

VISITOR MANAGEMENT PLANNING AS A TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN PROTECTED AREAS IN SERBIA

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Abstract

Visitor management planning is a new concept, tool and strategy of sustainable tourism and ecotourism. The importance of this concept is in the new approach to tourism in protected areas of the country, which means implementing a completely different philosophy of tourism. This paper provides an overview of the potential for sustainable tourism development in Serbia as well as an overview of visitor management planning methodology – Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) that was tested in Special Nature Reserve Zasavica, in Srem District, Serbia.

Key Words: *Visitor management planning, sustainable tourism, protected areas, ecotourism, SNR Zasavica*

JEL classification: *Z32; Q56; L83*

Introduction

It may be claimed that the well preserved and clean natural resources within the protected areas are the greatest value to tourists and there is a definite relationship between the value of the protected areas and the benefit of ecotourism activities. Visitor management in protected areas is crucial to ensure that the natural capital they protect can be enjoyed by future generations.

Having these considerations in mind, there is a huge potential for ecotourism in protected areas. This paper considers a case study of Special Nature Reserve Zasavica, in Serbia.

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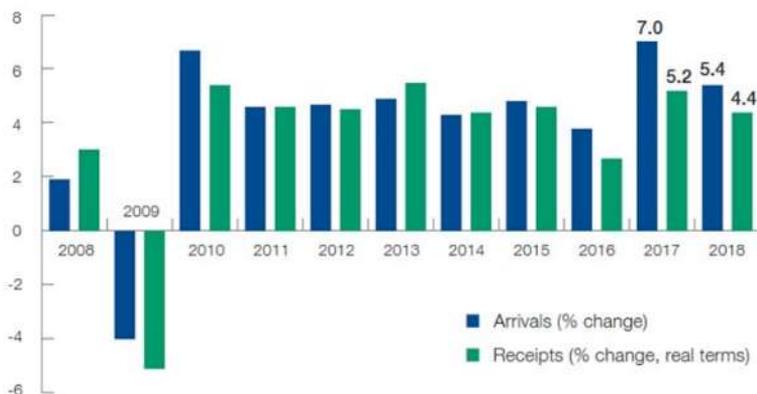
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Defining sustainable tourism and ecotourism

In terms of growth, tourism, as a sector of the economy, is one of the fastest growing industries in the world. Tourism is especially important for the less developed countries, as it stimulates the economy and increases employment.

According to data presented in the International Tourism Highlights 2019 (UNWTO, 2019), total international tourist arrivals in 2018 reached 1.4 billion, which is 5.4% annual growth, while total international tourism exports in the same year amounted to 1.7 trillion USD, which is 4.4% change per year. Both growths in international tourist arrivals and international tourism exports outperform the world GDP growth – 3.6% in 2018. There has also been a continual and stable expansion of the sector since 2010 until now, which is presented in Fig. 1.

Figure 1: *The annual % change of international tourism arrivals and receipts 2008-2018*



Source: UNWTO (2019)

Tourism is closely linked to the social, economic, and environmental well-being of many countries, especially developing countries. Therefore, it is an important factor of economic and social development.

The importance of sustainable tourism or ecotourism is highly recognized within the currently hyper turbulent business environment. Sustainable tourism, created by implanting key principles of sustainability into a tourism sector, is becoming the crucial factor of transformation of the whole economy into a sustainable one, and also it contributes to the goal of making the economy growth and development healthier, with the essential

responsibility for business environment as well as the wider, natural environment.

Sustainable tourism is defined by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2020) as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities". Incorporating balance between "environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development", the sustainable tourism development "requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, as well as strong political leadership to ensure wide participation and consensus building."

This definition emphasizes the vital connections between sustainable tourism and the sustainable development goals – SDG (UNDP, 2020). The 17 SDG were adopted by the UN in 2015, and they are originally integrated into the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was launched at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in New York, in September 2015.

European Commission has its own approach to ecotourism. According to the European Commission, "the competitiveness of the European tourism industry is closely linked to its sustainability" (European Commission, 2020). In the EC Communication *Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism* (EUR-Lex, 2007) there is a strong emphasis on creating "the right balance between the welfare of tourists, the needs of the natural and cultural environment and the development and competitiveness of destinations and businesses".

