

A stakeholders' analysis of potential sustainable tourism development strategies in Piatra Craiului National Park

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Abstract. Tourism is a major management issue for many protected areas as the presence and actions of visitors can present serious problems for biodiversity conservation. Therefore, tourism has to be managed carefully and site managers must assess and balance the costs and benefits of tourism in protected areas. It is also important to find ways for local people and communities to benefit from tourism linked to conservation. Using a stakeholder analysis, the article assesses benefits and threats of tourism development in Piatra Craiului National Park. Through a range of interviews with local stakeholders, the article identifies the main challenges that tourism brings to the protected area: ensuring the effective participation of communities in tourism development, effectively managing tourism to prevent it from undermining conservation goals, encouraging all stakeholders, particularly the private sector, to support the conservation of biodiversity and channelling a portion of tourism revenues towards supporting conservation. The ecotourism, as a responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves welfare of local people, is considered the best solution for a sustainable tourism development in Piatra Craiului National Park.

Keywords: Piatra Craiului, National Park, biodiversity, tourism

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Introduction

Sustainable development was defined by the Brundtland Commission in 1987 in the report called "Our common Future" as development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

According to the World Tourism Organization (2004) sustainable tourism should: (i)

make optimal use of environmental resources that constitute a key element in tourism development, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity; (ii) respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance; (iii) ensure viable, long-term economic operations,

providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation.

Tourism is now the largest economic sector in the world, still growing (Schelhaas 2004), and it is rapidly growing in Romania as well (Autoritatea Națională pentru Turism 2006). A strategy for the sustainable tourism development should include the conservation of tourism resources, assuring benefits for the local communities in and around tourism destinations and a better understanding of the necessity of conservation both by visitors and local population (Bran et al. 2000).

From the conservation perspective, sustainable tourism brings the following benefits (Nistoreanu 2007): (i) the efficient use of less productive rural areas; (ii) raising awareness concerning the effects of tourism activities on the natural, cultural and social environment; (iii) conservation funds for both natural and cultural sites; (iv) economic advantages for the local communities in the tourism destinations.

Tourism and biodiversity have a strong relationship that can be both positive and negative. Tourism can degrade natural areas, but can also be a reason to protect nature and culture. It can fund nature management and give nature a direct economic value, providing an incentive for local inhabitants and governments to protect nature (Tapper & Cochrane 2005). By establishing closer links with the tourism sector, protected areas staff can learn about the realities of tourist demands and more effectively meet the requirements of tourism companies. Stronger relationship between the protected areas staff and tourism sector can also encourage a greater understanding of conservation priorities amongst tourism companies.

Continued uncontrolled investments in the nature tourism sector will have serious negative impacts on biodiversity in Romania. In this respect, sustainable tourism is one of the few potential sources of income that can be channelled towards conservation measures, benefit sharing and service-based industries. For many biodiversity hotspots in Romania, which do not have formal legal protection or are poorly enforced and accredited, well-managed sustainable tourism programs can help to

convince communities to realize that tourism can also serve as a stop-gap measure for the local economy until legal protection is recognized and enforced.

The present study analyzed the potential tourism development in Piatra Craiului National Park, from the viewpoint of local stakeholders, with a special focus on the possibility to implement ecotourism strategies. Through a range of interviews with local stakeholders, the article identifies the main challenges that tourism brings to the protected area in Piatra Craiului

Piatra Craiului National Park: tourism destination and nature protection area

Piatra Craiului Massif was declared as natural reserve on 28th of March 1938 on only 440 ha. In 1952 the first forest management plan was set up in the Piatra Craiului area and designated for conservation purposes around 17.2% from the entire massif surface. This surface increased in 1972 at 900 ha. Nowadays the special conservation area (core area) covers 4879 ha, and the buffer zone stretches on 9894 ha. In 1990 Piatra Craiului is declared National Park through Ministry of Agriculture's Order no. 7, along with other 12 National and Natural Parks in Romania.

Starting with 1999, along with the implementation of the Biodiversity Conservation Management Project the first park administration was set up (Piatra Craiului National Park, website).

The park is crossed by a number of 30 tourist trails, leading the tourists to several beautiful areas. The main tourist attractions are: (i) the outstanding rich flora, including the species *Dianthus callizonus* - unique in the world; (ii) the wild fauna includes the chamois and the large carnivores - the symbol of unaltered nature - which have disappeared from most of the European countries; (iii) the traditional lifestyle in the areas neighboring the massif, especially in Măgura and Peștera villages.

