

Socio-cultural benefits of PAN Parks at Bieszczady National Park, Poland

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Natura 2000 refers to an ecological network of protected areas in the European Union (EU) and it serves as the center of the EU's policy on nature conservation (Berg et al. 2004; Font & Brassler 2002). The purpose of this network is to maintain and restore habitats and species at a favorable conservation status in their natural range. Tourism has been noted as one of the largest and fastest growing industries (Gunn & Var 2002; Swarbrooke 1999) and has significant environmental, cultural, social, and economic impacts (Mowforth & Munt 2003; Sirakaya et al. 2001), which could significantly affect *Natura 2000* locations (Font & Brassler 2002). *Natura 2000* will involve 20–25 European countries and it is important to know how tourism will affect these sites. The Protected Area Network (PAN Parks) project, started in 1997 by the World Wide Fund for Nature, was an initiative listed as one of the two most relevant management practices for *Natura 2000* sites (DG Environment 2001) in Europe. PAN Parks was started as a means to encourage synergy between nature conservation and tourism in Europe's protected areas. The aim of PAN Parks is to change tourism from a threat to an opportunity, by building partnerships with nature conservation organizations, travel agencies, the business community and other groups on a local, national and international level (Font & Brassler 2002; PAN Parks 2005). To receive PAN Park's verification (adopted in 2001), a park must meet five principles each with specific criteria (i.e., 1. nature values, 2. habitat management, 3. visitor management, 4. sustainable tourism development strategy, and 5. business partnerships) (Font & Brassler 2002; PAN Parks 2005).

There are nine PAN Park locations including Bulgaria, Georgia, Finland, Italy, Poland, Romania, Russia, and Sweden with new parks targeted for verification in 2008. A sustainable tourism strategy is necessary to combine tourism's potential and socio-economic development with overall nature conservation goals of protected areas (Cottrell & Cutmisu 2006). PAN Park's principles include guidelines to develop and implement a *Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy* (STDS), which is a framework to achieve a balance between the conservation goals of certified PAN Parks and sustainable tourism development in the PAN Parks region. Bieszczady National Park (BNP) in Poland was verified as a PAN Park in 2002 with the approval of an STDS in 2005; BNP provided an opportunity to conduct a baseline study to field test the PAN Parks monitoring protocol.

Purpose

This pilot study examines the socio-cultural benefits of PAN Park status for communities and tourism development surrounding BNP in Poland. The goal was to test a monitor of the socio-cultural benefits of PAN Park status for communities and tourism development at BNP. The central question was Does PAN Parks benefit socio-cultural development in PAN Park locations? A local PAN Park advisory group developed a sustainable tourism development strategy to link the park to tourism development in the region. The prism of sustainability (Figure 1), a holistic framework of sustainable development, was used as the theoretical lens to examine the economic, socio-cultural, environmental and institutional aspects of tourism development (Eden et al. 2000; Faulkner & Tidswell 1997; Spangenberg & Valentin 1999).

Research Questions

To address the central question of the study, the following secondary research questions were posed to structure the investigation.

1. What is the profile of tourism stakeholders in the BNP region?
2. To what extent are tourism stakeholders familiar with the PAN Parks concept?
3. What are the benefits of PAN Park status?
4. Who benefits most from PAN Park status?
5. To what extent are stakeholders satisfied with the institutional, economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects of tourism to the PAN Parks region?
6. To what extent is local participation in sustainable tourism development evident?
7. Is there a relationship between PAN Parks status of BNP and stakeholder satisfaction with tourism development?

