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SUSTAINABLE TOURISM LOCAL CLUSTER DEVELOPMENT IN PROTECTED AREAS: THE CASE OF PARNASSOS

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Abstract

Protected areas are widely considered as most suitable for sustainable tourism development of a region, aiming to stimulate the local economy and community. The formulation of integrated sustainable tourism development programs, is to be based on the cooperation among local and regional authorities, using as tools: the systematic promotion, publicity and advertising activities for the region, constantly searching for new tourism markets and target groups, and finally the cooperation among local authorities, local enterprises and residents. Parnassos National Park in Central Greece is an ideal protected area for sustainable tourism development, thanks to its rich natural environment, cultural heritage, local traditions, gastronomy and hospitality. This article investigates the need for the coordination of local tourism stakeholders within a local sustainable tourism cluster, to contribute in raising public awareness in environmental protection.

Keywords: sustainable development, Parnassos National Park, local tourism cluster

1. Introduction

Worldwide, protected areas are considered to be institutions of great socio-educational impact that could be linked to the process of education for sustainable tourism development. Protected areas contain some of the planet's most important ecosystems and many also 'serve as important cultural places where people contemplate and understand the natural world through visitation and tourism' (Eagles et al., 2013:60). The term 'protected area' is used to describe a variety of unique and very diverse habitats and natural areas (Murphy, 2014). The IUCN (2008:8) defines a protected area as a "clearly defined geographical space, recognized, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values" (Dudley 2008).

There is a significant variation in the location and size of protected areas, as well as in the purpose of the site and the management and conservation strategies adopted, leading to a distinct lack of universal understanding over their purpose, intended use and management systems (Murphy, 2014). As a result, efforts were made to establish protected area categories that could be used worldwide to help define the purpose of protected areas and develop universal management and conservation standards (IUCN, 2008).

National parks (Category II) fall, with wilderness areas, nature reserves, sanctuaries, national monuments, World Heritage sites, and protected landscapes and seascapes and variants on these forms, along the IUCN continuum according to the level of human activity permitted (Dudley 2008). National parks are "large natural or near natural areas set aside to protect largescale ecological processes, along with the complement of species and ecosystems characteristic of the area, which also provide a foundation for environmentally and culturally

compatible spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational and visitor opportunities" (Dudley 2008: 16, Miller et al. 2014: 257). National Parks can vary significantly in size, environmental and cultural amenities, management structure and lead management authority (e.g., state, federal, provincial entity), research priority and effort, operational and enforcement emphasis, educational programs, and goal priorities. (Miller et al. 2014: 258), since there is no single approach adopted as to their management.

According to the United Nations Environment Program (2013), National Parks 'provide protection for functioning ecosystems, but tend to be more relaxed with human visitation and the supporting infrastructure' and can contribute to local economies through educational and recreational tourism. Different protection is afforded to these protected natural areas and thus, activities such as tourism development are managed in varying ways, influenced by the area's categorization by national and international organizations.

However, tourism activities and facilities can create major threats to ecological integrity (Rollins and Robinson, 2002) since many national parks are under increasing pressure to provide more visitor facilities, accommodate more visitors, increase the supply of overnight accommodation and provide different types of visitor activities (Huang et al. 2008). The implication for sustainable tourism in protected areas is particularly challenging as it involves different stakeholders with contrasting obligations and interests (McCool, 2009) at the national, regional and local level. The formulation of integrated sustainable tourism development programs, is to be based on the cooperation among local and regional authorities, using as tools: the systematic promotion, publicity and advertising activities for the region, constantly searching for new tourism markets and target groups, and finally the cooperation among local authorities, local enterprises and residents (Kostopoulou 2012). As Boyd (2000:162) points out '...attention must shift towards how tourism, in line with sustainability principles, is planned, developed and managed to suit National Park environments'. Therefore, the institutional framework, within which activities are conceived, planned, funded, implemented, and managed is of major importance (Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith, 1990:4) for sustainable tourism development in National Parks. Smith et al. (2003) indicate that better quality governance of National Parks leads to higher quality—biodiversity conservation, while Eagles (2009) suggests that more research is needed in this area.