Concerning accommodation, there are several guesthouses in the villages inside the park (Peștera and Măgura), in the villages neighboring the park (Bran, Moeciu, Șirnea, Zărnești, Ciocanu, Podul Dâmboviței, Dâmbovicioara

and Sătic), and also the chalets and the camping sites inside the park. The comfort provided by the guesthouses varies from one daisy up to five daisies according to the classification ANTREC (National Association for Rural, Ecological and Cultural Tourism). In the Moeiciu-Bran area, there are over 150 guesthouses rated at one to three daisies, located at distances from 100 meters to 10 km from the park's border.

At only 30 km from Braşov, Piatra Craiului National Parks benefits from the proximity to this well-known tourism destination. Day trips or longer journeys are available from Braşov for trekkers or tourists interested in climbing, wildlife watching or just a breath of fresh air in the idyllic villages included in the park. Although there is no scientific proof because of the lack of statistical data on tourist arrivals, the tourism ascending trend in the last 10 years in Piatra Craiului National Park could have been generated by the Carpathian Large Carnivore Project.

There is no statistical data on the tourist arrivals or expenditure in Piatra Craiului National Park as the local authorities believe this is not their responsibility, but that of Braşov County Statistics Institute and local tourism stakeholders either do not have these statistics or do not wish to make it public. However, the administration of Piatra Craiului National Park has done a survey in 2003, during the summer season. With the help of volunteers who administrated a questionnaire to tourists entering the National Park, this survey outlined 90,000 arrivals in 2003 summer season.

One of the most important conclusions of the survey is the low tourist average stay (Verghet & Zotta 2003): 17% of the visitors spend only one day in the park, 44% of the visitors spend two to three days in the area, 30% spend from 4 days to a week and only 9% of the total tourists spend more than a week in Piatra Craiului National Park. This statistics reflect either a low quality accommodation or the lack of recreation activities and leisure service providers. In order to improve the tourist average stay a wide range of tourism activities should be developed appropriate for different segments of visitors: families with children, adventurers, scientists, nature enthu-

siasts, trekkers and other categories.

A specialized market research firm could do a similar survey with a less statistical error for the sum of 20,000 euro, so until further financing this remains the only relevant tourism statistics. The tourist arrivals in the area could also be recorded through local guesthouses statistics, if they would not be reluctant to declare these facts because they are afraid of paying more tax.

Tourism is a major management issue for many protected areas, as the presence and actions of visitors can present serious problems. In Piatra Craiului National Park, the main negative impacts of tourism activities are the inappropriate waste disposal both by tourists and local guesthouse owners, phonic pollution-both on and outside tourist trails, scaring wild animals, ATV and motorcycles circulation. Although garbage is widely spread over Piatra Craiului Mountains, the Park administration noticed an increased awareness amongst tourists on the garbage disposal, issue reflected, in the decrease of collected garbage quantities from 50 tones in 2002 to 10-15 tones at present. This could also be a consequence of the roadblocks positioned on several access roads in the National Park.

Theoretical frame work

The study focuses on potential sustainable tourism development strategies in Piatra Craiului from the point of view of the local stakeholders. The purpose of the study is to identify tourism practices in the park, which is the relationship between the local stakeholders concerning tourism development and nature conservation and how the present situation can be improved according to the stakeholders. In the context of better governance and sustainability, the implementation of strategies for tourism development in a protected area should embrace the form of a multi-stakeholder process (Hemmati 2001). A multi-stakeholder process is based on democratic principles of transparency and participation, and aim to develop partnerships and strengthened networks among stakeholders. Policymakers and managers can use stakeholder analysis to identify these key players or "stakeholders", pre-

dict whether they might support or block the implementation of reforms, and develop strategies to promote supportive actions and decrease opposing actions before attempting to implement major reform at the national, regional, local, or facility level. The information provided by stakeholder analysis can be used to provide input into other analyses; to develop action plans to increase support for a reform policy; or to guide a participatory, consensus-building process (Schmeer 1999).

Stakeholder analysis can be defined as a methodology for gaining an understanding of a system, and for assessing the impact of changes to that system, by means of identifying the key stakeholders and assessing their respective interests (Grimble 1998). Stakeholder analysis recognizes the different interest groups involved in the utilization and conservation of natural resources and provides tools that help to identify and resolve tradeoffs and conflicts of interest.

