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Conceptual framework for rethinking of nature heritage management and health tourism in national parks

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Abstract

Rapid development of tourism and growing competition among tourism destinations calls to rethink new trends of heritage management and tourism policy development in protected areas. It is widely recognized, that the largest concentration of natural and cultural tourism resources is in protected areas, in particular – national and regional parks and reserves. Remote national parks in Europe suffer from peripherality and face the challenge of rethinking of tourism policy and heritage management due to rapidly changing tasks for visitors' attraction. The aim of the study is to analyze conceptual framework of new trends of heritage management in above-mentioned areas. New initiatives of development of the peripheral national park areas as innovative tourist destinations and exploiting the recognized health benefits of the local nature heritage and resources have been observed in whole Europe (Curonian Spit NP Lithuania, Hohe Tauern NP Austria etc.) regardless of the region and type of park. Conceptual elements of the framework of new heritage management in remote national parks are discussed in the study such as health tourism over traditional nature tourism; tourist attraction network over tourist monotype activities.

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1. Introduction

As emphasized by a number of authors protected areas boast the greatest accumulation of natural and cultural values, therefore, they attract the greatest attention of tourism researchers. The traditional trends of tourism research in protected areas primarily rest on natural resources and cover the aspects of sustainable tourism, nature and eco-tourism, the view of the local populations on the natural and cultural heritage and the development of tourism, the exploitation of the natural and cultural values for tourism development, the aesthetical and tourism value of natural resources, the benefit of the natural and cultural values for the services of tourism, and other. The growing competition between tourism areas and the new challenges of tourism to protected areas create the necessity of rethinking the exploitation of the natural and cultural heritage and of finding new opportunities for its application. Moreover, protected areas as tourist attractions are affected by the general trends of the development of contemporary tourism: the implementation of IT, growing attention to health and health travel, a need for a more complex tourism product, etc. Such a complex context results in considerable challenges to peripheral protected areas.

To date, the peripherality of protected areas has never been evaluated in the research in tourism development. A fundamental statement formulated by Christaller 50 years ago (Christaller 1963: 96, from Hall et oth.2013) to the effect that peripherality was typical of tourism areas, and that it was tourism that provided the value of natural resources which were not utilized for direct economic activity, acquired new meanings and new significance in the competition between contemporary tourist destinations. The research in the phenomenon of peripherality and its impact on tourism areas has been receiving increasing attention from tourism researchers, however, the relationship between the protected areas and peripherality has not been analyzed, except for a fragmentary mention of an implicit psycho-emotional impact of the natural resources and heritage in the protected areas on, and their significance for, tourist experience.

The evaluation of the situation of tourism in peripheral protected areas frequently results in the conclusion that the development of tourism in them tends to stagnate, and the potential of natural resources has not been sufficiently exploited. Such examples can be found all over the world: the Curonian Spit National Park (Lithuania), Hohe Tauern National Park (Austria), Arenal Volcano National Park (Costa Rica), Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park (the Carribean), and other. Attempts are made to look for new tourism products in the said areas based on abundant, and often unique, natural resources, particularly conducive to the development of health tourism.

The article aims to analyze the opportunities of the exploitation of the natural heritage in peripheral protected areas for the development of health tourism.

The area of the Curonian Spit National Park was chosen as the object of the research, even though the research shall also use information about the management of the heritage in other national parks.

2. Study area

The Curonian Spit National Park (CSNP) as a tourist destination stands out from others by its special characteristics that turn into challenges to tourism development. First, that is an area boasting a diarchy: it is managed by the administration of the Curonian Spit National Park and by Neringa Municipality administration. Second, the City of Neringa was granted the status of a resort in 1994, however, the area so far has kept looking for its resort identity. Simultaneously, that is a World Cultural Heritage Site with protected natural-cultural landscape. The Curonian barrier spit separates the Curonian Lagoon from the open Baltic Sea. The length of the Curonian Spit is 94 km, and the width varies from 380 m to 4 km. That is the largest lagoon of the Baltic Sea, with the surface area of 1,586 km². Gudelis, V. (1995), Bučas J. (2001) Travelling dunes with their pine forests, clean beaches of fine white sand, and a clear coastal belt provide most attractive natural resources from the viewpoint of tourism. The Curonian Spit offers a large concentration of resources relevant for health tourism