Prism of Sustainability

Figure 1 (adapted from Spangenberg & Valentin 1999) shows those dimensions important to a holistic approach to sustainable development (SD). SD is difficult to obtain without consideration of some aspects of the economic, social, environmental, and institutional dimensions of sustainability (Cottrell & Cutumisu 2006; Eden et al. 2001; Spangenberg et al. 2002). The ecological dimension emphasizes the need to reduce pressure on the physical environment (Mowforth & Munt 2003; Spangenberg et al. 2002; Swarbrooke 1999; Valentin & Spangenberg 2000). The economic dimension considers human needs for material welfare (e.g., employment) in a framework that is competitive and stable (Roberts 2002; Sirakaya et al. 2001). An economic system is environmentally sustainable only as long as the amount of resources utilized to generate welfare is restricted to a size and quality that does not deplete its sources for future use. The social dimension refers to individuals' skills, dedication, experiences and resulting behavior. Institutions (such as the PAN Parks network) represent organizations within a system of rules governing interaction among members (Choi & Sirakaya 2005; Mitchell & Reid 2001). The institutional dimension calls for strength-

ening people's participation in political governance (in this case the institution is PAN Parks with STDS as the mechanism) (Gunn & Var 2002; Speck 2002; Waldon & Williams 2002). As acceptance of and identification with political decisions become broader, public participation may be strengthened. Valentin and Spangenberg (2000) suggest that the four dimensions can be linked to indicators for local communities to monitor and evaluate sustainable development.

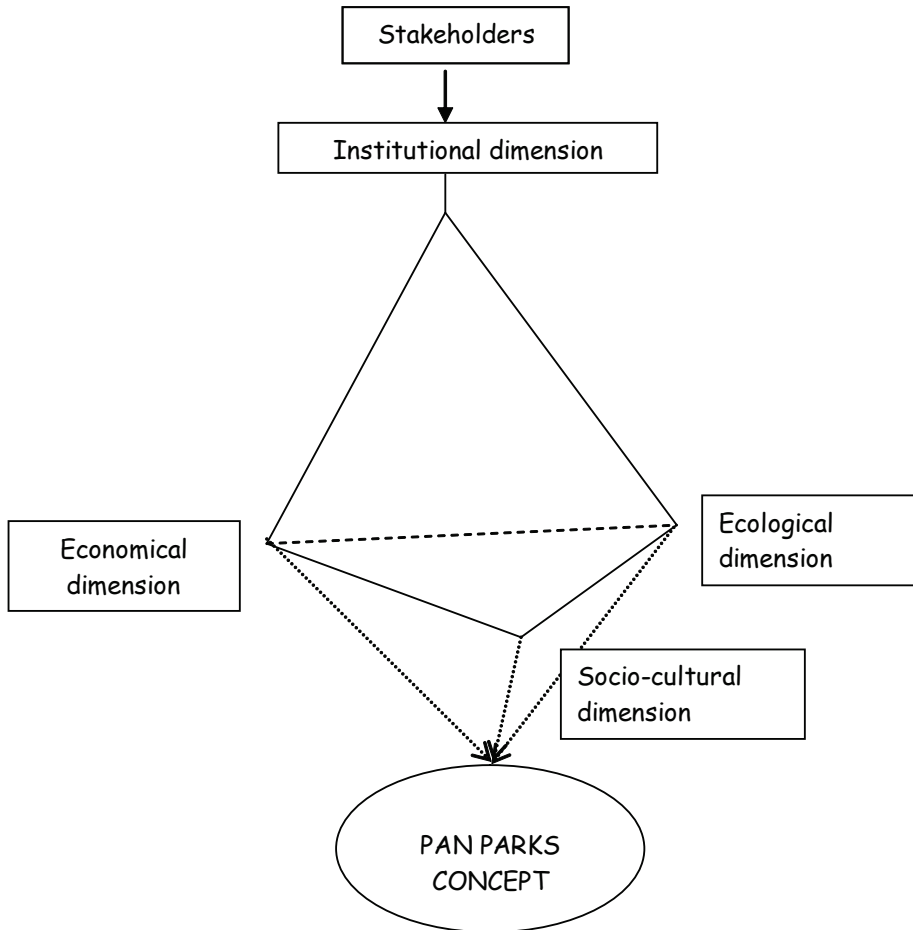


Figure 1. Prism of Sustainability (adapted from Eden et al., 2000; Spangenberg & Valentin, 1999)

Methods

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in the pilot-study conducted over a 5-day period in November, 2005. Eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted among stakeholders representing BNP staff, local authorities, PAN Park business partners, tourism businesses, and NGOs to represent the PAN Parks region. Interviews explored tourism development, sustainability of tourism in the context of

socio-cultural, economic, environmental and institutional capacity building and the role of PAN Parks on beliefs about sustainable tourism development. Interviews were conducted in Polish by an interpreter with translations made directly onsite. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and organized per interview question. Open coding was used to establish themes across the interviews to corroborate survey findings.

