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## THE BEGINNINGS OF BIRD WATCHING DEVELOPMENT IN NATURE PROTECTED AREAS OF SERBIA

**Summary:** In 2017, 2018, and 2019, excursions for tourists in nature conservation areas were organized at various sites in Serbia, with the aim of observing rare bird species. Considering that bird watching is an underdeveloped form of sustainable tourism development in the Serbian tourism market, the aim of this study was to examine the profile of tourists expressing their desire for bird watching, as well as the impact of this form of tourism on the protection and conservation of the nature of Serbia. Although sustainable development in the National Tourism Development Strategy of Serbia was recognized as an opportunity for future development, stay on the ground showed numerous disadvantages for the further development of this type of tourism, such as nature protection, inadequate destination management, waste disposal, space degradation, poor infrastructure, low level awareness of the local population and lack of educational facilities.

The conclusion of the research is that the excursions organized for the purpose of bird watching had a very favorable effect on increasing tourists' awareness of the environment, on the sustainable development of the tourist destination and pointed to the needs of current and future tourists who want to spend time in nature protected areas.

**Key words:** special forms of tourism, sustainable development, nature, Serbia

### Introduction

Sustainable development is a concept that emerged in the context of a growing awareness of an imminent environmental crisis (Drastichová & Filzmoser, 2019). The global process of sustainable development based on three basic imperatives: economic- which includes the formation of an effective economic system harmonized with the ecological factor; social- which affirms the human right to a high standard of living in safety conditions, and ecological- defining the conditions and limits for the restoration of ecological systems as a result of their exploitation (Nowikova et al., 2019).

The notion of sustainable development has expanded to cover all forms of development and economic activities including tourism (Farsari & Prastacos, 2001). Coccossis (1996) recognizes four different interpretations of sustainable tourism. These four perspectives are the „economic sustainability of tourism”, the „ecologically sustainable tourism”, „sustainable tourism development”- where although the need for environmental quality is apparent, the focus is on the long- term viability of the industry- and „tourism as a part of a strategy for sustainable development”.

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines sustainable tourism as a principle that meets the needs of tourists and the needs of tourist destinations on the one hand, and on the other foreign protects and enhances tourism opportunities for future generations; meets the needs today's tourists as well as the host region, while protecting and increasing development potential (Bramwell et al., 1998).

In recent years, natural areas have become a preferred recreation area for people looking to escape their busy urban lives. According to Payne and Schaumleffel (2008) „many rural communities have unique problems to overcome when attempting to deliver community recreation services” (p. 118). The world has become so complicated that people now seek solace in areas of nature (Cetin & Sevik, 2016). Special interest tourism has rapidly grown in volume and value across both the developed and developing world since the 1980s, fuelled on the one hand by the increasing diversity of leisure interests which characterise contemporary society and on the other heterogeneous travel market (Agarwal et al., 2018).

Special interest tourism includes different forms of travel with a special interest. Some of the most important ones are adventurous, rural, cultural, ecological (bird watching), medical tourism (Kruja & Gjyrezi, 2011).

In recent decades, interest in specific forms of tourism has increased in less developed countries that are not typical tourist areas. Independent journeys tend to differentiate from mass tourism and tend to be morally and ethically acceptable. That is why some authors claim that this could be a chance for the Third World Countries to overcome underdevelopment and to offer new forms of tourism related primarily to ecology (Mowforth & Munt, 2015). Especially large protected areas are increasingly considered to function also as instruments for regional development. This perspective applies particularly to many peripheral rural areas throughout Europe that are faced with severe problems due to economic and socio-cultural disparities (Mose, 2016).

According to Kim et al., (2007), „there has been considerable interest in the utility of the concepts of involvement and loyalty for the better understanding accepts of recreation behavior“ (p. 320). Protected natural resources are especially interesting to entrepreneurs who are seeking for such a way of vacation and living that is oriented to traditional values, but also to sustainable tourism. American tourists showed a great interest in wildlife. About 20% of Americans declared themselves as bird watchers, they spend about \$50 billion annually on this type of tourism (Ares et al., 2014). Sustainable tourism is often now seen as a normative orientation that seeks to re-direct societal systems and behaviour on a broad and integrated path toward sustainable development (Bramwel et al., 2017). The northern parts of

Serbia abound in wetlands and areas marked as protected natural resources, which can provide pleasant and meaningful experiences to excursionists and tourists, as bird watchers in Vojvodina.

The aim of the research was to determine how bird watching affects the development of sustainable tourism in Serbia and whether it has any future prospects. That is the reason for researching the of domestic tourists behavior in underdeveloped countries, which have a rich nature and scarce infra and substructure for the development of tourism, but they want to spend their leisure time well.