There is a slight confusion between sustainable tourism and eco-tourism. Although there are many similarities between the two terms and essentially they inherit the same root idea – the sustainable development – we should make a distinction. According to The International Ecotourism Society (TIES, 2015), ecotourism can be defined as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education", whereby the education means the inclusion of both the staff and the guests. In other words, ecotourism is concerned with "uniting conservation, communities, and sustainable travel."

An excellent insight into the complexity of the sustainable tourism term and the differentiation of the general sustainable tourism is presented by I. Juganaru, M. Juganaru and A. Anghel (Juganaru, I. et al., 2008) According to those authors, there are many forms of sustainable tourism, such as: eco-tourism, soft tourism, green tourism, rural and agro-tourism, community tourism, equitable tourism, etc. They define ecotourism as "ecological tourism, with the main objective to preserve the nature or approach to rare species. Ecotourism activity involves an important education and interpretation component, as well as support for raising awareness on the necessity of natural and cultural capital preservation. Ecotourism must have minimum consequences on the environment and must also contribute to the welfare of local populations." (pp. 797-804).

Authors Ružić, P. and Amidžić, D. (Ružić & Amidžić, 2018) refer to the transition from the market, commercial view on tourism that prevailed during the 1960s, 1970s and in the greater part of the 1980s to the new concept of sustainable tourism and ecotourism, which occurred after the 1990s. They conclude that "the concept of sustainable tourism as a form basically implies the aspiration of a local community (or community of broader scope) in relation to tourism development, which should become responsible for the type, type and pace of the selected tourist development" (Ružić & Amidžić, 2018, p. 135).

Comparing various definitions and various views (Integra, 2010), we may summarize that the sustainable tourism can be applied to all types of tourism, hence it is sort of a wider term than the concept of ecotourism. On the other hand, ecotourism is more concerned with the conservation of natural areas and natural resources and also with the welfare of the local people, involving the proper knowledge and education of both the staff and the guests. It comprises the knowledge of the natural resources as well as the knowledge of the culture and practice of the local communities and people living within the natural environment.

Considering all the previous definitions and bearing in mind the challenges and the proposed principles and measures needed to be implemented in the area of this highly sensitive type of sustainable tourism, we can review the main characteristics of ecotourism in a way that it:

- is applied in natural and cultural areas;
- has a minor impact on the environment;
- is based on principles of conservation and preservation;

- may even contribute to the improvement of the environment and its resources;
- protects local communities and may be beneficial to the local communities' wellbeing;
- involves responsible and planned use and engagement of tourists who intentionally take care of the environment and local communities;
- implies highly informed, planned and strategic approach, which involves the use of technology and the knowledge management methodology.

As we can see from these definitions, there is a completely novel philosophy of tourism behind the concept of sustainable, and especially ecotourism. This philosophy is based on the view that supports sustainability, ethical and responsible relationship of the consumers with the natural environment. Its core is the need to sustain the balance between the economy and the natural environment. It involves the *proactive* role of users, resulting in users' (consumers') commercial enjoyment in natural resources attractions together with applying principles of ethics and social responsibility to the natural environment in the form of tourism. In this view, ecotourism may be understood as innovative tourism, involving the "emerging of a new innovation paradigm", which indicates that "the innovation process more and more includes not only producers, but also the users. It means a shift from the product-centered innovativeness towards user-driven innovativeness." (Radun, 2006, p. 193).

This is in accordance with the modern concept of competitiveness, in which "the environment puts new, more complex requirements to the companies... The consumers, as focal point and target group, change their choice and interests, becoming more sensible and refined. Requirements for quality of the products and services, globally established standards, environment protection, and many other factors, make the relationships between market actors more complicated." (Radun, 2004, p. 57).

The natural tourist potentials of Serbia are great, rich, complex and diverse. As such, it represents an abundant basis for prospective growth and development of ecotourism. As ecotourism promotes a sustainable, balanced, low-impact use of natural environment by consumers, it needs strategic approach, planning and developed legal framework that will guarantee its proper implementation.

With the great shift of the Fourth industrial revolution, there are huge opportunities, although there are threats as well, in the wider future use of new technologies in ecotourism. According to Radun (2018b) "The Fourth industrial revolution enables the connection and permeation of a wide range of new technologies and is a fusion or synthesis of many new scientific and technological fields. In this way, it synergically magnifies and multiplies the interplay of many disciplines, branches and fields, integrating science, technology and economics into new great syntheses, causing enormous and incomprehensible tectonic changes in the worldview, the relationship between human and the world, the possibilities of knowledge and re-examining possibilities, role, boundaries and meaning of human in general." (p. 110).