A five-page self-administered questionnaire with both English and Polish versions was administered among stakeholders involved in tourism to solicit responses about familiarity with PAN Parks, PAN Parks status of BNP, participation in tourism planning, tourism to BNP, satisfaction with tourism development, and socio-demographics. Study participants were selected by the local PAN Parks coordinator via telephone a few days prior to the interview period to make an appointment. Criteria for selection were based on sector representation (e.g., park employee, accommodation, tour operator, local government) and availability. As a pilot study, limitations were lack of representation of actors besides tourism or park related interests, 5-day period for fieldwork, and outsider perspective (North American) on the phenomenon under study.

Following a descriptive profile of stakeholders, percentage of beliefs in benefits of PAN Park status (Table 1), mean satisfaction scores for the economic, institutional, social, and environmental aspects of sustainable tourism and PAN Park status (Table 2), and percentage participation in tourism planning were determined (Table 3). Non parametric tests included Kruskal Wallis tests for differences between perceived benefit of PAN Park status on beliefs in the value of PAN Park status (Table 1) and Mann Whitney U tests to examine the relationship between familiarity with PAN Parks and the various aspects of sustainable tourism (Table 2).

Study Setting

Bieszczady National Park (BNP) is situated in the southeast of Poland on the border with Slovakia and the Ukraine. BNP started the process of certification in 2000 resulting in PAN Park certification in September 2002. The draft STDS adopted in April 2005 is well supported by the stakeholders and presents a good framework for future cooperation and activities in the PAN Parks region including the municipalities of Cisna and Lutowiska.

The two municipalities that form the PAN Parks Region, Cisna and Lutowiska, view nature based sustainable tourism as their main development opportunity for the future (Berg et al. 2004). The visitor infrastructure is managed by the Park and partner organizations and enables quality experience without serious adverse impact on the conservation goals or nature itself. The Park operates two visitor centers outside the Park and 21 information points at the entrance of hiking trails inside the Park. Tourist accommodation is provided in some small hotels, mountain huts and a growing number of family bed and breakfasts. The number of service providers such as tourist agencies, mountain, wildlife and horseback guides has increased. The park and region have sufficient tourism potential and carrying capacity for sustainable tourism, especially with the development of visitor infrastructure in the Landscape Parks surrounding the National Park.

Through the work of the Local Pan Parks Group (LPPG), and implementation of the STDS, the Park has begun to build partnerships for sustainable development of the region with the municipalities, forest authorities, NGO and local business people active in tourism. This research focused primarily on those individuals representing the STDS process.

Results

Tourism Stakeholder Profile

The sample (n=36, 72% response rate) represents an active group with 75% working in tourism. Mostly residents, 40% were business owners and 26% NGOs. Only 14% were PAN Park partners; however, they only recently became partners with new partners expected in the near future. Relatively young and well educated, this group forms a strong network for sustainable tourism development. STDS has brought many of these stakeholders together providing incentive for further collaboration towards sustainable tourism development. For research question 2, a majority (81%) was familiar with the PAN Park concept and 89% knew BNP was a certified PAN Park.

Benefits of Pan Parks

For research questions 3 and 4 concerning *what and who benefits from PAN Parks*, several survey questions inquired about PP status effect on the value of the tourist experience, quality of life in the area, contribution to nature conservation, and environmental values. Forty-eight percent of the stakeholders agree that BNP status as PP increases the value of the tourist experience while 56% believe it will attract more tourists to the area. 50% felt that it increases the quality of life in the area while 29% disagreed. A majority (85%) agree PP status contributes to nature conservation. Meanwhile, 68% do not feel that tourism is a threat to nature conservation.