Stakeholders and tourism development

A stakeholder analysis can help a project to identify: (i) the interests of all stakeholders, who may affect or be affected by the project; (ii) potential issues that could disrupt the project; (iii) key people for information distribution during executing phase; (iv) groups that should be encouraged to participate in different stages of the project; (v) communication planning and stakeholder management strategy during project planning phase; (vi) ways to reduce potential negative impacts and manage negative stakeholders.

The stakeholder analysis in the case of Piatra Craiului National Park was used to identify key stakeholders who have a vested interest in the issue of sustainable tourism development. Essential steps for stakeholder analysis were: (i) stakeholder identification and documenting their interests in the project of developing sustainable tourism practices; (ii) assessing the power importance and level of impact upon each stakeholder if sustainable tourism practices were implemented; (iii) identifying how best to engage stakeholders in the development of sustainable tourism development, such as ecotourism.

In this study, "stakeholder" is a generic term for all people who have an interest in the tourism development and nature conservation in the area of Piatra Craiului National Park. This includes local authorities, tourism representative, administration of National Park, tourism development planners, visitors, and non-governmental organisations.

Materials and methods

There are a variety of techniques of data collection for the identification of stakeholders, of their interests and of their potential involvement in developing sustainable tourism practices. Field experience points in particular to the usefulness of informal, semi-structured interviews (using simple check-lists of key topics), both with individuals representing one stakeholder group and with a number of representatives from different stakeholder groups (Grimble 1998).

The research technique applied was a semi-structured in-depth interview with local stakeholders from Piatra Craiului National Park: (i) the mayor of a commune, the local authority for the 2 villages included in the park: Peștera and Măgura; (ii) a certified mountain guide whose activity is mainly in Piatra Craiului National Park; (iii) a local touroperator specialized in wildlife watching; (iv) the tourism policy planner in the administration of Piatra Craiului National Park; (v) 3 guesthouse owners in Măgura and Peștera villages.

The in-depth interviews were structured on 4 themes: tourism development in the area and tourism statistics, nature protection, local involvement in development and nature protection projects, and ecotourism. For each theme, a number of 6 to 10 questions opened were formulated in order to: (i) identify the tourism practices in the area, and particularly those practices with negative impact on nature protection, assess the stakeholder's potential commitment and interest in introducing ecotourism as a possible solution for a sustainable tourism development in the area; (ii) identify the practices of local involvement, public participation and partnership in decision making in the Park area, assess the stakeholder's potential commitment and interest in

developing community-based partnership for decision making in Piatra Craiului area.

The results chapter details the answers received to the first two themes (tourism practices and local partnership) in two different subchapters: (i) stakeholders' view on tourism practices in Piatra Craiului National Park and ecotourism implementation, and (ii) private-public partnership in tourism development and nature conservation

Stakeholders' view on potential sustainable tourism development in Piatra Craiului National Park

Stakeholders' view on tourism practices in Piatra Craiului National Park

Local authorities

Măgura and Peștera villages do not have their own city hall; they belong to the city hall of Moeciu and this makes the tourism development even slower as these two communities do not seem to be a priority for the Moeciu local authorities. Moeciu is a tourist village itself focusing on agritourism and rural tourism. However, in the latest years, Moeciu village became too crowded and invaded by holiday houses and guesthouses, which diminished the importance of the local architecture and rural experience as tourism attractions.

Moeciu local authorities believe that being included in Piatra Craiului National Parks is a good opportunity for Măgura and Peștera Villages, but it also brings restrictions that local community members do not understand. These restrictions seem sometimes to be in contradiction with their propriety rights and they are not welcome by the local communities as long as they do not get compensations.

Administration of Piatra Craiului National Park

The administration of Piatra Craiului National Park mentioned that the law includes the right for compensatory financing for local communities in protected areas, but it is not put in practice. People who own land included in the

area of the National Park should also be exempted from tax but as the local authorities calculate their global tax for all proprieties, the land owners cannot see whether the law has been respected or not.

Another important issue that affects sustainable tourism development in Piatra Craiului National Park is that there are more and more buildings (either holiday houses or guesthouses), which do not respect the local architecture and bring a negative impact on the local scenery. The administration of the National Park has included in the new management plan restrictions to limit building that do not respect the local architecture but their approval was still pending in the beginning of the year 2009. A previous attempt in this field has been done in 2003 through a decision of The County Council of Brașov but it failed.