and health promotion: the water lying in as many as four horizons of the soil, a special coastal microclimate, and exclusive, the Lithuanian Baltic coast-specific, marine therapy resources: the therapeutic sapropel of the lagoon, amber, coastal algae, etc. To date, on the basis of the natural resources, coastal, rural, and eco-tourism have been traditionally planned on the Curonian Spit (Povilanskas&oth. (2004). However, even the implementation of those types of tourism based on the principles of sustainable development continues to cause disputes and creates a prerequisite for the conflicts between nature conservation and tourism development. With the aim of settling the conflicts on the Curonian Spit, tourism experts propose the traditional forms of tourism in protected areas: responsible tourism (Armaitienė&oth. (2007), recognition and promotion of the aesthetical and protective value of the dunes and the dune landscape as a world cultural object, and the implementation of the integrated management of the coast, dunes, the traditional local lifestyle, fragile environment, and tourism (Žaromskis, R. (2007), Povilanskas&oth, 2011a). In expert opinion, the application of the guidelines for the sustainable management of the European coastal dunes (Doody, 1998) to the Curonian Spit revealed several paradoxical effects. The principal measure of the conservation of travelling dunes is the ban on tourism in them; as many as four strict nature reserves have been formed there to prevent the dynamics of the dunes. The Curonian Spit is the border of the Republic of Lithuania and Kaliningrad Region (Russia), therefore, the CSNP can be only reached by a ferry.

Although the Curonian Spit National Park is a world cultural heritage site, a resort, and a tourist destination which attracts both local and foreign tourists, the characteristics of its territorial exclusion, natural heritage, and the formation of new services witness that, in order to answer to the questions arising in the discourse of the tourism management in that tourist destination, one should apply the analysis of a peripheral phenomenon

3. Peripherality and natural heritage management

Since the 70s of the 20th c., the analysis of the relationship between tourism development and the peripherality of the site has been receiving an increasing attention (Crush&Wellings (1983), Weaver (1998), Kneafsey (2000), Labrianidis (2004), Bianchi (2004), Chaperon&Bramwell (2012) and other). One of the latest works, *Vanishing Peripheries: Does Tourism Consume Places?* by Hall C., M., Harrison D., Weaver D., & Wall G. (2013) presents new aspects of the discourse of peripherality of tourism destinations. The contemporary conception of peripherality is no longer questioned on the positive/ negative axis: „A key issue is that the notion of the periphery as well as the centre is always being continually (re)negotiated making the ‘periphery’, as Harrison rightly observed, something that is inherently ambiguous.“

The principal characteristics that define peripheral tourism areas (Hall et oth., 2013) include geographical remoteness; lack of effective political and economic control over major decisions affecting well-being; economic linkages; migration flows; lack of innovation; state intervention; information flows; and high aesthetic values. In the said research probe, other authors have been finding additional arguments and new meanings for the expression of the positive properties of peripherality, mainly by just choosing a different analytical perspective, such as D. Weaver (2013) who raises the question “Is it not therefore more logical to describe the places where such experiences are achieved as the pleasure core rather than the pleasure periphery? This pleasure core, notably, concurrently remains an economic periphery”and argues about the low levels of innovation coexistence with high levels of inspiration. So far, no number of characteristics and no quantitative expression of a site have been established for the said site to be defined as peripheral, therefore, the matching of at least one characteristic allows the discussion of peripherality. In the current situation of tourism development, the following characteristics of peripherality apply to the Curonian Spit: geographical remoteness; economic linkages; lack of innovation; state intervention; information flows; and high aesthetic values. Four of them are directly related to the management of natural resources. In the case of the Curonian Spit, we should speak not of the geographical, but of the managerial peripherality, when, in the course of time and due to different reasons, a rather narrow vision of development has formed.

Just like in many other sites of natural heritage, the principal dilemma in the Curonian Spit is the way of reconciling the desired intensive tourism development and the objectives of nature conservation, which are “often creating a tension or conflict between the usually larger number of stakeholders involved. Each of stakeholders is likely to hold conflicting agendas and priorities, resulting in difficulties arriving at consensus of opinion on site and resource management” (Leask, 2006).