In this way, we can anticipate in near future ability to create all-inclusive, hyper-networked and hyper-intelligent management system aiming to enable more sophisticated management of ecotourism activities.

Ecotourism in protected areas as a new tourist product

With the advancement of industrialization, the impact of human society on the environment is growing. Having this impact in mind, the environmental degradation increases and the space for conservation and healthy nature is decreasing progressively. That is why it is extremely important to protect some parts of the territory of a country in order to preserve natural values of exceptionally prettiness, rarity and attractiveness.

It should be observed that there is a potential conflict between two main tendencies, one of which is the motivation of the urban population to satisfy their need to relax, refresh and recreate in the regions of preserved and protected nature, which is growingly acknowledged by tourism, and the other is the necessity of ensuring essential and long-term protection and conservation of the most valuable parts of the natural environment, including complex and rich ecosystems, rare and beautiful natural objects and species by the society, on a national, regional and international level. In this respect, D. Filipović (2017) states: "the main issues of protected area management is establishing the balance between the protection of natural values and sustainable development of an area – economic, ecological and social dimension of sustainability." (p. 39).

Ecotourism indicates the importance of conservation of the natural environment and its resources. The aim is to preserve the biodiversity and

sustain the integrity of the natural environment as well as the welfare of the local people dealing with it and/or living therein. In this respect, the protected areas, due to their special treatment, strict legal and institutional regulation and preserved natural resources, are highly important for the development of ecotourism.

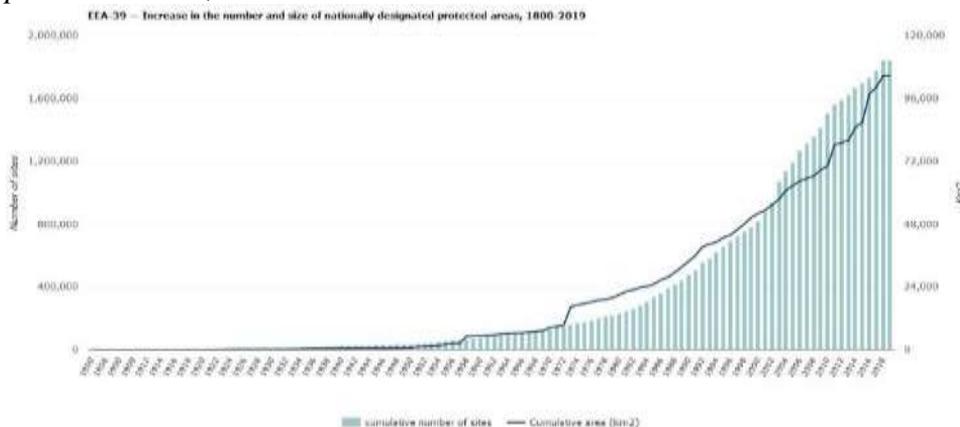
It may be indicated that the well preserved and clean natural resources within the protected areas are the greatest value to the tourists and there is a definite relationship between the value of the protected areas and the benefit of ecotourism activities. Hence, S. Nikolić (Nikolić, 2006) states: "If certain natural environments have richer and more complex ecosystems and landscapes of greater recreational opportunities, more attractive and rare natural objects and phenomena, so the more important are the ecotourism destinations. And it is precisely landscapes and natural objects of such features and importance that are valued and proposed for protection as natural resources. That means that there are no significant differences between the ecological and tourist features of a protected and ecologically preserved nature." (p. 110).

The protected area is defined by International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN, 2020a) as "a clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values."

The EU has a rather advanced legal and institutional framework for the environment regulation and protection. The main institution responsible for environmental protection is the European Environment Agency (EEA), within which there is a comprehensive inventory of nationally designated protected areas (European Environment Agency, 2020a) in 39 European countries, including Serbia. Over time, the number and size of nationally designated protected areas in these countries have marked a constant rise (Fig. 2).

