

THE PROSPECTS OF ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN BORJOMI - KHARAGAULI NATIONAL PARK

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The Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park is one of the largest national parks not only in Georgia, but in Europe too. The park was endorsed and created with the support of the World Wildlife Fund and the German government in 1995 and was officially inaugurated in 2001. In 2007 the park became a member of PAN (Protected Area Network). The particular uniqueness of the park, along with its location and climate, is the diversity of geographical and ecological zones. The park is famous for its beautiful landscapes, historical monuments and diverse flora and fauna. The major part of the park is covered with coniferous and deciduous forests. At the border of western Georgia grew species characteristic to Colchic flora. We monitored the process of secure touristic management in those parts of the park, which are mostly endangered by visitors. As it was found out, according to existed standards, the optimal loading of places takes place in mid-mountain forest zone. The touristic-recreational capacity on one hectare of forested area in this zone is two visitor a day, in forestless places less. By theoretical calculations touristic-recreational loading on one hectare/an year is more than existing norms, but destructive adverse loading from visitors' side wasn't observed. On contrary, such destructive actions was noticed from indigenous people, who use perspective touristic territories for agricultural purposes. In places mostly visited by tourists the reduction of rare forest species takes place. The main principles of sustainable ecotourism development are not maintained and the administration of the park should undertake decisive measures to improve the situation.

With advances in transportation and information technology, even the most remote places on Earth are within reach of a traveler. Actually, tourism now is the world's largest industry, with nature tourism the fastest growing segment. People want to experience nature and the world, but should try to do so in a way that doesn't impact the natural environment.

In response to this increasing appreciation of nature experiences, a new travel ethic has arisen called ecotourism. By IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) definition ecotourism is: „Environmentally responsible travel to nature areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature and accompanying cultural features, both past and present, that promote conservation, have a low visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local people”[1].

We must admit, that the most part of tourism actions in natural areas today is not sustainable ecotourism.

The real sustainable ecotourism should be distinguished by its emphasis on conservation, education, traveler responsibility and active local community participation. Specifically, ecotourism possesses the following characteristics [1]:

- ✓ Conscientiousness and low adverse-impact visitor behavior;
- ✓ Sensitiveness and appreciation of local cultures and biodiversity;
- ✓ Support of local conservation efforts;
- ✓ Sustainable benefits to local communities;
- ✓ Local communities' participation in decision-making;
- ✓ Educational components for travelers and local communities.

Increased tourism to sensitive natural areas without appropriate planning and management can threaten the integrity of ecosystems and local cultures. The increased masses of visitors to ecologically sensitive

areas can lead to significant environmental degradation. Likewise, local communities and indigenous cultures can be harmed in numerous ways by an influx of foreign visitors and wealth. Additionally, fluctuations in climate, currency exchange rates, and political and social conditions can make over-dependence upon tourism a risky business [2,3].

On the other hand, the growth of ecotourism creates significant opportunities for nature conservation and local communities. Ecotourism can provide much-needed revenues for the protection of national parks and other natural areas that might not be available from other sources. Additionally, ecotourism can provide a viable economic development alternative for local communities with few other income-generating options. Moreover, ecotourism can increase the level of education and activism among travelers, making them more enthusiastic and effective agents of conservation [4,5].

Ecotourism focuses on local cultures, wilderness adventures, volunteering, personal growth and learning new ways to live on our vulnerable planet. It is typically defined as travel to destinations where the flora, fauna and cultural heritage are the primary attractions. Responsible ecotourism includes programs that minimize the adverse effects of traditional tourism on the natural environment and enhance the cultural integrity of local people. Therefore, in addition to evaluating environmental and cultural factors, initiatives by hospitality providers to promote recycling, energy efficiency, water re-use and the creation of economic opportunities for local communities are an integral part of ecotourism [5].

