TOURISTS' PREFERENCES FOR OUTDOOR RECREATION AND NATURE TOURISM IN ROMANIA

PREFERINTELE TURISTILOR PENTRU ACTIVITATI DE RECREERE IN AER LIBER SI TURISM DE NATURA IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *Efficient management of national parks requires a wide vision that refers not only to natural and cultural resources and the administering organizations, but to visitors and the tourism industry as well. This paper focuses on the visitor, as a key element of the tourism industry in national parks. The objective is to reveal tourists preferences to recreate in Romanian national parks by emphasizing their profile and revealing the main visit characteristics. The research area is represented by four Romanian national parks, where 413 tourists were approached to partipate in the study. The results offer information to park managers and other stakeholders in understating the demand for outdoor recreation and nature tourism in national parks, as a valuable input for appropriate management actions.*

Key words: *outdoor recreation, national parks, Romania*

INTRODUCTION

National parks serve a wide range of functions and purposes, among which providing opportunities for recreation (Prato *et al.*, 2005). Moreover nature-based tourism can be perceived as an economic driver, which offers tourists the opportunity to explore pristine areas and enjoy nature (Eagles *et al.*, 2004). In the last years, a growth in the number of tourists was noticed at the national level (Arion *et al.*, 2009). The increase in the number of tourists represents today a challenge for park managers, local communities and tourism industry. Information about tourists and establishing use restrictions play an important role in the conservation of the environment.

Eagles *et al.* (2004) emphasize three interrelated aspects that a park

management involves. These are natural and cultural resources, visitors and the tourism industry and the administering organizations. Equal importance should be given to all three aspects by any planning and management organization (Eagles *et al.*, 2004). Tourism in national parks may bring benefits to local communities situated near the parks such as employment opportunities, improvement of life quality through infrastructure development, and awareness of the value of the natural areas (Beeton, 2006, Borges *et al.*, 2011).

The current paper focuses on the tourism aspect with the aim to reveal information needed for a proper management. The objective is to idetify tourists' preferences to recreate in Romanian national parks by emphasizing their profile and the main visit characteristics. This will help managers in understating the demand for recreation activities. The study is part of a complex research project, which aims is to determine the economic value of national and natural parks from Romania and to develop a strategy of using the values in the management strategies (Dumitras *et al*., 2011).

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Data were collected using an in-person survey implemented on tourists visiting four national parks from Romania: Piatra Craiului, Ceahlau, Calimani and Rodna. The choice of the parks was made based on the estimated number of tourists and presence or absence of a visitor center (Dumitras *et al*., 2011). The data base consists of 413 respondents who were approached during the trips. The questionnaire was designed using the non-market valuation methodology, since the overall scope of the main project is to estimate welfare measures and to identify a manner in which those can be considered as key information in the management plans. Descriptive statistics was conducted on the relevant variables to understand the characteristics that define the tourist and the visit. The statistical measures have also the role to investigate any biases in data collection, an important step for the future stages of the main project before conducting any advanced statistical analyses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1 and Table 2 reports characteristics related to tourists and to the trip taken to the analyzed national parks. The proportion of male respondents is similar to female respondents. Tourists with the age between 18 and 39 years represent 69.25% from the total number of respondents. It seems that the main visitors are young people that like to take trips in natural areas and enjoy being involved in outdoor recreation activities. More than half of respondents have at least a college or university degree. The monthly income per household is more or less evenly distributed among the gourps of income. As regard to the main characteristics of the trip, it may be observed that more than 60% of respondents have visited the parks for the first time. It seems that there is a new demand for outdoor recreation opportunities, result that guesthouse owners and park administrations should consider in developing and or improving tourism services.

