

TOURISM AND BIODIVERSITY IN ALBANIA: THE IMPORTANCE OF COEXISTENCE FOR A LONG TERM DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The article discusses the process of tourism development in Albania, offering some considerations related to the negative effects emerged in the last years and also, giving some example of good coexistence of these two phenomena. As tourism is a relatively new sector in the Albanian economy, his development has grown without a long term strategy and the role of the state has been insufficient for the protection of the environment. Studies in the field of sustainable tourism in Albania are still very scarce, without any positive impact for the environmental protection. That, first of all, by the fact that, sectors close to tourism as urbanization, agriculture, and energy sector are in a phase of consolidation in the country, and tourism among them has not taken a relevant importance. The scope of the paper is to offer a contribution related to the importance of these sectors, as an economic generator for the country, by examining the most important phases of tourism development. In conclusion, we have added some recommendations related to sustainable tourism by offering some great examples of coexistence in Albania.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, development, integration, environment protection

INTRODUCTION

Albania is a country with a diverse biodiversity. From the main ecosystems of the country, we can include marine ecosystems, coastal, lakes, rivers, green Mediterranean shrubs and deciduous broadleaf forest, coniferous and mixed, subalpine meadows and alpine pastures. Albania is also known for hydrographic network and rich complex consisting of rivers, lakes, wetlands, surface, and marine waters. In an area of 28,748 km², we can find two Bioregions: Mediterranean region and the Alpine region which facilitate the growth of poultry and livestock, a rich variety of landscapes meet in the country, as a result of natural features and a long history of human population and activities in them (Biodiversity treasures – 2012). The varied relief that we meet in Albania has made in certain periods of history thrive various activities, which can be cited agriculture and livestock for centuries, to pave the way most modern activities of the last century as industry and tourism. Various natural ecosystems have made in a short period of time in Albania to develop a different type of tourism which can be included in:

- maritime tourism;
- coastal tourism;
- mountain tourism;
- eco-tourism;
- cultural tourism;
- rural tourism.

As a more complex activity, tourism is constantly developed consuming the environment. In some cases providing an integration with the relevant territory where is developed. A typical example is the coast, which is one of the most requested destinations by internal and external tourists in Albania. Coastal areas, as all urban areas in the western lowlands of the country, have undergone a radical change of urbanization in the past 25 years, due to the development of the tourism sector and its indirect activities. Almost all coastal cities have doubled, and all the country's beaches have known an unprecedented urbanization in the history of our country. Other territories also have been changed drastically (Kullolli – 2014). We can mention here, the transformations of cities or villages near the lakes of Shkoder and Pogradec.

If the coast is the most notorious area to attract tourists, there are natural parks that make up the majority of areas protected, that in Albania account for 10% of the surface of the whole territory of the country. Since the first moments of the establishment of these areas with a special charm, priority has been the best-management, conservation and use of these areas in a sustainable manner to prevent their alienation and destruction. Although continuing priority of all national and local organizations is the protection of natural areas, most national parks have

been deteriorating in the past two decades. There are many areas where illegal activities have destroyed part of all of these parks. Movements of the population from inland areas of the country towards the west areas has caused a drastic change in the urban map and have reduced the agriculture area.

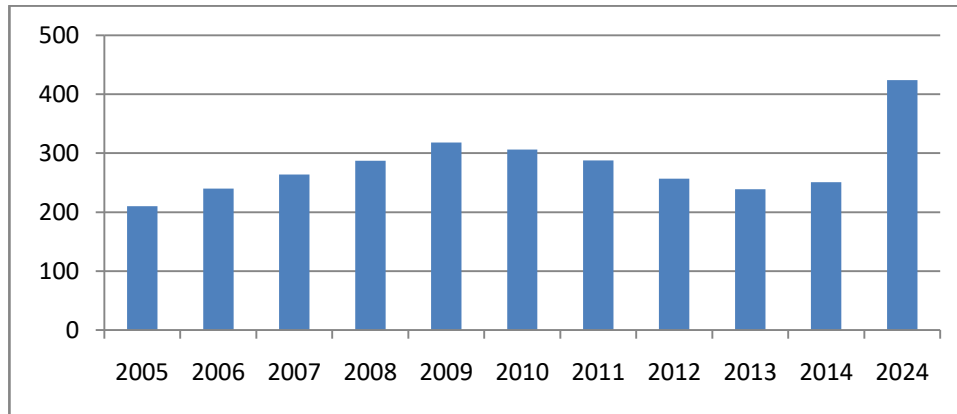
In most cases, the urbanization process and the tourism development has brought economic prosperity, but there have also been cases where constructions brought a lot of environmental degradation. In most cases, tourism development is actually associated with the destruction of the environment, but the phenomenal economic development of society has been the unavoidable destruction of certain areas. As in many countries of the world, the construction of tourist infrastructure reduces the environmental territory. The challenge of stakeholders in tourism development of a country is the collective integration of these two phenomena in a long-term process which could guarantee more prosperity for the people of a territory and a better curing of the environment where the phenomenon of tourism.