The CDDA officially outputs protected area information from the selected European countries to the World Database of Protected Areas (WDPA). The WDPA is a complete global database of protected areas (terrestrial and maritime). According to the WDPA (IUCN, 2020b), "the protected areas are internationally recognized as major tools in conserving species and ecosystems."

Figure 2: *Increase in the number and size of nationally designated protected areas, 1800-2019*



Source: *The European Environment Agency, 2020a*

The CDDA receives data from the Eionet Network (European Environment Information and Observation Network) which systematically gathers various data from EEA member and cooperating countries in Europe (Eionet, 2020). It differentiates three categories of designation types: A, B and C. Category A comprises (European Environmental Agency, 2020b) "designation types used with the intention to protect fauna, flora, habitats and landscapes (the latter as far as relevant for fauna, flora and for habitat protection)".

Policy and legal framework for ecotourism in Serbia

The systematic and well-planned policy is vital for the development of ecotourism. Since ecotourism is a kind of sustainable tourism, which is focused on tourism with a low or null impact on the environmental resources and aimed at the conservation and development of the natural environment, the legislation and institutions that deal with environmental protection are of utmost interest. The institutional and legal framework is designed for designation, classification, arrangement, planning and protection of areas of special or extraordinary interest for the country.

Serbia has founded a consistent and well-planned centralized system and policy of environmental protection. Nevertheless, only in 2017, with the establishment of the Ministry of Environmental Protection, for the first time, the environmental protection in the Republic of Serbia was raised on

the highest possible level and it received its full economic and social recognition.

There is a complex network of institutions, agents and organizations in Serbia, which have a great impact on the environment, aiming to regulate, protect and oversee environmental protection in Serbia. The most important institutions in Serbia, responsible for environmental protection are:

- The Serbian Environmental Protection Agency;
- The Institute for Nature Conservation of Serbia and
- The Institute for Nature Conservation of Vojvodina Province.

The state of nature conservation and protection is regulated by the Law on the Protection of Nature (Zakon o zaštiti prirode, 2018). The Law defines the protected areas as "areas that have pronounced geological, biological, ecosystem and/or landscape diversity and are therefore designated as protected areas of general interest by the Conservation Act."

The central national institution responsible for the conservation and protection of natural environment is the Institute for Nature Conservation of Serbia in Belgrade. The Institute recognizes 7 types of protected areas: a strict nature reserve, a special nature reserve, a national park, a monument of nature, a protected habitat, an outstanding natural landscape and a nature park (Institute for Nature Conservation of Serbia, 2020). The Law on Nature Conservation (Zakon o zaštiti prirode, 2018) differentiates and defines all these protected areas *in concreto*.

According to the updated Central Register of Protected Natural Resources of the Institute for Nature Conservation of Serbia (Central Register of Protected Natural Resources, 2020), the total protected area in Serbia is currently 677,950 ha, which is 7.67% of the territory of Serbia. There are 469 different protected areas, including 5 national parks (150,225 ha or 1.7% of total territory of Serbia), 18 nature parks (299,088 ha or 3.38%), 21 landscapes (67,998 ha or 0.77%), 69 nature reserves (145,446 ha or 1.64%), 6 protected habitats (2,728 ha or 0.03%) and 314 natural monuments (11,347 ha or 0.13%). According to the Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia (Prostorni Plan, 2010), by 2021, the total protected surface of Serbia should reach 12% of its territory. However, a large number of species and natural ecosystems in Serbia indicate rich biodiversity in terms of quality, but natural habitats of many species, especially endemic ones, take up very small areas, thus limiting biological

resources and potentials which urge for harmonization between nature protection and tourism planning sector (Amidžić et al., 2014).

The legal and institutional framework of environmental protection in Serbia is highly influenced by the complex and comprehensive legal and institutional system of the EU. According to Radun, V. (2018), "the environment protection is great challenge for Serbian government as it needs huge efforts and making substantial and sustainable progress in three areas: a) transposition of the environmental legislation of EU into national legislation of Serbia; b) administrative capacity to implement, monitor and enforce that legislation, and c) establishing the infrastructure required for compliance with the legislation." (p. 118).

Visitor management in protected areas

Visitors in protected areas have a wide range of environmental impacts including the impact on biodiversity, water resources and soils. Such impacts can include changes to animal behavior, breeding patterns, an introduction of invasive species, damage and removal of rare and endangered species` habitats (Spenceley et al., 2015). Consequently, visitor management in protected areas is crucial to ensure that the natural capital they protect can be enjoyed by future generations.