Table 1

Visitor characteristics of respondents

Characteristics		% respondents
Gender:	Male	49.88
	Female	50.12
Age:	18-29 years old	43.34
	30-39 years old	25.91
	40-49 years old	18.64
	>50 years old	12.11
Education:	Less than 9 grades	0.00
	High school (12 years)	27.85
	College or University (3-6 years)	44.55
	Graduate school (Master, PhD)	27.60
Average monthly income per household:	< 650 RON	2.42
	650-1000 RON	7.99
	1001-2000 RON	22.03
	2001-3000 RON	25.18
	3001-4000 RON	17.68
	4000 RON	24.70

Note: September 2011 Exchange rate 1 EURO=4.2309 RON; 1 USD=2.9600 RON

The relatively high percentage of overnight stays in guesthouses can be explained by the geographical position of rural communities around the national parks. This should be seen as an advantage to increase the economic level of local communities. Short trips are preferred maybe because national parks are considered as suitable tourism destination for weekend trips. In general, tourists prefer to travel in groups up to 5 persons. The parks are visited by people traveling from different parts of the country and abroad.

Table 2

Visit characteristics of respondents

Characteristics		% respondents
First visit:	Yes	61.74
	No	38.26
Weekend visitors (1-3 days):	Yes	76.27
	No	23.73
Accommodation types:	Guesthouse	62.47
	Camping	13.32
	Mountain refuge	5.81
	No overnight staying	8.23
	Other (monastery, cottage)	10.17
Group size	1-5 people	64.65
	> 5 people	35.35
Distance traveled	< 150 km	23.97
	150-300 km	45.04
	>300 km	30.99
Main recreation activities	Hiking	92.00
	Rest and relaxation	72.40
	Nature observation	57.87
	Photographing	54.96

Note: September 2011 Exchange rate 1 EURO=4.2309 RON; 1 USD=2.9600 RON

Respondents were also asked to indicate the recreation activities performed during the actual trip. More recreation activities were pointed by all. Hiking and rest and relaxation are the most preferred ones. The parks offer a wide range of hiking trails, which have been recently remarked. Tourists also enjoyed to observe the nature and to take pictures. Other

activities such as climbing, horse riding, and fishing were chosen by fewer tourists, the choice depending also on the particularities of the parks.

Transportation costs range between 0 and 200 RON, depending on the distance traveled and mean of transportation. However, a large number of tourists (85.23%) expressed their willing to visit the park again under the hypothetical case that the transportation costs would increase with 20%. About half of them are willing to visit if transportation costs would be with 50% higher and 27.60% in case of double costs. This result indicates that there is demand for recreation in natural areas and people seem to highly appreciate the value of nature. Respondents were also asked to assess a level of importance to a list of reasons that might have affected their choice to visit a national park. The scale was between 1 (not important) and 5 (very important). Lower values were given to the familiarity of the park and distance from home. Tourists like to explore new areas and distance does not always represent a barrier to take a trip. Campsites are preferred to be clean, easy to be accessed and not crowded. The opportunity to see wildlife was most highly scaled, as well cultural and historical features.

Table 3

Level of importance for reasons to visit the park

Reasons for selecting the park	Average scale
It's close to home	2.81
I am already familiar with this park	1.89
The silence at the campsites	3.49
The cleanliness of the campsites	4.09
The easy access to the campsites	3.49
The lack of crowding	3.73
The opportunity to see wildlife	4.27
The cultural and historical features of the area	3.83

Moreover, tourists have expressed to what extent has improved the general state of physical health, mental, spiritual and social well-being during the trip on a scale from 1 (not improved) to 5 (well improved). The average scale ranged between 4.10 and 4.41, thus, respondents do gain benefits after visiting the park.

CONCLUSIONS

The elements that meet tourists preferences identified in this study can be further used by park managers in developing appropriate management actions that do respond to the real demand (Eagles *et al.*, 2004). Knowledge about socio-demographic characteristics that define potential tourists, as well as their preferences regarding outdoor recreation and nature tourism should be taken into consideration by park managers, local communities and other stakeholders when management actions are taken related to tourism.

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