Tourists

According to the stakeholders, the main tourists' discontents are linked to the low quality of accommodation, insufficient tourist information signs, garbage, foresters' insufficient foreign language skills, poor infrastructure, bad road access and logging.

Guesthouse owners and tourism industry representatives

The main difficulties faced in the local tourism development mentioned by the analyzed guesthouse owners, guides and tour operators are: very bad road access; little or no implication in garbage collection by the local authorities; buildings that do not respect the local architecture; excessive land parcelling; the absence of local town-planning; the absence of a sewage system; hunting; all-road vehicles access.

The main impediment for tourism development in the communities included in Piatra Craiului National Park is the bad road access which is thought to be also the main reason for little tourist arrivals comparing to the neighbouring tourist villages Bran and Moeciu, which attract far more tourists than Măgura and Peștera. Both local guesthouse owners and tourists blame the local authorities for the bad shape of the roads. On the other hand a good

road access could also generate an increase in tourist arrivals in these two communities (especially mass-tourism), but could have a negative effect on the environment and local community. Moeciu local authorities mentioned that a project has been done by the Braşov County Council for the rehabilitation of the road passing from Moeciu to Peştera and Măgura and ending in Zărneşti. Although the road should have been finished by the end of 2008, only a few kilometres have been done in Moeciu.

Although, the local guesthouses included in Piatra Craiului National Park are promoted on the park website (www.pcr.ai.ro), most of the analyzed guesthouse owners complain about an insufficient promotion by the park administration and they do not see practical advantages coming from their inclusion in a protected area. A guesthouse manager also complained about not receiving maps with Piatra Craiului Mountains for tourists, as the administration of the park does not have enough funds to edit them.

The ecotourism is seen as a solution for a sustainable tourism development in Piatra Craiului National Park by most of the interviewed stakeholders, but only one of them is focusing almost exclusively on this form of tourism. This entrepreneur is an eco-certified member of The Association of Ecotourism in Romania. The Association of Ecotourism succeeded to realize a partnership for nature conservation and tourism development among tourism associations, non-governmental associations acting in local development and nature

conservation, nature conservation projects and travel agencies. The mission of the association is to promote the concept and development of ecotourism for the support of nature conservation, local communities in natural areas, and for raising the standard of ecotourism related services as well as promotion of the nature as an essential element of the Romanian tourist destination image.

Private-public partnership in tourism development and nature conservation

An important impediment in the way of a sustainable tourism development in Piatra Craiului National Park is the lack of partnership between local authorities and the local community, especially guesthouse owners. Lack of willingness for partnership is claimed by both local policy decision-makers and local community representatives (guesthouses, park administration, NGOs).

While the mayor of Moeciu commune appreciates the efforts of the guesthouse owners in Măgura and Peştera villages to develop tourism, he is also looking for more involvement of the private sector in local development. He suggested that the problem of bad infrastructure requires public-private partnership with a contribution of 50% from each part. On the other side, the main discontent of local community members is that Moeciu local authorities have not modernized the infrastructure (roads, waste disposal system, sewage). Nevertheless, according to the tourism policy planner in the National Park, an evolution of

There are experiences on ecotourism implementation in the area, e.g. The Carpathian Large Carnivore Project (CLCP) which has developed and implemented a comprehensive conservation programme for large carnivores in Romania. The project started in 1993 and has ended in summer 2003 and has had numerous organisations involved. The overall goal of the program was to establish a community-based conservation of large carnivores and their habitat in a model region in the Southern Carpathians through an integrated management approach. As rural development was considered a tool to achieve conservation an ecotourism program was developed in the area around Piatra Craiului National Park in the attempt to local politics in favor of conservation. In 1997, an ecotourism program was developed entitled "Wolves, Bears, and Lynx in Transylvania", based on organized group travel in co-operation with western travel agencies and local services. Between 1997 and 2003, over 3000 visitors have visited the area through the program. The travel agencies paid a donation for each visitor to the "Community Conservation and Development Fund" helping to improve the local infrastructure and financially assists conservation measures.

