

MANAGEMENT OF ECOTOURISM IN GEORGIA

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Abstract

For many developing countries tourism is one of the main sources of income, creating and generating much needed employment opportunities for socio-economic development. Within tourism is the new trend known as ecotourism whose main aim is to minimize the negative aspects of tourism on the host country. Ecotourism is sustainable tourism segment which includes relatively quiet natural landscapes of inspection including the protected areas. In the international tourism market typical tour operators are searching for new products, new countries in order to diversify their tourism packages. This is a strategy to keep clients on board as well as to attract new ones. According to ecotourism statistics, it was seen from the eighties a marked shift from mass tourism to ecotourism and more and more tourists were seeking environmentally relevant holiday destinations. The ecotourism statistics further shows that nature tourism has generated, it is believed, as much as seven percent of all international travel expenditure and they further reveal that this rate is increasing by about ten to thirty percent each year. Significant attention must be paid to current problems connected with deterioration of global environmental conditions, such as: climate change, violation of the ozone layer, demographic explosions, ecosystem changes and threat to biodiversity, weak energy condition, pollution, water scarcity, and loss and destruction of protected natural areas and changes in the natural processes in the biosphere. The solutions to these challenges lie in the management of ecotourism to fight this exploitation through protection, conservation and utilization of valuable resources.

Keywords: Tourism, Ecotourism, Sustainable Tourism, Management

Introduction

The term tourism is an economic and social phenomenon. Over the decades, tourism has become one of the world's largest and fastest growing industries. Accounting for more than 30% of the world's exports of commercial services and more than 6% of overall exports of goods and services, tourism has a major and increasing impact on both people and ecosystem services. For many developing countries it is one of the main sources of income, creating and generating much needed employment opportunities for socio-economic development.

The development of tourism, despite the current downturn in the world, shows a steady increase in tourism demand: The growth in international tourism in 2013 was equals to the growth in income generated by over one billion tourists who travelled for business, leisure, visiting friends and relatives or other purposes. Such results confirm the increasingly important role of the tourism sector in stimulating economic growth and contributing to international trade.

The continued growth of the tourism industry and its associated tendency to overcrowd a destination progresses in tandem with strong environmental sentiments from consumers who increasingly demand cleaner, more sustainable and more environmentally friendly tourism destinations. These qualitative and quantitative trends necessitate the

development and management of sustainable and biodiversity based tourism products, linking tourism with the sustainable use of natural resources and conservation management.

Total export earnings generated by international tourism in 2013 reached US\$ 1.4 trillion. Receipts earned by destinations from international visitors grew by 5% to reach US\$ 1159 billion, while an additional US\$ 218 billion was earned by international passenger transport. Tourism has a changed face, as after the First World War, it has changed from domestic travel to international travel that has seen it grow exponentially even in developing countries.

Within tourism is the new trend known as ecotourism whose main aim is to minimize the negative aspects of tourism on the host country. Ecotourism is mainly intended for small groups of tourists and the local organization, by small specialized enterprises. The categories of tourists interested in this kind of tourism are clearly aware of environmental responsibility.

Ecotourism is sustainable tourism segment which includes relatively quiet natural landscapes of inspection including the protected areas. This type of tourism is popular among tourists of the categories which are eager to get more information on the local ecosystem, eco culture and concerned about environmental problems. The typical eco-tourist is aged between thirty-five and fifty-four years of age and of these, it is believed that as many as eighty-two percent have graduated from college, and are more than ready to pay more than what average tourists pay, which is about twelve hundred dollars for a trip. This type of investing does not require a lot of tourism, but it is necessary to have qualified guides, because the places where tourists travel the strict conservation measures are needed.

Ecotourism is: "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people." Ecological tourism is nature-oriented tourism; therefore, diversity of eco-tourism could represent the two main types:

- Ecotourism in protected areas, traditional or eco-tourism destination, which are ecological tours in the narrow sense of the term, and the so-called "Australian" (or "North American");
- Ecotourism not only within the protected areas. This type of eco-tourism is the so-called "German" (or Western - European) model and faces a wide range of eco trips.

Ecotourism is generally created by the natural environment and cultural diversity. Ecotourism promotes the natural and socio-cultural environment. It creates jobs and income to local residents. On the other hand, where the eco-tourism acts, the environment needs to provide additional control and security measures.

