

# The Role of National Parks in Promoting Sustainable and Responsible Tourism

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## Abstract

*One of the contemporary challenges in the tourism industry is development in line with the idea of sustainable development. In order to implement these ideas and principles, broadly based social education is needed. National parks are institutions of great socio-educational impact and that is why they could be linked to the process of education for sustainable and responsible tourism. This article presents the results of a survey conducted in Polish national parks on their commitment to the process of social education promoting sustainable and responsible tourism, and indicates the still unused potential of national park activities which can contribute to raising public awareness in this regard.*

**Keywords:** sustainable and responsible tourism, national park, education

## Introduction

Tourism as a social phenomenon, understood as a temporary change of location, in various forms and for various purposes, has been developing and gathering momentum since ancient times. However, it was not until the 20th century, owing to the development of means of transport, that tourism became a dynamically growing branch of the economy. It also attained mass popularity. Together with an increase in the general number of tourists and their concentration in particularly attractive locations, both environmentally and culturally speaking, an increasingly negative influence of tourism on the broadly-defined environment started to be observed. In the 1970s voices of criticism started to be raised concerning actions aimed at maximization of tourism income, which in effect lead to the degradation of natural and historical-and-cultural substance, as well as of the social environment in tourist destinations. As the result of a discussion over tourism's future, a new idea of tourism development was born, which is based on the minimization of intervention into the natural-cultural environment and on the optimization of contacts with local communities (Zaręba 2010). This new approach to tourism is a reflection of the contemporary global tendency towards the "ecologization" of social awareness, which stems from a concern about disappearing natural and cultural resources. It is also a consequence of the exhaustion of mass tourism and a need to "get close to nature" and get away from crowded resorts (Szczęsna 2013; Zaręba 2010).

## 1 Theoretical principles of sustainable and responsible tourism

The currently promoted new style of tourism is called "sustainable tourism" as it refers to the idea of sustainable development. This concept was born in the 1990s. Quite soon it was reflected in research and gradually in practice as well in the tourism industry (Dumbraveanu 2007). Tourism Concern 1992's *Beyond Green Horizon* defines sustainable tourism as "tourism and associated infrastructures that, both now and in the future: operate within natural capacities for the regeneration and future productivity of natural resources; recognize the contribution that people and communities, customs and lifestyles, make to the tourism experience; accept that these people must have an equitable share in the economic benefits of tourism; are guided by the wishes of local

people and communities in the host areas” (Eber 1992). Therefore, the basis of sustainable tourism is keeping a balance between tourist needs, the natural environment, and local communities (Nieżgoda 2008).

The first document that presented guidelines for the implementation of sustainable tourism, addressed to all participants of tourism (state and local governments, tourist organizations and companies and tourists themselves) contains Agenda 21 for the Travel and Tourism Industry, adopted by 182 governments at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), the Earth Summit, on 14 June 1992.

Simultaneously, scientific terminology makes use of the term “responsible tourism.” The principles of responsible tourism were formed during the conference organized in 2002 by the Responsible Tourism Partnership and Western Cape Tourism, the participants of which were representatives of different groups of interests from the tourism branch. The principles were listed in the form of the so-called Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism.<sup>1</sup> Along its lines, tourism should be understood as aiming at providing sustainable development in social, cultural, economic, and environmental areas, which entails a minimization of negative influences and maximization of the positive ones, such as: increase of the employment rate and living standards of local communities, sustainability of historical-and-cultural heritage as well as biodiversity in the tourist areas.

Even though, in principle, sustainable tourism as well as responsible tourism have the same main goal—i.e., sustainable development, there is a functional difference between the two. The term “sustainable tourism” refers to global principles of the private sector, whereas the term “responsible tourism” refers to attitudes and specific behaviours of all the parties involved in the process of organization of and participation in tourism. It can be stated therefore that “responsible tourism” concerns bringing “sustainable tourism” into life. Putting theory into practice is the greatest challenge for the tourist industry. The ideas and principles of sustainable tourism are understood and accepted in the majority of groups involved in tourism, yet it is far more difficult to implement the theoretical ideas, both by the organizers and participants of tourism. Against such a background an urgent need for social education promoting sustainable and responsible tourism is created. In Poland, where social awareness of sustainable tourism is very low, the institutions which may play a significant role in promoting the idea of sustainable tourism are national parks.

## 2 Tourism in national parks and its limitations

The main goal of national parks in Poland, regulated by the Nature Protection Law, is not only to protect the natural environment but also to make the park resources available to the public.<sup>2</sup> Making parks public is achieved mostly by allowing tourism to develop in their area. The idea of making national parks accessible for tourists was formulated and approved at an international forum in 1969 in New Delhi, during the 10th General Assembly of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (Szczęsny 1982).