This article presents a conceptual framework for examining how an iconic National Park with rich natural and cultural components can be influenced by the internal dynamics of a local sustainable tourism development cluster. Parnassos National Park in Central Greece is an ideal protected area for sustainable tourism development, thanks to its rich natural environment, cultural heritage, local traditions, mountain shelters, hiking trails and climbing routes, mountain bike, horseback riding, a unique flora and fauna, local gastronomy and hospitality. The article presents the results of a secondary research conducted on Parnassos National Park broader area on its commitment to the process of environmental 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.

2. Study area: Parnassos National Park

2.1 Environmental characteristics

Parnassos is a National Park with rich natural and cultural heritage that can be considered to be a living ecological laboratory of nature and ecology with important and sensitive ecosystems. The area could act as a model for the development of alternative forms of tourism in mountainous areas. Local natural and cultural resources can be regarded as a

development keystone where Parnassos National Park Management Body aims to guarantee environmental protection and sustainable development (Tsitsoni 2015).

The study area constitutes an ideal tourism destination, endowed with a unique natural environment and landscape, flora and fauna, rich cultural heritage and lively traditions, warm local hospitality and gastronomy, mountain shelters, hiking trails and climbing routes, mountain bike, horseback riding (Region of Central Greece). The most attractive tourism resources of Parnassos territory include mountainous areas, caves, canyons, archaeological sites, byzantine/ medieval monuments, traditional settlements, wetlands as well as congress centers in many hotels.

The basic advantage of the area is the existence of a rich variety of environmental resources, however unexploited to a significant extent. Natural resources and an attractive landscape with picturesque villages, hiking trails and mountaineering routes, as well as important ski centers namely Parnassos and Timfristos, constitute a dynamic potential for the development of alternative forms of tourism in the area e.g. mountainous, winter tourism. The rich variety of the natural environment covers all the types of alternative forms of tourism. However, considerable natural resources have not yet been properly exploited, for example hiking trails in protected areas etc. For the tourism potential development of the area there is need for regional planning that reassures the rational use of the landscape e.g. mountains, caves, wetlands, lakes, rivers, as well as cultural resources.

The importance of local agricultural products for attracting gastronomy tourism should be also underlined. Moreover the local agricultural products like olives, olive oil, a variety of wines, honey, cheese, all form a unique combination of natural resources (climate, soil, local varieties and animal breeding) and cultural heritage of the region (traditional production equipment, skills and practices).

The mild climate of the area allows for both summer holidays period as well as for winter holidays. Excessively high temperatures or high degree of moisture are not recorded during the summer period, therefore the area offers a friendly environment for Northern European tourists. The climate also favors the winter tourism development on mountainous areas, especially in the ski centers locations.

The study area has a rich historical and cultural heritage, with significant monuments and archaeological sites that can contribute to the cultural tourism development of the region. The worldwide famous archaeological site of Delphi (the Delphic Oracle, the Ancient Theater, the Stadium and the Museum) is the second most visited destination in Greece. The archaeological and folklore museums, religious monuments, historical bridges, together with local cultural events and folklore festivals based on local traditions and products form an attractive tourism destination. Finally, the geographic location of the study area, at the centre of Greece, neighboring major transport nodes e.g. Athens International Airport "Eleftherios Venizelos" and urban centers e.g. the capital city of Athens constitutes a significant accessibility advantage.

2.2 Tourism characteristics

The study area is characterized by a dual tourism development pattern that includes: a) destinations with high touristic performance indicators e.g. Delphi, a premium cultural tourism destination, Arachova, a major ski tourism destination, that attract an intense demand growth of international tourists and weekend urban visitors, b) destinations with considerably low touristic performance indicators e.g. Parnassos mountainous area, that presents considerable potentials for further tourism development, and could form a model of

alternative forms of tourism (mountainous, winter, etc.) for sustainable tourism development and the protection of natural environment.

The study area, due to a unique spatial concentration of natural and cultural resources and climate conditions offers opportunities for sustainable tourism development and activities for all year around (Tioka 2007, Tsitsoni 2015). These activities include mountainous and winter tourism, such as winter sport activities, as well as opportunities for walking and hiking activities covering:

- Outdoor activities, mountain- climbing, hiking, riding, sports camps operating during the summer (Kostopoulou and Aivatzidou 2007).
- Cultural events and traditional local products festivals (Kostopoulou et al. 2015), environmental educational and scientific activities in protected areas, visits to archaeological sites, monuments, museums.