The analysis of the relationships of the protected areas and health tourism brings out an obvious key aspect often neglected by tourism researchers. The protected areas frequently possess the same natural health resources considered to be the principal resources of resorts and earning the status of a resort to a place. Resorts classification based on nature resources given by Mill (2008) gives approval for above-mentioned statement: the climate (mountain, coastal, or desert resorts); water, marine flora, muds, peat, etc. (balneological resorts); coast, water, and marine flora and fauna (seacoast resorts); or landscape (golf resorts). The natural resources of the protected areas and health tourism are linked by an obvious symbiotic relationship. One of the most important success factors in health tourism is specialization, usually prompted by the collection of local natural resources. It is the specialization that allows numerous spa and resorts to be authentic, to enjoy long-term success, and to acquire a unique profile, and its excellent foundation is the local natural resources. Three factors of successful specialization are named: the search for the ways of specialization in the environment of the enterprise, i.e. by assessing the local resources; serious assessment of the potential for a particular specialization; and the development of the specialization itself (Grimm & Winkler, 2011).

4. Results and discussion

In the survey aiming to assess the outcomes of the management of the natural heritage and the potential of the health tourism services, as well as the planning of the prospects of tourism development, 31 in-depth interviews were carried out. The duration of one interview ranged from 40 minutes to 2 hours. The respondents included local residents, businesspeople, and the staff of the administrations of the Curonian Spit National Park and the Municipality. Categorization of the interviews and citations are given in Table 1.

Table 1. The views of the representatives of the local administration and governmental institutions on the management of the natural heritage and the resources of health tourism

| Categories | Subcategories | Citations |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|--|
| Management of natural heritage | Exclusivity of nature | The nature is exclusive; it is not accidental that we have a national park here; exclusive nature – the forest, the sea; exclusive Neringa – the lagoon, the dunes, both the dead and living; the nature is the principal thing. We are not envious of Vilnius dwellers, as Monday to Friday we live a relaxed life; it is clean everywhere, and we ride bikes. Neringa is a natural and a man-made outcome, UNESCO also appreciated it, and thus increased the value of the place; sometimes one does not even know what a treasure one owns, and when we started travelling around the world, we saw how special we are; the strength of Neringa is its nature; Neringa is exclusive: the lagoon, the dunes, dead and living, the nature is the principal thing. |

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|---------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| | Nature conservation | In Neringa, one cannot move anything – to mend the roof or to put in a new door – everything is prohibited by the Curonian Spit National Park; it is boring here, no new constructions are allowed under the guise of nature conservation; the national park should have a more flexible view on the development – nature conservation also has to be reasonable... |
| Peripherality | The volume of demand for activity | We live here like in a pond, nothing ever changes: the same Germans, the same <i>Švyturys</i> umbrellas, plenty of ideas have been generated, however, nothing is being done; whenever you want to do anything, you need a lot of permissions; if you have to organize anything, you will face plentiful problems: there is no place for a larger number of people, there is no good hall or good accommodation; there's nothing to do in a closed space and especially in the off-season; there's no immediate contact between the locals and visitors, and the locals' view of the tourists is purely pragmatic: how to get money from them, and not how to offer a tourist a good time. |
| | Local residents | The characters are queer and changeable like the weather: they see all kinds of rich people and afterwards put on airs; people here are exclusive, a different sort, as in the summer our life changes, and in the winter, the place is quiet, and only true patriots of the area live here, as they love this land; why should Klaipeda people work in the municipality – that is wrong. |
| | Changes | There's a shortage of health promotion services, but these need professionals; so far, we do not have those services which need certification; clean air alone is already a service, as well as water procedures. There's nothing to do in Neringa. We need some centre, like a sanatorium or a health service centre, that would provide services under the roof; a resort must have such a centre. |
| | Health and health promotion | In Neringa, we are all healthy, just because of the air, we play volleyball and dance, everybody can move the way they like; people say that cancer started occurring, but its cases increased all over Lithuania, moreover, there's diabetes, spine, but no local illnesses, and no disabled schildren at school, we cannot be compared to the city people – we are hardened and swim in the sea till September, and my daughter had a swim in April, people do not |

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| | | often use solariums (whenever they feel like using them, they go to Klaipeda), and cycling is recovering, even senior ladies mount bicycles, although previously bikes were thought to be a poor means of transport. |
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The only aspect where the opinions of the respondents coincided was a positive view of the natural resources of the Curonian Spit: the forest, the water, and the air were highly prized by all the locals. Another observation: the representatives of the local administration and governmental institutions, as local residents, unanimously identified themselves primarily with Neringa's natural environment. In the process of summarizing their views, we identified a paradoxical situation: although the locals took a positive view of the local nature, not a single representative, except for the staff of the CSNP, mentioned that exclusive nature calls for exclusive conservation. Quite a few of the respondents had a particularly negative opinion about the regulations of the national park and strict requirements of the CSNP for the environment and nature conservation. The respondents agreed that the natural resources in the area were conducive to health promotion, however, almost no health services were offered in the area.