Since the mid 1970s, a variety of planning and management frameworks have been developed for protected areas to address visitors management planning issue. These frameworks include the Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC), Visitor Impact Management (VIM), Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP), Visitor Activity Management Process (VAMP), the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS), and Tourism Optimization Model (TOMM) (Nilsen et al., 1997).

Due to economic benefit for protected areas managers, certain level of impact on natural capital may be acceptable. However, it is crucial to determine what degree of impact is acceptable - more precisely to determine the limits of acceptable changes in ecosystems.

That is why the Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) framework has been used and accepted worldwide. According to Eagles et al. (2002), "It is essential to develop goals for tourism in protected areas. All subsequent actions, such as building facilities, developing recreation programs and assigning levels of tourism service, flow from these goals. The LAC offers

a way to do this that does not focus so much on the relationships between levels of use and impact, but on determining the desirable environmental and social conditions for the visitor activity, and the management actions required to achieve these conditions." (p. 81).

Rather than focusing on establishing carrying capacities and limiting use in these settings, the LAC identify desired social and resource conditions. Consequently, management is oriented toward maintaining or restoring those conditions. Limiting the use is viewed as only one of a number of possible management techniques.

In order to set up a framework for Limits of Acceptable Change appropriately, the following steps are envisaged:

1. Identify issues and concerns. The purpose of this step is to identify features of particular concern to be maintained or achieved and to provide a basis for establishing management objectives;
2. Develop and describe opportunity classes. According to Stankey et al., (1985), an opportunity class provides "a qualitative description of the kinds of resource and social conditions acceptable for that class and the type of management activity considered appropriate" (p.6).
3. Select indicators for resource and social conditions. This step identifies specific standards which require inventorying and monitoring (for example, vegetation damage, soil erosion, amount of infrastructure, crowding) and which provide the basis for identifying what management actions are required where.
4. Inventory of existing resources and social conditions. Indicators chosen in the 3rd step should guide the inventory of resources and social conditions to avoid unnecessary data collection and ensure that the collected data is useful.
5. Specify standards for resources and social conditions in each opportunity class. This step involves the specification of standards that describe acceptable and appropriate conditions for each defined opportunity class.
6. Identify alternative opportunity classes. This step identifies options to help define what conditions are acceptable in terms of the resource and social conditions.
7. Identify management actions for each alternative. During this step, the range of management strategies that would be required for each alternative opportunity class are examined, which will help determine which are viable.

8. Evaluate alternatives and select a preferred one. This step involves finalizing opportunity class allocations and the preferred management program.
9. Implement actions and monitor conditions. During this step, the management program is implemented to achieve the objectives set in step eight. Monitoring ensures periodic, systematic feedback on how the management action is working.

Case Study - Zasavica Special Nature Reserve

The Special Nature Reserve Zasavica (hereinafter referred to as SNR Zasavica) is situated in the Republic of Serbia, on the territory of Srem and North Mačva, east of the Drina River and south of the Sava River. It comprises territories of Sremska Mitrovica and Bogatić municipalities. It is a mosaic of aquatic and wetland ecosystems with fragments of flooded forests. The protected area covers 1128.55 ha, while buffer zones cover 3.462.65 ha. Regarding the international protection status, the SNR Zasavica is designated as a Ramsar site, Important Plant Area, Important Bird Area and Prime Butterfly Area. According to the IUCN management categories, it is a Habitat and Species management area, category IV (Bartula et al., 2011).

The potential for ecotourism in SNR Zasavica is primarily based on the natural capital of the area that attracts a number of visitors throughout of the year. The degree of visitors` impact depends upon many variables in addition to the amount of use: the degree of site hardening, the motivations and behaviors of visitors; the mode of visitor transport and lodging; the effectiveness of guides; and the season(s) in which most use occurs.

Overall measuring of tourism carrying capacity does not have to lead to a single number, like the number of visitors/total area/year. Defining the carrying capacity of individual tourist sites/zones in terms of a simultaneous maximum number of visitors/users is a more acceptable approach. Therefore a pragmatic, but a more appropriate approach is recommended that identifies potential sites for tourism development and visitor infrastructure and contrasts them with the data from the biodiversity research.