The study area is considered to be a rather low budget destination for summer holidays. According to the Hellenic Chamber of Hotels Institute's study "Regional analysis of Greek Hotels", the Region of Central Greece is a fair prices or a good "value for money" destination, regarding accommodation and food. However, winter resorts may come with quite high price levels due to high demand for ski infrastructure and associated facilities.

The percentage of repeating visitors in the study area is satisfactory e.g. nature tourism in Parnassos National Park, or sport activities at Arachova ski center. Residents from the capital city and other urban centers, whose origin is from the area, are regularly repeating their visits, bringing with them relatives and friends, so they all have the opportunity to discover the natural and cultural heritage of the region (Tioka 2007).

3. Materials and Methods: Results

The surveys' results of research that have been carried out during the last two decades at the broader area of Parnassos (Kostopoulou 2012, Fousteri 2012, Martinis 2001, Tioka 2007, Papageorgiou 2005), provided useful considerations for the tourism flows, as well as the possibilities for tourism development of the region.

Survey results show that the vast majority of visitors come from Athens and other urban centers (Martinis 2001). Visitors are mainly approaching the area by their own car (80%), where the most popular destinations are Parnassos Ski Centre in the winter and the archaeological site of Delphi. There is an intense spatial concentration of tourist resorts in Arachova, as a result the benefits from tourism activities are not spatially equally distributed, while the number of visitors in the mountainous areas during the summer period are quite low.

The study area, due to the size, variety and spatial distribution of tourism resources, can build up opportunities for tourism development all over the year by offering alternative forms of tourism. As a result, the tourism activity that is mainly being focused on ski tourism during the winter season, could be reoriented towards alternative forms of tourism offering: a) outdoor activities (climbing, mountain bike, hiking etc), b) cultural, informative, educational, scientific events (visiting monuments, museums, festivals, conferences).

The study area has not yet fully exploited its tourism development potential based upon unique natural and cultural characteristics. The area has not a characteristic tourism profile that would promote the comparative advantages in the tourism market, while a considerable lack of tourism infrastructure has been detected (Papageorgiou 2005). Furthermore, the lack of co-ordination -among all stakeholders involved in the production of the local tourism

product is considered to be one of the major problems for the sustainable tourism development of the region (Fousteri 2012).

Within this framework the contribution of Parnassos National Park to the tourism development of the region, and its overall impact on the local economy is rather limited, in spite of a large spectrum of development opportunities. Most of the visitors have restricted information about the National Park and the facilities offered. Nevertheless, the visitors of the National Park strongly agree with its significant role for the protection of nature and the opportunity provided for the sustainable development of the area. According to a survey (Martinis 2001) 80% of respondents were positive to the idea of introducing an entrance ticket to the National Park, provided that the money would be allocated for environmental protection. According to the survey (Martinis 2001) the vast majority of respondents (90%) strongly believe that the area is the appropriate natural environment for environmental education and sustainable tourism development programs. Parnassos National Park Management Body has developed the necessary infrastructure for the promotion and implementation of awareness programs for students and residents, where participants can be taught and experienced the role of natural and cultural environment protection in sustainable development (Tsitsoni 2014, 2015).

The general conclusion out of the secondary research undertaken for the study area is that there is considerable unexploited potential for sustainable tourism development to be based upon the appropriate planning strategies and measures, as well as cooperation among all stakeholders involved to create a local sustainable tourism development cluster. The Greek state in a recent law for the establishment of National Parks Management Bodies, gives the opportunity to local stakeholders to promote, support and organize ecotourism tourism programs ("Nature 2000" Commission 2011, Tsitsoni 2012). Protected areas' management bodies could also provide quality labels to local enterprises in protected areas, operating according to the terms of environmental protection, for the area.

4. Discussion-Conclusions

Based on the results of our research on secondary sources, we can come with some conclusions and proposals for the improvement of tourism development of the region and the local tourism product. The wider region of Parnassos has considerable opportunities for the development of special and alternative forms of tourism since the area has rich natural and cultural resources.

The best practices and knowledge of relevant know – how of European touristically developed protected areas, and the cooperation with other mountainous tourist communities around the world, are valuable assets and could create considerable advantages through international cooperation programs. A list of proposals, yet not exhaustive, aiming at motivating tourism demand and increasing the number of tourists in the area includes the following: (Martinis 2001, Papageorgiou 2005, Tioka 2007, Kostopoulou 2012, Fousteri 2012, Tsitsoni 2015).