IMPORTANCE OF TOURISM IN THE ALBANIAN ECONOMY

The importance of tourism as an engine of tourism development is identified and confirmed by experience. Tourism is a process that set in motion a series of events that bring to the economy of a territory a high influx of economic income. Aggregate revenue triggers what is called "chain effect" on the economy, which causes the social and cultural development of the territory. The complexity of organization of the tourist industry, which includes a wide range of elements (accommodation, transport, leisure, and food), has the objective of tourist the consumption. Tourist consumption for many countries is already a key priority. Two neighboring countries of Albania, Greece, and Croatia, are typical examples in this sense, without mentioning Italy, that is a worldwide leader in the touristic industry since the beginnings of the consolidation of the touristic industry.

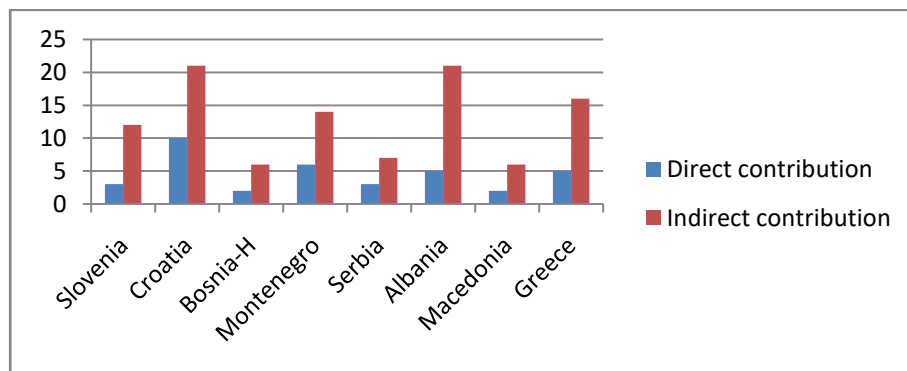
According to WTO (WTO - 2015), the total contribution of tourism in Albania is ABOUT 16% of the domestic product, with a direct and indirect economic contribution of 239.8 million dollars a year. The average growth of inflows is estimated nearly 4% per year, with a forecast of the economic income of 424 million dollars in 2025. Unless the decline of arrivals in the last 4 years, as a result of the global economic crisis, the trend of newcomers is positive and in continuous growth. By comparing with the countries of the region the perspective of tourism development is optimistic. Albania is one of the few countries in the region that has a gradual increase in the number of tourists and the only country in the region where the combined elements of tourism attraction is a distinctive strength in the wider Balkan market and for future years.

Table 1. The direct contribution of tourism to GDP (in million \$)



Tourism may represent in the near future a real engine for the economy of the country. But is Albania prepared to withstand the tourist flow which will reflect the negative aspects of the overall biodiversity of the country? Will the effort of all stakeholders that operate in the field of tourism change the trend of deteriorating environmental resources where tourist activities happen?

Table 2. The direct and indirect contribution of tourism in percentage for countries of West Balkans



These questions have become more and more important in recent years and the attention of researchers and operators has been driven by the study of tourism sustainability as the only element that can guarantee a *longevity* of biodiversity in our country.

ALBANIAN TOURISM DESTINATION LIFE CYCLE

Tourism is a relatively new sector in Albanian economy and this is a positive aspect from the point of view of the tourism development perspective. The isolation of the country four decades has made possible the preservation of the biodiversity of the country in its natural state. The

lack of tourism infrastructure and the virgin nature of many natural areas are the proof of this phenomenon.

The exploitation of irregular development in the nineties with deficiencies in organizing and regulating the tourism process have influenced the destruction of a consistent part of biodiversity in our country. As in any other activity, the exploitation should be controlled and under the supervision of local and national bodies to ensure a renewal of existing natural resources. Degradation of the natural resources of a territory would cause in a very short time the lack of visitors and the negative association with the consent of the area or territory of our country. In Albanian reality, examples may be the degradation of the coastline of the city of Durres, which in recent years has been accompanied by the departure of holidaymakers to other destinations like Shengjin, Velipoje, and Ulcinj. This deviation in the demand for tourist services may cause increased dissatisfaction with the destination in question and in a short time the territory may suffer degradation in other indirect tourist services. This chain reaction is due to the fact that as every service offered in the market, tourism service too, has a life cycle characterized by entry, growth, maturity, and decline (Pike – 2008).