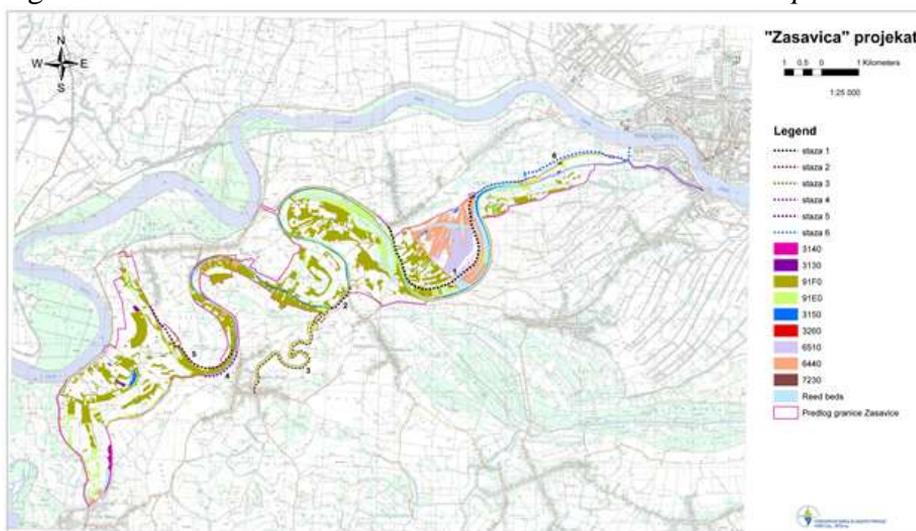
Zones are used to describe management actions and to guide or control a very wide range of activities. Zoning for visitor use is fundamental to all other management strategies of Zasavica SNR. Zoning of visitor activities

is the division of a reserve into a number of different sectors, or zones, for the purpose of distributing different types of use or non-use (i.e. protection) in the most appropriate places. Although visitor management could and should exceed the borders of the reserve, including the buffer zones and the communities around the area in the visitor experience, the prime focus was on the relation between visitation and conservation objectives. The second objective was to determine the range of potential visitor experiences and resource conditions that can be accommodated via a good zoning scheme and appropriate management. As the potential experiences mostly relate to the extensive use (a vulnerable zone with limited access), a "trail-oriented" visitor use has been chosen as a common approach. A clear trail scheme was produced that combines tourism potential with sensitive habitats and vulnerable species, monitoring indicators, etc.

Including the existing "Valjevac – Šumareva Ćuprija" nature trail, potential further development of trails was envisaged, as shown below:

- No 1: Pedestrian-Bicycle Path "Valjevac – Šumareva Ćuprija"
- No 2: "Beaver's Path": Gajića Ćuprija – Batar
- No 3: Educational Trail: Gajića Ćuprija – Batar
- No 4: Banovo Polje – Raševića Ćuprija – Ljubinkovića Ćuprija
- No 5: Raševića Ćuprija – Ljubinkovića Ćuprija – Staniševac
- No 6: Mačvanska Mitrovica – Visitor Centre
- No 7: Ravnjanska Ćuprija – Gajića Ćuprija

Figure 3: *Visitors trails and Natura 2000 habitats relationship*



Source: *Zasavica SNR Management plan*

The identification (Figure 3) was done of where the trails would be located and the field researches on the location's natural conditions were completed by biodiversity experts. By contrasting tourism data and visitors management opportunities with biodiversity maps, the basis for a visitor zoning plan has been established. It aims at minimizing negative impacts, while providing optimal experiences along Zasavica nature trails.

Conclusion

Having in mind that the protected areas in Serbia cover the surface of 677,950 ha, which is 7.67% of the whole territory, the potential for developing tourism based on natural resources is remarkable in Serbia. However, in order to secure sustainable use of natural resources by the tourism sectors, visitor management planning is required.

Researchers realized that looking only at numbers of visitors to minimize negative impact on natural ecosystems was not sufficient. They demonstrated that what visitors did, when they did it and a number of other circumstances were frequently more important in determining visitors' impacts than simply the number of visitors. Therefore, the Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) framework been proposed as the most effective visitors management planning tool that involves identifying desired social and natural resource conditions, defining the objectives and measures for achieving the objectives rather than only limiting the use of resources and restricting the number of visitors.

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