## Literature Review

The development strategies of modern civilization are formed on the basis of sustainable development principle (Bielińska et al., 2015, p. 159). Bird watching is the main component of wildlife tourism and one of the most growing forms of entertainment in tourism in the Western world (Krejić et al., 2019). Tourism movements in protected natural areas are important as drivers of tourism development in underdeveloped countries. Tourists who opt for such a journey generally have no special expectations, except for preserved nature. Understanding nature-based visitors' motivations and environmental attitudes is important for the development of appropriate visitor management strategies for protected areas (Cheung & Jim., 2014). Ecotourism in protected areas offers one of the more tractable ways to quantify the economic benefits (De Groot et al., 2002). It is therefore important to explore the motives for the arrival of domestic tourists in protected natural areas in Serbia. The competitiveness of Serbian tourism is not favorable. Tourists who are practicing bird watching are generally well educated and relatively wealthy (Jones & Buckley, 2001). Bird watching has contributed to the integration of research about their protection, conservation and further socio-economic development.

Interest in this form of tourism in China begins around 1990 thanks to foreign tourists. In the meantime, associations for the protection of birds have been established, which positively affect the increase in the number of tourists and visitors (Ma et al., 2013). It is estimated that in United Kingdom, there were 372 million visits to nature, and most of them include bird watching. Bird watching is also important from the point of generating economic income and employment at local and national level (Carver, 2009). Bird watching is an act of birds observation and identification in their native habitat. This is one of the greatest revenues from ecotourism, as it is about the largest individual groups of eco-tourists who are very educated, with above the average income (Cordell & Herbert, 2002). Their visits to destinations for bird watching make significant income from tourism and provide significant financial revenue for protected natural areas rich in endemic species (Hill et al., 2010). They are preferred for tourists not only because of their nature based activities, but because they are ready to pay the higher travel costs in order to watch birds (Cheung & Jim, 2014).

Bird watching in literature is also listed as a fun, leisure activity, especially in capitalist economies as response to rapid urbanization and reduction of green spaces

in many urban areas (Giglio et al., 2016). On the other hand, despite referring to the concept of sustainable development in protected areas of nature in Serbia, domestic authors deal with them at the potential level. Previous works have been based on the potentials for bird watching development, mainly in rural areas. Ristić and associates (2016) believe it is necessary to design tours for bird watching, as well as Jegdić and associates (2017) which point out certain areas in Vojvodina as an eco-rural destination, such as the Upper Danube River, considering bird watching and photo safaries as main attractions in protected natural areas. The domestic authors agreed that areas of preserved nature are the chance for the bird watching development in the areas of Fruška Gora national park (Medić et al., 2012), special nature reserve Deliblato sands (Krejić & Plečić, 2014), in villages at the border crossings between the two countries (Angelkova et al., 2012). As the tourism market is exposed to constant changes and influences of various factors coming from both global and local market, the tourist market of Serbia could be said to be the main characteristic of its relatively new and small market, turbulence and instability (Krejić et al., 2017).

### **Characteristics of tourists watching birds at localities in Serbia**

In the period from 2017 to 2019, the Society for bird protection in Serbia organized excursions for domestic tourists, with the aim of promoting the development of bird watching and introducing them to rare bird species in Serbia. More than 800 respondents volunteered for trips that were free across the country and included transportation and guide services.

Bird watching is organized as a day trip, in the area of rivers, lakes, in the forest, swamps or within the area of the floodplain. These were mostly nature reserves, special nature reserves or national parks.

#### ***Common characteristics of bird watchers in Serbia***

In terms of gender, the majority of respondents were male, and they stated that they liked to photograph birds. The women pointed out that they come for excursions for recreation and leisure, as well as staying in nature. Most of the respondents had higher education and completed master studies, and it is not surprising the high level of awareness that tourists showed about nature conservation and environmental care. The way they signed up for the trips was through the internet. At the same time, the majority of highly educated tourists have declared themselves unemployed and ready to assist in actions on the ground that are beneficial for the conservation of the environment, landscaping the banks of rivers and lakes, for ease of access for tourists. In addition to bird watching, visitors at various sites collected debris, which is a river to the shore by pulling water levels, but also which picnickers left behind in nature parks. In addition to the birds, tourists recognized the medicinal herbs as well as the cultural monuments they were passing by. Tourists had high expectations of encountering rare bird species. Bad and unmarked roads, lack of signposts in natural sites have been a major backbone for tourists when it comes to infrastructure.

## Benefits of bird watching

Bird watching is a most promising branch of ecotourism because bird watchers comprise a large and increasing pool of educated and wealthy individuals who desire to observe birds in their native habitats and whose activities have relatively low environmental impact (Sekercioglu, 2002).

The benefits of bird watching for domestic tourists were:

- contribution to ornithological knowledge
- getting to know the areas of Serbia that are not tourist valued, where tourists do not have the opportunity to stay;
- awareness of the difficult lifestyles of local people living far from civilization;
- staying in a preserved and untouched nature;
- recreation and relaxation in clean air;
- educating tourists about rare bird species;
- taking photographs of wildlife;
- tasting organic products of the local population, mainly honey, juices and jams of wild strawberries, blueberries, and other forest fruits, as well as dried fruits and mushrooms.