Before the nineties, Albania had not an organized touristic sector, as it was seen as a capitalist phenomenon, so, forbidden. Anyway, it existed in a spontaneous way. In the nineties we have the first organized touristic activities, that consists of the first touristic agencies and small tour operators. In terms of products life cycle, this phase consists of the entry. This phase consists with the first arrivals of tourists in Albania. Their main motives were the recognition of the mystical (unknown) nature of the Albanian community, visits to the natural virgin areas and the numerous cultural and archaeological sites of the country. The first groups of visitors were also the best promotional elements of a wealthy country, which, although not offering good services, the operators managed to satisfy the basic needs of many tourists who spoke positively about Albanian tourism.

The positive impressions of tourists in the early 90s made possible what is called the rise of Albanian tourism during the nineties. This stage is characterized by the steady growth of the number of visitors thanks to the initiatives of local residents in filling the basic tourist services. The growth is divided into two phases: 1) development; 2) consolidation.

The first, is the phase that consists of a steady and high increase in the number of newcomers. It is noted with the improvement of tourism services and the entry of large companies into the tourism industry. Tourism plays an important role for the local economy of the territory and the environment in which tourism develops is undergoing some changes in their biodiversity. In some cases there are changes that completely alter the biodiversity of the territory to the extent that the designated territory does not reach the growth and consolidation

phase. Such a situation tends to some Albanian destinations - as in the case of Durres - where uncontrolled development causes immediate land degradation and alienation of the positive qualities that tourists are coming to. The development can deteriorate in such way for many reasons, which may be:

- a) The boom of newcomers at peak times at certain destinations where the respective services are used to withstand attitudes that are used only for a short period of time;
- b) ease in bureaucratic procedures in the field of investment, creating an appropriate investment ground for money laundering;
- c) the absence of dividing lines between tourist areas and urban areas. In this case urbanization "invades the land" which could be used to build tourist infrastructure or be left in the virgin situation for which a part of tourists may like the area in question. The area of Golem and Durres can be classified in such a situation;
- d) erroneous public policy, which may result due to erroneous planning regarding the expectation of a territory.

Generally, most of the Albanian tourism destinations have not reached the consolidation stage, which occurs when the designated destination has managed to create a very positive image and the arrival of tourists marks no higher growth - both in the development phase - but steadily and manageable. The growth stage is in an unclear situation. This, due to an unstable political situation of the country. In the last two decades, there has not been a clear and long-term strategy in the tourism sector. This has caused an unfair competition between operators, constructions without a permanent urban development plan and the occupation of the free and protected territories.

The two other stages, maturation, and downturn, have reached permanently some areas, such as Durres and Golem. Investments expected in the regulation and in tourism facilities can immediately restore the growth stage in the next years.

The simplicity of the life cycle model faces real difficulties that, not every destination follows the same life cycle for the differences that are faced in the geographical, cultural, social, economic and environmental elements. Differences between destinations are also added to the market factor in which they are included. The market in some cases is one of the most decisive elements because the lack of competitive bidding often makes a destination preferable even though attitudes toward it are not very positive. For example, tourists from Kosovo, Serbia, and Macedonia came in Albania because prices in Albania are very low compared with Greece, Croatia and Montenegro. Another reason is the fact that, the highest number of tourists are Albanians which leave in Kosovo and Macedonia. In fact, the average spending of tourists in

Albania is very low. The amount of money spending influences the qualified investment in facilities and environment protection.

THE COMMON INTEGRATION OF TOURISM WITH THE ENVIRONMENT

The study of life the cycle of a tourism destination offers a clear overview of the current situation in one territory and exposes the necessity of long-term planning in the sector of tourism. Such strategies require the involvement of all actors in a given territory to coordinate for a long-term urban-economic planning, the maintenance and successful management of the environment and the territory. These interventions require a new approach to the tourism phenomenon as a motor of economic development for that specific territory: that of the common integration of tourism with the environment. Given the fact that, the two elements complement each other, the common coexistence of these two elements is bound between them. No economic income can be provided for the maintenance of the environment and without an attractive environment tourists will not come, therefore no income is provided.