When asked if they benefited from PAN Parks, a majority said no (67%; n = 24) while 22% said indirectly and 11% directly. To assess the effect of perceived benefit of PP on stakeholders, an additional test was run to examine differences between those with no benefit, indirect benefit and direct benefit from PP on average scores for each of the value orientation statements about park PP status (see Table 1). Using a nonparametric test (Kruskal Wallis) differences were found on the four statements as shown in Table 1. This means *Perceived benefit of PP* has some effect on how stakeholders responded to those questions. Those who received indirect and direct benefits agreed (*Average* = 4 to 4.3) with the statement that park PP status increases the value of the tourist experience while those who said 'no' were neutral (*Average* = 3.1). Those with direct benefit felt that park PP status attracts more visitors (statement h). Those with indirect PP benefit felt strongly that PP status increases life quality while those with no benefit felt it has more or less no effect (statement b). Those with indirect benefit strongly agree (*Average* = 5) that park PP status contributes to nature conservation. Those with direct benefits had the lowest score of 3.8 which still represents slight agreement with the statement.

Table 1. *Kruskal Wallis test for difference between perceived benefit of PP on value orientation about park PP status*

Value orientation about park PP status ¹	Benefit from PP	N	Average
a. BNP status as a PP increases value of the tourist experience*	No	21	3.1
	Yes, Indirectly	7	4.3
	Yes, directly	3	4.0
	Total	31	3.5
h. PAN park status of BNP attracts more tourists*	No	20	3.6
	Yes, Indirectly	8	3.6
	Yes, directly	4	4.8
	Total	32	3.7
b. BNP status as PP increases life quality for local population*	No	23	2.9
	Yes, Indirectly	7	4.3
	Yes, directly	4	3.3
	Total	34	3.2
c. PP status of BNP contributes to nature conservation*	No	23	4.1
	Yes, Indirectly	6	5.0
	Yes, directly	4	3.8
	Total	33	4.2

¹Statement measured on 5 point agreement scale 1-strongly disagree; 2-disagree; 3-neutral; 4-agree; 5-strongly agree

*Significant at .05 level

PAN Park status has some benefit (direct or indirect) to 33% of the sample on stakeholder beliefs concerning the more inherent values of PAN Park status on quality of life and nature conservation. Further, PAN Park status is believed to enhance the quality of the tourist experience among those people who receive direct and indirect benefit from park PAN Park status. *Does PAN Parks benefit local communities – the answer is to a slight degree for some people?* Overall socio-economic benefits of PAN Parks are still too early to assess and further visibility and extension of the sustainable tourism network is necessary.

Performance

To address research question 5, respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements reflecting the four dimensions of sustainability on a 1 to 5 agreement scale (Table 2). Items with a score of 4 or higher perform well. A 3.5 to 3.9 is satisfactory – while anything less than a 3.5 is less satisfactory to neutral or less. For the *economic dimension*, scores ranged from 4.04 to a low of 2.64. Tourism is perceived to create new markets, bring new income, while diversifying the local economy, and creating new jobs. Tourism is obviously thought to contribute economically to the community. There was only slight satisfaction with product availability and improvements to local infrastructure. Tourism does not seem to increase the price of local products.

Respondents are only slightly satisfied with the *institutional aspects* of tourism with scores ranging from 3.81 to 2.61 and mostly below the 3.5 mark. The communication and decision making opportunities with local communities is not satisfactory.

Responses for the *social-cultural aspects* were more positive overall. Many felt that quality of life has improved because of tourism with a decrease in criminal activity. Local attitudes seem to improve because of tourism and more people visit the area because of BNP. Tourism seems to have led to an improved environment while local traditions have become more important. Overall tourism development is wanted and believed to be helpful to improve the quality of livelihoods for the region. The only slightly negative result had to do with economic gains for women. The item was noted as an odd question for the Polish context where gender equality is not an issue.