Owing to the realization of the main protective function of national parks, tourism organized in their area should meet the requirements of sustainable tourism with the highest standards. This postulate is fulfilled mostly in terms of parks’ natural environment protection, which is achieved by regulation of tourism intensity and acceptance of only selected forms of tourism in the area of a particular national park. The following examples of actions taken by national parks in Poland concerning the sustainability of tourism in their area are derived from the literature.

Regulation of tourism intensity is achieved by means of its monitoring and planned limitation of the numbers of tourists when such a need arises, as well as by introducing charges, which to some extent may limit the numbers of tourists. Regulation of tourism intensity is also achieved by channeling tourist activity into tourist trails and educational tracks so that they can promote

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1. The Cape Town Declaration of 2002 was initiated at the conference organized in 2002 by the Responsible Tourism Partnership and Western Cape Tourism, as an event preceding the World Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. The declaration formulates the aims and principles of responsible activity in tourism in the environmental, economic, and social areas, see: <https://www.capetown.gov.za/>.

2. See: Ustawa z dnia 16 kwietnia 2004 r. o ochronie przyrody, DzU z 2004 r. nr 92 poz. 880.

the natural quality of a park and realize the protective goals. What is more, tourists are expected to abide by the parks' rules and regulations, which is supposed to provide an environmentally-safe exploration of the parks.

Only selected forms of tourism—i.e., those that are least harmful to nature (mostly: walking, kayaking, riding a bike or a horse)<sup>3</sup> are allowed in the area of national parks. In order to promote these and not other forms of tourism, parks offer tracks, thematic trails, and infrastructure necessary to cultivate a given form of tourism (e.g., rest stops for bikers). Such activities also qualify as sustainable tourism.

Even though various protective actions are undertaken, tourism in national parks often leads to a conflict between environmental protection and tourists' needs. Among the most common problems stemming from tourism in national parks is an excessive number of tourists, especially in attractive locations, which happens in a recurring manner and causes degradation of the natural environment. Another problem is rubbish and destruction of tourist infrastructure (Partyka 2010). In Poland, one of the busiest parks is the Tatra National Park. The small area of high mountains in Poland coupled with the tremendous natural attractiveness of the region favors a concentration of tourists both in summer and in winter. The Tatra National Park was one of the first to take action to reduce tourist traffic. For this purpose, they introduced tourist traffic monitoring and conducted surveys among tourists in order to specify their interests and needs, and provide better management of tourist activity in the area of the park (Blazejczyk 2002).

On the other hand, the existence of a national park in a given area entails some limitations, both in terms of tourism as well as business, which often leads to protests being voiced by visitors and local communities. When it comes to tourists, protests concern limitations in using the whole park and its resources (e.g., no gathering of fruit and mushrooms, no fishing, no swimming, or sailing in rivers and lakes), but also limitations in acceptable forms of tourism (e.g., no sports or no using motorized means of transport), or the need to pay entrance fees. In the case of park inhabitants, protests concern limitations to the ways of making money and making use of the park for their own purposes (Królikowska 2007). Results of surveys conducted among local governments in communities located within the protected areas in Poland show that local communities more often recognize constraints arising from the nature conservation priorities, considering them as a barrier to local development. Social and economic benefits that reach the inhabitants in connection with the establishment of the protected area are perceived to a much lesser extent, which often leads to conflicts between the local community and the authorities of national parks (Zawilińska and Mika 2013). Public outcry against the imposed limitations is sometimes voiced by breaking the rules, protests, or legal disputes with the park authorities.

Realization of the principles behind sustainable tourism requires meeting the needs of all the parties, and in this case bringing together environmental protection with the tourists' needs and socio-economic development of the local community. This is a great challenge for national parks and shows a need to take remedial measures on many levels (Huijbens 2011).

The first level of such actions concerns improvement to be made in protection of valuable environmental resources. It should aim at reducing the load of the excessively exploited sections of a given park, yet not by means of making the rules stricter for tourists but rather by extending and diversifying the attractions offered. Exemplary actions (taken in some of the national parks in Poland—e.g., Kampinoski NP or Świętokrzyski NP and around the world) are:

- limiting tourist access to environmentally valuable parts of the park in order to channel the tourist activity into the buffer protection zone and its surrounding areas, also by means of increasing the attractiveness and enriching the tourist attractions for these areas<sup>4</sup>

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3. These forms of tourism are known as environmentally-safe, hence they qualify as sustainable tourism. However, there are many examples where an excessive number of tourists is the cause of degradation of the natural environment.