- Formulation of an informative- educational program for local enterprises, about alternative forms of tourism in the region, especially ecotourism and nature tourism.
- Founding of a local agency, with the main objective to promote sustainable tourism development in protected areas, the resources development, financial and human capital of Parnassos National Parks Management Body in order to undertake more initiatives.
- Promotion of the specific characteristics of the tourism product of the region

- Laying out a friendly touristic behavior framework for all stakeholders involved in tourism (friendly prices, high quality service for customers etc.)
- The tourism product should be adapted and harmonized with the local culture and lifestyle, aiming at preserving authenticity and avoiding commercialization
- Modernization of hotel units and restauration of traditional buildings, archaeological sites, churches and monasteries in the area;
- Improvement of transport infrastructure and access to remote mountainous settlements of the region , adaptation of transport infrastructure to the natural environment of the area, construction of green infrastructure and implementation of projects for environmental protection
- Support for public and private investments in tourism infrastructure e.g. hiking, climbing, mountain – climbing and agri-tourism
- Installation of the necessary signs and info kiosks at nodal poles of tourism attractions of the region
- Consultancy support to tour operators , Municipal tourist offices,
- Organizing cultural events such as festivals, concerts, theatrical performances, revival of local traditions and customs during the year
- Route and networks trails for the promotion e.g. of archaeological heritage monuments and museums, aiming at a wider diffusion of tourist attendance
- The development of alternative forms of tourism in order to attract a variety of target groups all over the year.
- Interventions and improvements on local technical and social infrastructure e.g. pavements, lighting, sufficient parking places, security in local municipalities. in order to improve tourists' and residents' quality of life
- The creation of an integrated tourist promotion program with a definite management project and political approach
- The training of employees being involved in tourism, through subsidized programs, seminars, workshops on issues related in tourism at protected areas
- The local population should change the way of thinking, through environmental education and information of the benefits from sustainable touristic development
- Adopting touristic code of behavior and vision to the success of area as a high quality tourism destination
- Special educational programs in schools, so for students to become environmentally aware.

In reference to Parnassos National Park and its contribution to the touristic development of the region, a number of actions are being proposed that can contribute to the improvement of its operation and support to the local economy (Kostopoulou 2012, Fousteri 2012, Tsitsoni 2015).

- The creation of an integrated tourist package, combining visits to the National Park and other activities (accommodation, entertainment, sport activities, ski, etc.), for attracting visitors with different motivations and interests.

- Support to the participation of locals in sustainable tourism development synergies, through volunteering, enriching their associations and groups, organization of conducted tours, educational programs etc.,
- Systematic and co-ordinated cooperation synergies among Parnassos National Park Management Body and the authorities involved with tourism (local authorities, local enterprises, etc.),
- Organizing and/or participating in awareness' seminars/workshops/conferences on issues related to the environment protection and the combination between nature tourism and its protection,
- Increasing and improving educational and recreational activities (exhibitions, cultural events, educational programs for children and adults, research activities etc.)
- Elaboration of specific visitors' management plans, focusing on issues on defining the area's tourism carrying capacity (Kostopoulou and Kyritsis 2006).

The operation of Parnassos National Park Management Body is expected to have a direct positive impact on the promotion and implementation of information awareness of local authorities and residents, as on the social, economic and cultural development of the region. Moreover, it will contribute significantly to the protection and conservation of the environment, as well as the implementation of environmental legislation and protection of the Park.

Recognizing the great value of biodiversity and sensitivity of mountainous ecosystems, imposes the need for integrated sustainable tourism development planning. Tourism development in protected areas can have multiple benefits for the local societies and economies, such as increasing employment and income of residents, while preserving and protecting the natural environment. In order to achieve sustainable tourism development goals, there is need for the study and planning design at the national, regional and local level, as well as a consensus among all stakeholders involved in local sustainable tourism development (government entities – local authorities – local community).

For the success of this planning approach, there is need for the coordination of the active involvement of residents and the cooperation among all tourism stakeholders, within a local sustainable tourism cluster to include: local authorities, local tourism operators, Parnassos National Park Management Body, local tourism enterprises associations, local environmental and tourism initiatives, residents. A factor of major importance for the proper sustainable development of the protected area under study is the education and training programs for tourists and residents, so as for them to understand the need for the creation of a local sustainable tourism cluster in the area.

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