For the *environmental dimension*, scores ranged from 4.44 to 3.06. The park protects environmental values and nature and such policies are generally respected among the stakeholders. Awareness and local attitudes about nature protection have improved. Those questions with negative wording received slightly lower scores with a greater degree of variation with standard deviations greater than 1. There is a general concern that increased visitor numbers will lead to more negative impacts on the environment and natural resources. Tourism according to many stakeholders should be channeled more into the buffer zone areas. Environmental protection aspects received the highest scores followed by the social-cultural aspects. Economic aspects were marginal with signs of improvement. Overall, respondents are not happy with the institutional aspects of sustainability. This finding was also supported by results of the semi-structured interviews.

Table 2. Average performance (satisfaction) scores for aspects of sustainable tourism

Dimensions of Sustainability		
	Mean	STD
Economic		
j. Tourism to BNP is a strong economic contributor to community	4.03	1.08
i. Tourism to BNP creates new markets for our local products	4.00	0.93
b. Tourism to BNP diversifies the local economy	3.94	0.86
a. Tourism to BNP brings new income to local communities	3.94	3.94
c. Tourism to BNP creates job opportunities for local people.	3.89	1.14
h. Tourism businesses should hire at least 50% of their employees from within community	3.77	1.11
g. BNP contributes to increased value of local property.	3.53	1.23
e. Products and services have become better available in general from tourism to BNP	3.42	0.97
f. Thanks to BNP the region gained importance to the government resulting in improvements to infrastructure (e.g. roads)	3.42	1.30
d. Prices of local products (food, medicine) and services (services) increased from tourism to BNP.	2.64	1.07
Institutional		
g. We need to take a long-term view when planning for tourism to BNP	3.81	1.01
h. Tour Guides to BNP are well trained	3.78	1.12

a. Communities' residents have an opportunity to be involved in tourism decision making	3.58	1.32
j. BNP must monitor visitor satisfaction	3.58	1.16
e. Participation in the development of tourism development plans is encouraged by local authorities due to BNP.	3.28	1.06
c. Entrepreneurship in tourism to BNP is encouraged by local government	3.08	1.34
k. Tourism facilities are developed in cooperation with local businesses in the BNP region	3.03	1.03
f. I feel I can access the decision-making process to influence tourism development in the BNP area.	2.75	1.34
b. There is good communication among parties involved in policy/ decision making process of tourism to BNP	2.61	1.10
Social		
g. My quality of life improved (deteriorated) because of tourism to BNP*	4.44	1.08
b. More people visit here because of BNP.	4.42	0.69
d. Tourism to BNP decreases (increased) criminal activity in the region around the park *	4.33	1.01
j. Visitors to BNP are encouraged to learn about local cultures	4.08	1.02
e. Local traditions become more (less) important because of tourism to BNP*	4.03	1.16
c. Tourism to BNP positively (negatively) influences norms and values in the area *	3.92	1.18
h. The quality of the environment in my community increases (deteriorated) because of tourism*	3.69	1.35
a. There are more educational opportunities for locals due to tourism to BNP	3.50	1.11
f. Women gain more economic freedom due to tourism to BNP.	3.14	1.17
Environmental		
h. The diversity of nature at BNP must be valued and protected	4.44	0.69
j. Good examples of environmental protection are shown at BNP	4.42	0.69
f. BNP area tourism must be developed in harmony with the natural and cultural environment	4.39	0.96
e. As a result of BNP, people's awareness of environmental protection has improved.	4.22	0.83
b. BNP strengthens efforts for environmental conservation	3.72	1.00
g. Tourism activity to BNP is channeled into areas with suitable facilities	3.58	1.13
a. Tourism to BNP does not cause pollution of environment (water, soil and air).*	3.39	1.25
d. Increasing exhaustion of water and energy resources was not caused by tourist activities to BNP *	3.22	1.17
c. The number of visitors to BNP results in positive (negative) impacts on plants and animals *	3.06	0.95

*Items were recoded to a positive direction as reflected by word added in bold.

Performance (satisfaction) measured 1=strongly disagree; 2 disagree; 3=neutral, 4=agree; 5=strongly agree

Participation in tourism planning

For research question 6, several questions explored stakeholder knowledge about planning, their wish to become involved and complaints to authorities. From Table 3, 53% (n = 19) know of opportunities for participation in planning while 58% would like to become involved. 36% have complained about tourism development to local authorities while 25% would like to.