For each object or area of natural heritage, and particularly an object of the world cultural heritage, individual managerial decisions should be found and applied, as the diversity of resources typical of that area, its geographical location, the expertise and professionalism of the staff of the protected area, and the awareness and the interaction abilities of the stakeholders account for a network of managerial action of a different configuration.

Contemporary trends of tourism development, among which the demand for health promotion and health travel, that has been growing fast over the last decade, stands out, indicate that it would be useful for peripheral protected areas to transfer the focus of the development "from the raw material to the product", i.e. to place emphasis not on the significance of the very natural resources, which is particularly evident in the case of the Curonian Spit, but on the exploitation of natural resources for the development of health tourism, with the aim of increasing tourism-related competitiveness of the area. Thus, e.g., in the area of the Hohe Tauern National Park (Austria)(Health tourism, 2013), the regional authorities, having assessed the stagnation of tourism, made a decision to develop new tourism products, starting with the Krimml Waterfalls resources. As established, staying near the waterfalls provided effective help in cases of asthmatic and allergic diseases, moreover, the general background was very good: low total pollution, a short flowering period, and a low level of fungal spores. Essentially similar products, meant for thalassotherapeutic health promotion objectives, should also be applied on the Curonian Spit.

The insights found in scientific literature and the analysis of the views of the local residents lead to the identification of the following conceptual elements of the development of tourism in peripheral national parks: the exploitation of natural resources and the advantages of an exclusive natural environment for the development of health tourism. The said prospect should serve as a counterweight to the strict limitation of the exploitation of natural resources, rather limited marketing which emphasizes exclusive resources instead of exclusive services and benefits to the traveller, and the image of a protected area which in Lithuania is related to the prohibitions rather than to the benefits to visitors. The promotion of health tourism and the priorities with respect to the traditional kinds of ecotourism would allow to compensate for the negative impact of the peripherality of the area and to prevent the peripherality of management. Another element of the development of tourism that tends to reduce the "negative" peripherality of a tourist destination is a tourist attraction network vs. the traditionally monotypic activity characteristic of the system of tourism in peripheral protected areas. Bitsani&Kavoura (2011), Povilanskas & Armaitiene (2010), Povilanskas&Armaitienė A. (2011b) Responsible coastal, rural, and eco-tourism ought to be developed and combined with health tourism services. To quote Conti and Perelli (2006), "the trend marks an increased attention on territories rather than on destinations, and

on networks of tourism attractions rather than on the monoculture economies”. In that way, a more complex tourist product would be formed, while unique quality natural resources would provide excellent conditions for it.

5. Conclusions

The contemporary competitive conditions of the development of tourism call for the rethinking of tourism development in such traditional sites of tourist attraction as protected areas. The phenomenon of the peripherality of national parks has been studied insufficiently: the number of characteristics and the qualitative expression possessed by a tourist site or a national park for them to be defined as a peripheral area have not been identified. The interrelationship of management and peripherality has not been established, either.

The representatives of the local administration and management institutions—the respondents of our survey considered natural resources to be the key elements of the Curonian Spit, however, they admitted that monotypic activity was no longer sufficient for the contemporary tourism development and the competitiveness of the area. As witnessed by the survey, the representatives of the local administration and governmental institutions highly appreciated the health promotion potential of natural resources, however, failed to see the opportunities of their exploitation.

In the peripheral Curonian Spit National Park, with the aim of the development of tourism, the understanding of a tourism product should be extended and the principle of a network of services should be applied. Traditional forms of tourism in protected areas, i.e. coastal, rural, and eco-tourism, should be expanded by the services of health tourism.

For the promotion of tourism in peripheral protected areas and the mitigation of the negative effects of peripherality, the following elements are proposed: the development of health tourism by means of exploitation of natural resources and a tourist attraction network.

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