If in the past tourism was studied solely from the point of view of the economic development provided in a territory, in recent years an ever greater attention is being paid to the environment. Many expert and analyst have constantly stopped in the conflict with the tourism and environment by attributing to the tourism all the causes of environmental degradation. Swedish scholar G. Budowski (Budowski – 1976) described this phenomenon by defining three different natures in the relationship that creates tourism with the environment: 1) coexistence; 2) conflict; 3) integration of each other.

In the current economic and social situation of Albania, the integration of tourism with the environment seems more appropriate to be implemented. The context and the situation in which Albanian tourism is developing favor the common integration climate of these two elements, which would include in their sub-categories various representatives such as local community, public administration, economic groups, specialized schools, non-profit organizations, etc. The coordination of the actions of all these organisms would contribute to a more efficient development of tide and the implementation of environmental protection programs, especially in those areas where the environment is the main element that attracts tourists.

In our case, of particular interest would be the realization of such programs in areas with large tourist flows. The management of the environment and tourist activities combined with other productive activities could also affect the development of the entire territory. Coastal areas are the most important where the realization of such strategies could greatly help revitalize these areas which in recent years have experienced a rather chaotic and unorganized development. Also, inland areas could benefit greatly and their retraining could help to improve

the quality of air in nearby urban areas. As an example, can be taken a number of small programs that have been implemented in certain areas of our country (with positive impact) and initiatives that have been undertaken by different countries in the European Union. As an example, one of the most important initiatives at European level we can mention are InterregProjects, started in 1990 with the implementation of the first project up to the fifth project in 2014-2020. Similar projects, which have had an impact also in Albania, are those realized by ARLEM (the Mediterranean Regions Assembly), which is consistently focused on the analysis and protection of coastal destinations in the Mediterranean region. Also as Adrion - Adriatic and Ionian Sea - program on which Albania has been directly involved.

Similarly, in Albania, a number of initiatives of this nature have been updated, with the aim of protecting and preserving the environment. These may include Alpine Mountain Initiatives, initiatives in the eastern and southern parts of the country, and programs for organizing tourism in coastal areas. And after the 90s, the projects are generally environmentally friendly.

Their goal, beyond cooperation in the field of tourism and environment, has included promotion programs, sharing experience in the administration of the territory between different regions and improving the lives of citizens from these projects. Countries that have had a greater impact on tourism in these projects have been France, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, and Italy.

EXAMPLES OF RECREATIONAL & ENVIRONMENTAL AREAS RE-QUALIFIED IN ALBANIA

In recent years, we have faced a number of initiatives that have prioritized the sustainability of tourism in Albania. The interest of public structures has also been growing steadily. In 2014 have been adopted another national tourism strategy for the next 10 years. It stressed the importance on sustainability. Unfortunately, by 2014 till in 2017, there has been nothing in practice, and the sector faces a lot of problems, especially infrastructure and managing problems.

Most of the environmental protection projects in Albania have repeatedly seen the cooperation of a large number of actors, where the role of foreign donors is to be assessed. Among the most active international organizations in the tourism sector are UNDP, GIZ GmbH, World Bank, etc.

From the most accomplished projects, we can mention the re-qualification of the Thethi area, in the district of Shkoder, in cooperation with the German Association for International Development, which enabled the construction of the Koplik-Thethi motorway building, with a

branch to the Razem tourist resort. This investment increased the number of visitors of Thethi National Park, increasing the number of economic activities in the area.

Another important project aimed at a number of activities is the management of the National Park of Prespa in collaboration with Greece and Macedonia. The project was realized by Federal Forest Office of Austria and the German Development Bank in cooperation with local actors. This initiative is aimed at studying and managing the Prespa National Park and its surrounding areas, in a development perspective for the entire area.

We can also mention a number of initiatives that have led to the reevaluation and the increase of economic activities that have in their center not only economic development but also the environmental sustainability. We can mention the retraining of the area of Dardha and Voskopoja in the district of Korça, the National Park of Llogara in the district of Vlora and the Karavasta Lagoon Park in the district of Lushnje. Of the most important initiatives to be mentioned here, has to do with the recent debates over the blockade of the construction of the hydro power plant in the canyons of Lengarica, in the district of Permet and the retraining of the area as a protected environmental zone that in the future may attract a considerable number of visitors. The debate is still ongoing and the civil part has opposed successfully to the initiative of the construction.

The initiatives show the importance of re-qualification of environmental areas and their importance in all aspects of the life of locals. These are both economic and social aspects that would enhance local livelihoods and contribute to long-term environmental sustainability.

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