Table 3. Participation in tourism planning

Knowledge of opportunities to participate in TP planning	n	%
No	19	53
Yes	17	47
Wish to become involved in TP Planning		
No	4	11
Perhaps/maybe	11	31
Yes	21	58
Knowledge of where to complain		
No	11	31
Yes	25	69
Ever complained about tourism to authorities		
No, not at all	14	39
No, but I would like to	9	25
Yes	13	36

Further analysis shows that 58% of the stakeholders believe they have an opportunity to be involved in tourism decision making, yet only 31% felt they could actually access this process (data results not shown). Only 19% felt that communication for policy decision-making was good and 39% believe that local authorities encourage planning participation and entrepreneurship. Thirty-six percent believe that tourism facilities are developed in cooperation with local businesses in the BNP region. Local participation in tourism planning, although perceived possible, is limited overall. This sample represents stakeholders very much involved in tourism and tourism planning; yet survey indicators show limited perceived opportunity for participation in planning and decision-making for tourism development. *Does PAN Parks influence stakeholder beliefs about participation and communication in the tourism planning process?* A hypothesis test (*Mann-Whitney U nonparametric test - results not shown*) was conducted to see if those people familiar with PAN Parks were different than those people not familiar. Although results were not significantly different - interestingly, those people familiar with the PAN Park concept tended to rate their satisfaction with the items lower than those people not familiar. More specifically, knowledge about PAN Parks tends to enlighten the need for local access to and participation in tourism planning. With this added awareness comes a more critical perspective. A larger sample representative of tourism stakeholders not yet familiar with PP would help to assess this further.

Overall Satisfaction with Tourism Development

For research question 7 concerning PAN Park status and stakeholder satisfaction with tourism development respondents were asked “*how would you rate the quality of tourism development in the BNP region?*” The average response on a 10-point scale was 5.92; scores ranged from a low of 2 to 9 high; 50% were not satisfied with scores of 5 or less. Approximately 31% were slightly satisfied with scores between 6 and 7. Only 19% were satisfied with scores between 8 and 9. To determine the link between knowledge about PAN Parks and opinions about the quality of tourism development, those few people who did not know about the PAN Parks concept had low opinions about tourism development.

Discussion & Conclusions

Results of both methods were compiled to assess the socio-cultural benefits of PAN Parks. A partnership for sustainable development among stakeholders was evident supporting an overall vision of sustainable tourism development. Although cause effect (PAN Park concept) cannot be claimed, perhaps those stakeholders familiar with the ideals supported by PAN Parks have a better understanding of what sustainable tourism involves; consequently they may tend to value the importance of the various aspects of sustainability more than those people not informed about PAN Parks. PAN Parks primary benefit tends to be environmental sustainability, yet there is evidence that it contributes to aspects of socio-cultural sustainability as well. Institutional benefits regard the development of a sustainable tourism network via linking park policy and activities to that of local businesses and communities. Stakeholders value the PAN Park concept and this will improve and spread to other stakeholders in the future.

From the qualitative interviews, PAN Park certification contributed most to environmental protection and an improved community attitude about nature conservation. Socio-cultural aspects for the community were noted as public outreach, environmental education, promotion of the arts, and sustainable development of the region. Open communication between the park and local communities received mixed reports indicating a need for further awareness building among local residents. From the *quantitative survey*, stakeholders familiar with PAN Parks gave higher satisfaction scores for the cultural, economic and environmental aspects of sustainability than did those who did not know about it.

PAN Parks with its sustainable tourism development strategy process is viewed as a driving force for sustainable development combining protected area concern for environmental protection with active involvement of tourism businesses. The PAN Parks Foundation continues to examine the benefits of PAN Park certification with studies at park locations in Bulgaria (Mateev 2007) and Romania in 2006 (van Hal, 2007) and Finland in 2007. Similar results found at Central Bulkan National Park in Bulgaria and Retezat National Park in Romania imply that PAN Park status enhances resident involvement in tourism development, improved park management and belief

in the value of nature conservation due to international recognition (Mateev 2007; van Hal 2007).

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