4. For example “Plan zagospodarowania przestrzennego Świętokrzyskiego Parku Narodowego wraz z otuliną” [Plan of spatial development of Świętokrzyski National Park and its buffer zone] (Braun 1980) assumes localization of tourist objects and devices, as well as various sports events and educational classes not only in the park and its buffer protection zone but also in the whole Kielce region. This helps to keep out of the park those tourists who are not determined to rely on activities within the park.

- diversification of the activities offered to tourists in the park, both in terms of attractions (e.g., creation of new trails and thematic tracks addressed to different groups of tourists, creation of viewing platforms and pulpits, etc.) as well as acceptable forms of tourism. The range should acknowledge not only the natural quality of the park but also the cultural, historical, and religious aspects of the area. This will enable tourists to move around the park
- preparation of a rich and diverse educational programs (supervised by the park authorities) for a wide group of tourists
- diversification of entrance fees—from free entrance, free trails and tourist infrastructure in the outskirts of the park to the highest fees for visiting the most valuable areas of the park; fees should also be varied depending on the season
- adjustment of the already existing tourist trails, and locating them in such a way so that they could pass around ecosystems vulnerable to degradation (Chmielewski 2002; Kapuściński 2002).

All the preventive and regulatory measures in tourism in national parks will have a limited effect unless their validity and necessity is understood and accepted by the park users, i.e. tourists and inhabitants and business people operating within the park area.

### 3 Education for sustainable and responsible tourism in the Polish national parks

An equally important area of activity of national parks, besides resource protection and making them public, is education, in its broadly defined sense. In the context of the above-mentioned considerations, it appears that national parks should be one of the basic institutions which have a chance to promote sustainable tourism (for the sake of the park itself, and for tourism in general). As mentioned in the introduction, sustainable tourism seems to be the only appropriate way for tourism to develop. However, to put the ideas of sustainable tourism into practice, society needs to be made aware of them and society must be prepared for the implementation of tourism in accordance with this concept. As shown by the study conducted by Szymańska in 2009/2010 among Polish tourists visiting national parks, most of them know little or nothing about sustainable tourism, and therefore they do not implement its principles in practice (Szymańska 2013).

For the above reasons, there is a high demand for social education on the needs of sustainable tourism. Confirmation can be found in a number of scientific publications (Cater and Goodall 1992; Dobrowolski 2008; Ham, Sutherland, and Meganck 1993; Johnson 1998). However, there is no consensus concerning who, in practice, and in what way, should educate society about sustainable tourism (Gough and Scott 1999).

In Poland, to which this study is applied, in practice there is no institution that would deal with such an activity on a regular basis. Some tourist offices try to promote sustainable and responsible tourism, yet firstly, it is a rare practice, and secondly, the scope of such an activity is limited only to the customers of a given tourist office. The internet media market offers portals which publish and promote ideas of sustainable and responsible tourism. However, their offer reaches only those interested in the topic (i.e., probably “the aware tourists”). Not much is happening on the business level of the tourist industry. Poland is at the very lowest European level when it comes to implementation of the principles of sustainable development by tourist companies. The project “Social Responsibility of Businesses for Tour Operators and Tourist Offices,” supervised by Travellife (an international organization dealing with certification of tourist companies promoting sustainable development) has been implemented for only a few months. When it comes to common social educational campaigns promoting sustainable and responsible tourism, there are no institutions and activities that would promote it. School education, in the case of children and adolescents, covers the topic of sustainable development, yet it is realized in a general manner with no particular reference to tourism. There are also no public media campaigns in this area, which ought to be initiated and financed by the state represented by, e.g. the Ministry of Sport and Tourism, or the Ministry of the Environment, even though tourism is becoming more and more popular and problems thereof are more and more visible to the public eye. Against such a background the role of national parks in education for sustainable and responsible tourism can be seen.

All the national parks in Poland perform some educational activities in various forms. However, an analysis of their educational offer leads to a conclusion that it is predominantly environmental education promoting the quality of a given national park, and ecological education directed mostly towards environmental protection in the park, but also understood in a broader sense.

The authors of this article wanted to obtain information on whether national parks, apart from their basic educational campaigns, take some action aimed at promoting the ideas and principles of sustainable and responsible tourism. For the purpose of this article, the method of a diagnostic poll in the form of a questionnaire was used.

22 out of 23 national parks answered the questionnaire, Karkonoski National Park being the only one which did not respond. Only Narwiański National Park stated that it does not provide any educational campaigns as far as sustainable and responsible tourism is concerned. The remaining 21 national parks offer such campaigns to a varied extent. Most often the addressees of the educational campaigns are tourists as well as children and school students, and park inhabitants, which seems to be natural owing to the fact that these are the basic users of the park. Only half of the parks use educational campaigns to reach tourist businesses in the local environment, including owners of private accommodation. Some national parks, mostly located in the mountains, direct their educational campaigns to tour guides, and course participants and instructors of (e.g., mountaineering or alpinism). Only a few parks direct information campaigns concerning sustainable and responsible tourism to teachers, educators, scientists, workers of tourist information offices, non-government organizations, or students of tourist schools. Biebrzański National Park presents its offer also to prison inmates. The only park that tries to reach self-government authorities with its educational offer is Roztoczański National Park.