Table 1. *Positive and negative impacts of bird watching in Serbia*

Positive impact of bird watching	Negative impact of bird watching	Recommendations for optimal bird watching
Contribution to ornithological knowledge	Bird disturbance	Limit the number of visitors
Visiting terrains that are out of reach of tourists	The departure of birds from the nest	Walk to the site
Activation of educated guides, ornithologists	Threatened by hunters	Education before going to the field
Involvement of the local population in bird watching	Loss of eggs from the nest	Introducing eco boats
Sales of local, organic products	Exhaust gases	Moving away from the nest
Proposals for the protection of unprotected areas of nature	Poaching	Educating the locals
Recreation in nature	Waste from visitors	Help prevent poaching
Evaluating the local culture of the area		Making homes for the winter
Reduced number of negative impacts from tourism		Conservation of natural habitats
Waste collection in nature		Donate money for bird habitats
Excursion income		Collaboration with NGO org., Locals and country

Source: *Authors, based on research*

## **Problems of bird watching development in Serbia**

Within the Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia (2016, p. 27), it is stated that dense forests and protected areas of nature provide opportunities for bird watching. However, apart from the Society for bird protection in Serbia, which belongs to a non-governmental organization, there are currently no state organizations or institutions in the country that educate the population or make excursions when it comes to bird watching. Non-professional and unskilled personnel, who are employed by the party in local, regional and national tourism organizations, represent a danger for further development of ecotourism, sustainable tourism, or bird watching. Low level of awareness of the local population about environmental protection, frequent landfills within nature parks, bad roads, traffic signaling, represent a problem for the further development of this type of tourism in Serbia.

Potential bird watching enthusiasts in Serbia will only be able to obtain bird watching service in cooperation with the non-governmental sector, whose members selflessly invest their knowledge in order to prevent poaching and for the survival of rare bird species. Bird watching offers are not part of the tourist offer of travel organizations or travel agencies. One of the problems for the further development of bird watching is that NGOs do not have continuity in the education and organization of such content, but do so on approved projects, usually from foreign foundations and associations, once a year.

## **Conclusion**

Bird watching is a most promising branch of ecotourism because bird watchers comprise a large and increasing pool of educated and wealthy individuals who desire to observe birds in their native habitats and whose activities have relatively low environmental impact. In the 21st century, the ecological education of the society is the basis of socio-economic transformations and improvement of quality of life, according to the rules of sustainable development (Wartecka-Ważyńska et al., 2019). Among various kinds of ecotourism, bird watching has the highest potential to contribute to local communities, educate locals about the value of biodiversity, and create local and national incentives for successful protection and preservation of natural areas (Sekercioglu, 2002, p. 288).

The governments of less-developed nations, local and international NGOs, and bird watching companies should give priority to bird watching promotion and education. These organizations should also strive to increase the contribution of bird watching to rural communities and local grass-root organizations since bird watching has a significant potential to generate income through the protection and promotion of natural areas. Tourism is one of the most important problems for contemporary environmental protection, yet it is difficult to imagine that protected areas (except for unusual objects) can function without tourists visiting them (Uglis & Jęczmyk, 2017, p.17).

Based on the conducted bird watching trips in Serbia, we can conclude that bird watching has an important impact on the sustainable development of Serbia as a tourist destination, and that with constant education of the population, employees in state organizations, locals, and the organization of the trips, this contribution can be far greater in the future. Developing countries like Serbia have highly educated tourists and excursionists willing to, despite small incomes, spend money for educational excursions. Therefore, this research can be significant for future projects and manners of financing such excursions for the local population of citizen, associations and tourist organizations, chambers of commerce, but also as a unique contribution to development and preservation of nature and its values in developing countries. Bird watching as a form of tourism can positively reflect on the increase in the activity of domestic tourists in nature, which in future can positively reflect to overall health status of the inhabitants of one country.

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## ПОЧЕЦИ РАЗВОЈА BIRD WATCHINGA У ЗАШТИЋЕНИМ ПОДРУЧЈИМА ПРИРОДЕ СРБИЈЕ

**Сажетак:** Током 2017., 2018. и 2019. године, организовани су излети за туристе у природна подручја на разним локацијама у Србији, са циљем посматрања ретких врста птица. С обзиром на то да је посматрање птица неразвијен облик одрживог развоја туризма на српском туристичком тржишту, циљ ове студије био је испитати профил туриста који изражавају жељу за посматрањем птица, као и утицај овог облика туризма на заштиту и очување природе Србије.

Иако је одрживи развој у Националној стратегији развоја Србије препознат као прилика за будући развој, остатак на терену показао је бројне недостатке за даљи развој ове врсте туризма, попут заштите природе, неадекватног управљања дестинацијама, одлагања отпада, простора деградација, слабе свести локалног становништва, нестручних кадрова и недостатка инфраструктуре.

Закључак истраживања је да су излети организовани у сврху посматрања птица имали врло повољан утицај на повећање свести туриста о окружењу, на одрживи развој туристичке дестинације и указали на потребе садашњих и будућих туриста који то желе проводити време у заштићеним природним подручјима.

**Кључне речи:** посебни облици туризма, одрживи развој, природа, Србија