Today, ecotourism is considered the fastest growing market in the tourism industry according to the World Tourism organization, with an annual growth rate of 5% worldwide and representing 6% of the world gross domestic product. That is about 11.4% of all consumer spending. Around the globe, ecotourism is quickly becoming one of the most popular forms of vacationing. Businesses are creating camps and eco-lodges and natural resources managers are designing trails and tours. It must be underlined, that most of the popular eco-travel destinations have fragile ecosystems, so it is very important to maintain a careful balance between preservation and promotion of ecotourism in order to ensure the long-term health of both the ecosystems and tourism economies [6].

TIES (The International Ecotourism Society) created principles of ecotourism in 1990. It has been 25 years since TIES was started and it was impotent to re-visit three principles found in literature that ecotourism:

- ✓ is non-consumptive/non-extractive;
- ✓ creates an ecological conscience;
- ✓ holds eco-centric values and ethics in relation to future.

In 2015 TIES revised existing main principles according to new knowledge and practice. By new conception ecotourism is uniting conservation, communities and sustainable travel. This means that those who implement, participate in and market ecotourism activities should adopt the following ecotourism principles [7].

- ✓ minimize physical, social, behavioral, and psychological impacts;
- ✓ build environmental and cultural awareness and respect;
- ✓ provide positive experiences for both local people and provide industry;
- ✓ produce direct financial benefits for both local people and private industry;
- ✓ deliver memorable interpretative experiences to visitors that help raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental and social climates;
- ✓ design, construct and operate low-impact facilities;
- ✓ recognize the rights and spiritual beliefs of the indigenous people in your community and work in partnership with them to create empowerment;

Today we know much more about the tourism industry through scientific and design related research, and we are also better informed about environmental degradation and impacts on local cultures and non-human species. It is important that this knowledge is reflected by these principles [8].

Our object of research was The Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park which is situated in the Lesser Caucasus Range, south-west to the Georgia's capital of Tbilisi. The Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park is one of the largest national parks not only in Georgia but in Europe too. It includes: The Borjomi Nature Area, the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park and the Nedjvi Sanctuary. Total area of the park is 61235 ha [9]. The park is stretching from the resort of Borjomi to the town of Kharagauli. The territory of the park dates back to medieval times, when it was used by local nobility for hunting. In the 19th century it was converted into the nature reserve when Georgia became part of the Russian Empire. In 1935 the Borjomi nature reserve was established with the territory of 18000 ha. In 1995 the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park was endorsed and created with the support of the World Wildlife Fund and the German government and was officially inaugurated in 2001. In 2007 the park became a member of PAN (Protected Area Network) [10], and that is a guarantee for highest level protection of the protected area and sustainable development of tourism.

The particular uniqueness of the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park, along with its location and climate, is the diversity of geographical and ecological zones. The park is famous for its beautiful landscapes, historical

monuments and diverse flora and fauna. The major part of the park territory is covered with coniferous and deciduous forests. Wild and virgin forests are growing in the park. The northern section of the park is covered with broad-leaf forests. There grow such species as: *Fagus orientalis*, *Quercus iberica*, *Quercus macrantera*, *Acer platanoides*, *Acer pseudoplatanus*, *Acer laetum*, *Populus tremula*, *Ulmus scabra*, *Tilia caucasica*, *Pyrus caucasica*, *Carpinus orientalis*, *Corylus avelana*, etc. In subalpine zone: *Betula verrizcoza*, *Betula litvinovi*. At the border of Western Georgia grow species characteristic to Colchic flora: *Rhamnus imeretina*, *Laurocerasus officinalis*, *Rhododendron ponticum*, *Taxus baccata*, *Castanea sativa*, *Ilex colchica*, *Rhododendron flavum*, *Lonicera vaucasica*, *Vaccinium arctostaphylos*, etc. From coniferous species there grow: *Picea orientalis*, *Abies nordmaniana*, *Pinus sosnovsky* [11,12].

The fauna of the park is similarly diverse. Here we can see such animals as: *Caucasus (red) Deer*, *Wild Boar*, *Grey Wolf*, *Brown Bear*, *European Lynx*, *Common Marten*, *Eurasian Badger*, *Goitred (Persian) Gazelle*, *Caucasian Squirrel*, *Chamois (alpine)*. The territory of the national park lies on the migration route of many migrating birds.

The Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park covers the territories, which are the marginal parts of several historical regions of Georgia. The park is located in the territories of Tori, Mereti and Samtskhe. The adjacent territories of the National Park are rich in historical monuments. For the lovers of antiquity and history it is very interesting to see such monuments against the beautiful sights such as the domed temple of Timotesubani of the thirteenth century, Nedjvi church (9th century), Nunisi church (9th century), Sakvirike basilica near the village of Dviri (10th century), Green monastery of Chitakhevi (9th century), Gogia and Petra fortresses near Licani (9th century), Vakhani and Gold fortresses in Adigeni district. There are even older archeological monuments, e. g. cyclopean former settlement of Bronze age at the village of Boga, crypts of the Bronze age and cultural layers of the Antique age.

The Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park has rapidly developing touristic infrastructure. The park has two visitor centers, one in Borjomi and another in Kharagauli. Visitors to the park can enter via five entrances: Atskuri, Panavi, Nunisi, Borjomi and Marelisi and all must be registered. The Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park offers a range of outdoor activities. Visitors can go trekking, riding a horse and camping outside in a tent. The park's tourist shelters each accommodates 12 campers. There is also a guesthouse in Marelisi (Kharagauli district). Hiking trails can be followed independently with the help of the map, or in a company of a guide.

The trails ranging from one day to one week treks, lead through virginal mountain forests at the altitudes between 800 m. and 2642 m. Breathtaking panoramas inspire landscape photographers, especially in autumn. In Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park we investigated the process of secure touristic management in places mostly being endangered by visitors. As it occurred, according to existing standards, the optimal loading of places takes place in mid-mountain forest zone. The touristic-recreational capacity on one hectare of forested area in this zone is two visitor a day, in forestless places less. By theoretical calculations touristic-recreational loading on one hectare/an year is more than existing norms, but distractive adverse loading from visitors wasn't observed. On contrary such distractive actions was observed from indigenous people, who use perspective touristic territories for agricultural purposes. In places mostly visited by tourists the reduction of rare forest species was noticed. In conclusion we must notice, that the principles of sustainable ecotourism development in Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park are not maintained today and the administration of the park should undertake decisive measures to improve the situation.

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ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ РАЗВИТИЯ ЭКОТУРИЗМА В БОРЖОМ-ХАРАГАУЛЬСКОМ НАЦИОНАЛЬНОМ ПАРКЕ

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Боржом-Харагаульский национальный парк один из самых больших национальных парков не только в Грузии, но и в Европе. Парк был организован в 1995 году с помощью Всемирного Фонда Дикой природы (WWF) и правительства Германии. Официально открылся в 2001 году. В 2007 году парк был включен в РАН (сеть охраняемых). Особенной привлекательностью парка является удобное расположение и разнообразие географических и экологических зон. Парк привлекателен историческими памятниками и разнообразием флоры и фауны. Большая часть территории парка покрыта хвойными и лиственными лесами. На приграничной с Западной Грузией части парка произрастают древесные породы, характерные для колхидской флоры. На территории парка проводился мониторинг наиболее перегруженных визитерами частей, которые подвержены опасности. Оптимальная нагрузка, согласно существующим нормам, приходится на среднегорный пояс лесов. Туристическо-рекреационная нагрузка на один гектар лесной площади составляет два визитера в день. Туристическо-рекреационная нагрузка на один гектар лесной площади в год превышает существующие нормы, однако, деструктивных отрицательных результатов со стороны визитеров не встречаются. Деструктивные моменты наблюдались со стороны местного населения, которое использует перспективные туристические территории в сельскохозяйственных целях. На территориях, наиболее часто посещаемых туристами, наблюдается уменьшение редких древесных пород. Администрации парка необходимо принять соответствующие меры для улучшения и соблюдения основных принципов устойчивого экотуризма.