong conflict in Białowieża Fores), low acceptance of the local community of protective activities
- Lack of developed economic instruments that will compensate for “costs” related to maintaining tourist values of protected areas and strengthen interest in the protection of local communities and motivate economic entities to economically manage natural resources and values
- Absence, low standard, or improper location of tourist infrastructure (insufficient infrastructure that can drain tourist traffic, poor equipment of routes regarding sanitary, technical and informational infrastructure), too few created characteristic regional and local tourist products
- Too little promotion of the sustainable tourism model, lack of professional marketing of pro-ecological forms of tourism
- Limitation or lack of financial resources (especially local capital) for investments related to the development of tourism
- Insufficient scope of cooperation for the sustainable development of tourism (management of parks, territorial self-governments, forest inspectorates, entities of the tourism industry)
- Low level of ecological awareness and “tourist culture” of the Polish society

Sustainable tourism development in protected areas will require overcoming many existing development barriers, primarily infrastructural, organizational, information, financial, environmental, and social barriers. In the minds of the Polish society, the view is quite common that precious natural values constitute a burdensome heritage limiting development opportunities.

Success in the development of tourism is not only influenced by tourism resources (natural or cultural heritage), but social factors: having a leader capable of mobilizing the community around the vision of sustainable tourism development. Key factors for development are: network development, innovation, creation of integrated tourism products, building competitive advantages.

The important role in stimulating the development of tourism in the region is territorial self-governments. The extent and scale of tourism change depends largely on local and regional tourism policies developed by local governments. In present socioeconomic reality, marketing approach to protection and enrichment of environmental assets of a particular area, as well as its promotion for tourist, plays crucial role. Preparation and then implementation of unified strategy of asset promotion may help to create unique image of a particular area, and raising its competitive skills, as

consequence. Local government has a high potential to coordinate the cooperation of entities and projects implemented in the region and to take action concerning tourist the promotion of the region. One of the important principles of sustainable tourism development is the deep involvement of all stakeholders in the tourism economy (including local communities), the decision-making process, and the practical implementation of this concept.

Local communities play an important role in the sustainable development of tourism. This role can be considered in three basic aspects. Firstly, the attitudes and behaviors of the inhabitants of protected areas and their economic activities have a significant impact on the quality and protection of local natural and cultural values. Secondly, the local community is a direct recipient of positive and negative effects of tourism development in protected areas (social, economic, and ecological). Thirdly, the local community is an important element of the complex tourist product of the area. It contributes to the tourist attractiveness of the place and tourist image of the area. Therefore, a friendly attitude of the inhabitants towards tourism and nature protection is very important. Positive attitude of inhabitants stimulates development initiatives, while negative attitude often constitutes a barrier to development.

5 Conclusion

The development of tourism in protected areas requires changing the current model of tourism in favor of sustainable tourism. Sustainable tourism can be a tool for active nature conservation and sustainable stimulator of the development of protected areas. The complexity and multifaceted nature of tourism makes it possible to achieve benefits in various spheres: social, cultural, economic, environmental, spatial, and institutional. Economic, social, and environmental sustainability are the key factors that affect the well-being of the people as well as the creation of jobs and the preservation and enhancement of natural and cultural attractions.

Protected areas in Poland have great development potential for the development of the tourist function. This potential allows for the creation of unique, attractive, and competitive tourist products, competing on a European scale. The main element of this competitiveness is high biodiversity at the landscape, ecosystem, and species level. Biodiversity in the future may constitute a branded tourism product of Poland that creates its positive image in the world as a country that protects the “natural heritage of Europe.”

Utilizing this potential requires appropriate action in the sphere of tourism development, organization, and management of tourism, both by local governments and the management of protected areas. It is important to plan and manage tourism in protected areas that will reduce the negative effects of tourism development in the long term. It is necessary to strive for broad cooperation and coordination of the actions of many regional actors and the local tourism economy.

Sustainable tourism development in protected areas will require overcoming many existing development barriers, primarily infrastructural, organizational, information, financial, environmental, and social barriers (e.g., in the process of using the

benefits, differences in the interests of different groups often lead to the emergence of various social conflicts).

The main challenges of tourism in protected areas are: the need to raise public awareness about the contribution of sustainable tourism to the development of regions, the need to monitor the impact of tourism on the economy, societies and environment of protected areas and assess the sustainability of tourism; the need to create integrated, innovative and competitive eco-friendly tourism products.

Acknowledgments The studies have been carried out within the framework of the work No. S/WZ/5/2015, and financed from the resources of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, allocated to science.

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