Education promoting sustainable and responsible tourism takes various forms. The most often used forms of information transmission are lectures and workshops addressed to various groups as well as materials printed in the form of brochures, folders, guide books, leaflets, banners, and information boards. Tatra National Park stated that it offers school materials on responsible tourism, safety for tourists and nature. Educational campaigns which are used less frequently are occasional actions and thematic events, exhibitions, conferences. 13 out of 21 national parks stated that the information about sustainable and responsible tourism is available on their websites or Facebook profile, whereas 10 out of 21 put the information in regular information points.

Another survey question concerned topics used in educational campaigns promoting sustainable and responsible tourism. Most frequently (17 out of 21 cases), the parks present information to tourists, providing them with the details of safe tourism. This information concerns mostly tourism in a specific national park, not in a global sense.

Thirteen parks make tourists acquainted with the principles of sustainable and responsible tourism. A similar number of parks, within their educational campaigns, presents the characteristics of tourism forms which meet the criteria of sustainable and responsible tourism, and encourage people to choose these forms by providing adequate infrastructure in the park area. The terms “sustainable tourism” and “responsible tourism” are not presented and explained to tourists. Only 7 out of 22 parks enclose such information in their educational materials.

An important element of educational campaigns aimed at promoting sustainable and responsible tourism is presenting its principles in the group of business entities dealing with tourism. The questionnaire shows that 12 out of 21 parks give any information to the business entities concerning the environmentally-friendly organization of tourism in the park area. What is more, 9 parks provide tourist companies with some good examples of tourism practices from other regions and countries.

## Conclusions

The questionnaire shows that the majority of the national parks in Poland (21 out of 23) take some educational steps promoting sustainable and responsible tourism. The scope of such steps is varied—from intensive in some parks to greatly limited in others. A scrupulous analysis of the questionnaire results shows that most frequently education promoting sustainable tourism concerns

a given park and the principles of responsible use of its resources by the main users (tourists and business entities) yet it is not brought to life. It could be concluded that educational campaigns led by the national parks mostly deal with environmental resources and responsible tourism in these parks. However, there are no educational campaigns, understood as a set of general guidelines which should be followed regardless of the park localization, organized to promote sustainable and responsible tourism.

Nowadays, in times of intense tourism development and environmental-social problems which are the consequence of this development, the implementation of the principles of sustainable and responsible tourism is the only safe way for the tourist industry to develop. The slogans and ideas behind sustainable and responsible tourism, presented at tourist symposia and conferences, remain dead when not popularized and rooted in the public awareness. Against such a background an urgent need could be observed for broadly understood social education for promoting sustainable and responsible tourism. Yet there are no actions taken in this area, e.g. no media campaigns organized by national institutions or the tourism industry itself. Only individual tourist offices organize their events according to the idea of sustainable and responsible tourism. Consciously planned educational campaigns in this area, carried out by tourism companies, are exceptions.

In this context, national parks seem to be entities which could, to a great extent, participate in social education promoting sustainable tourism. It is justified for many reasons. A national park, as a form of nature protection, may be publicly available only in the sustainable variant, hence as an institution it is predisposed to promote the principles and culture of sustainable and responsible tourism. What is more, the task of national parks is also to make their resources available for, among others, the needs of tourism, and to educate. Therefore, education promoting sustainable and responsible tourism fits the scope of the park's activity. What is important is that national parks are in fact the only few institutions with a general educational influence, concerning adults as well, as each year they are visited by thousands and sometimes millions of tourists of different ages. It could be expected that educational campaigns organized by national parks regarding sustainable and responsible tourism may reach a wide range of people.

In order to realize the above-mentioned principles, the already existing educational offer needs to be extended with some elements of sustainable and responsible tourism in a broad sense, not only pertaining to a particular national park. The information could be disseminated in various forms: it could be presented by tourist guides, it could be written on the information boards in the park, in the form of leaflets or brochures, educational films, lessons, workshops for children and adolescents, events or competitions. The range of the target audience of educational campaigns should be extended. Apart from children and adolescents, who are the main targets of the campaigns, the information should also be circulated to: business entities from the tourism industry, local communities, self-government authorities, i.e. potential organizers of tourism in a given area.

Such a multi-layered educational activity carried out by national parks could help to raise the social awareness and the level of culture in tourism, in line with the idea of sustainable development, as well as in accordance with the guidelines formulated in the programme UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005–2014.

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