Box 1 Local success stories: Business integration of nature protection and tourism development

practices in the field seems to be in progress. Since 2002-2003 the local guesthouse owners have started to change their point of view considering their inclusion in the protected area: some of them have sponsored some of the parks publications and initiatives. A "success story" also exists, with the creation of a local NGO, Pro Măgura, whose activities focus on sustainable local development in Măgura village.

Moreover, some few guesthouse owners started to be involved in nature conservation projects in partnership with the administration of Piatra Craiului National Park. One of them is Herman Kurmes, a guesthouse owner from Măgura, who is also an inbound tour operator and a member of the Association of Ecotourism in Romania. This entrepreneur focuses on sustainable and socially responsible tourism to support the conservation of the environment and to protect wildlife (see Box 2).

Conclusions

The research reveals the necessity of implementing sustainable tourism strategies in Piatra Craiului National Park. The study identifies many issues that show unsustainable practices of tourism in the Piatra Craiului: the problem of waste disposal in the communities included in the national park, negative tourist behavior, the lack of tourism statistics, little support for the local communities from the local authorities, the presence of buildings that do not respect the local architecture, little understand-

ing of the sustainable tourism concept by the local community members, infrastructure problems, little tourism signs and tourist information, excessive land parcelling, hunting and logging, little funding for conservation purposes.

All these issues prove the necessity of a sustainable tourism planning in Romanian National Parks and also the need for a practical guide for tourism planners. As stressed out by a previous study (Dekkers et al. 2004) to achieve sustainable tourism development, an improvement of communication between stakeholders is needed.

The best way to encourage sustainable tourism development in Piatra Craiului National Park is to promote the effective partnership between local authorities, the park's administration, tour operators, guides, guesthouse owners and local communities. This partnership could be initiated by a local NGO, which could have the ability to proceed to fund-raising. Such a partnership would assure an identity and a better organization of this tourism destination and could lobby both at regional and national level in the interest of nature conservation and tourism development in the area.

The partnership can enhance the necessary conditions for ecotourism development in Piatra Craiului. The ecotourism is an ideal component of a sustainable development strategy, where natural resources can be utilized as tourism attractions without causing harm to the natural area (Dekkers et al. 2004). As the term of ecotourism is not widely known and pro-

Carpathian Tours was founded in 1999 in cooperation with the Carpathian Large Carnivore Project and within the frame of this "wolf-project" they developed a sustainable tourism programme with the principle of socially and environmentally responsible tourism for the National Park Piatra Craiului area. Their main interest is nature conservation and the protection of the European large carnivores: bear, wolf and lynx; therefore they focus on hiking and nature experience holidays with wildlife watching. In the year 2000 Carpathian Tours was a founder member of the first association for ecotourism in Zarnesti and in 2003 a founder member of the first national Association for Ecotourism in Romania: AER. As it regards a close contact between the traveler and the tour operator as essential, this tour operator guides only small groups (max 15 persons) and a special highlight is watching European brown bears from a cabin in the forest, and also other wildlife watching: wild boar, birds of prey, owls or even wolves. Carpathian Tours also works with the Romanian Institute for Wildlife Research on some of their projects like the beaver reintroduction programme or the reintroduction of marmots in the Făgăras Mountains (www.cntours.ro: Carpathian Tours website).

Box 2 Local success stories: Partnership for integration of nature protection and tourism development

moted by the local stakeholders and authorities, better information should be enhanced via workshops or specific courses. Therefore, the three main policy recommendations of the study are: the tourism development should benefit from a systematic planning which would include all interested stakeholders; a private-public partnership is needed in order to identify the challenges of tourism development and to build commonly local solutions; financial or informational and promoting ecotourism will benefit both tourism sector and nature conservation policies, therefore there is a need that local authorities and protected area administration promote and support all initiatives regarding the ecotourism information and implementation.

The main limitation of the research presented in this study is the low number of interviews, yet the study aims at an exploratory and qualitative not quantitative analysis. In order to have a complete view on the sustainable tourism development in Piatra Craiului National Park, the research must be followed by a more complex analysis involving also a quantitative survey including tourists, local guesthouse owners, members of the community and other stakeholders that can offer a better understanding of the issue. A focus-group could also be used as a qualitative research method in order to have a discussion between the different stakeholders on the sustainable tourism development theme, which could provide even more information on the subject. However, the study provides first insides about the challenge of introducing sustainable tourism practices, and particularly argues that in this purpose building private-public partnership is a condition sine qua non.

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