Ecotourism has four main cornerstones: the development of sustainability, economic benefits for local communities, cultural and educational integration of components. It is also necessary to take into account the fact that tourism in the state as well as private sector has common interests. Very often, short-term benefits and long-term interests are sacrificed. This is a particularly obvious example of the least developed countries where the population is forced to put up with long-term, ecocide "in order to survive in the short term".

In recent years the requirements for ecotourism strategies have widened to include the search for tools that guarantee more benefits for the local community and indigenous populations, particularly in rural areas. These rural areas are mostly characterized by rich biological diversity, the central asset for tourism. It would be desirable to have more opportunities for the youth that they realize need and importance of nature for human development- survival from the very beginning.

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further shows that nature tourism has generated, it is believed, as much as seven percent of all international travel expenditure and they further reveal that this rate is increasing by about ten to thirty percent each year.

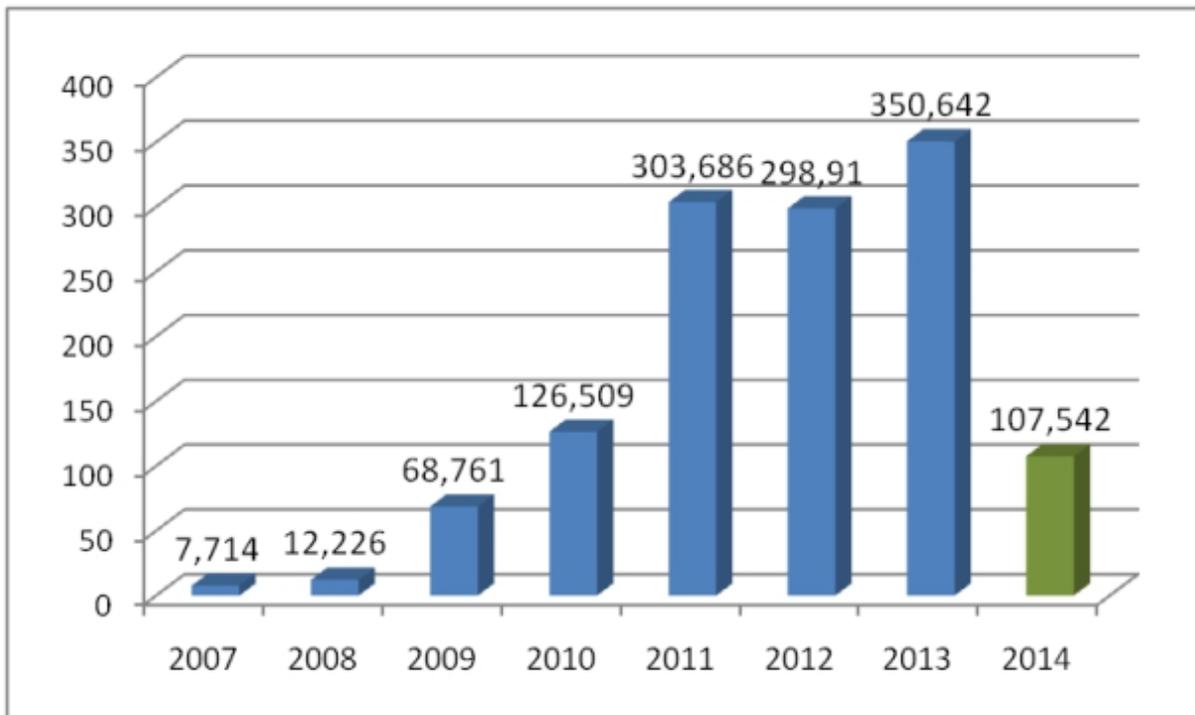
Table 1. Visitors Visited Georgian Protected Areas

Year	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Visitors	7,714	12,226	68,761	126,509	303,686	298,91	350,642

Source: www.apa.gov.ge Agency of Protected Areas

Each year several million visitors visit large national parks. The National Parks visitor number is growing every year. If we consider the visitor statistics, we see that in 2005 the Georgian protected areas were visited by 5 669 people, and in 2013 this number increased to 350 642 (See table 1 and graph 1).

Graph 1. Georgian Protected Areas Visitor Statistics by Years



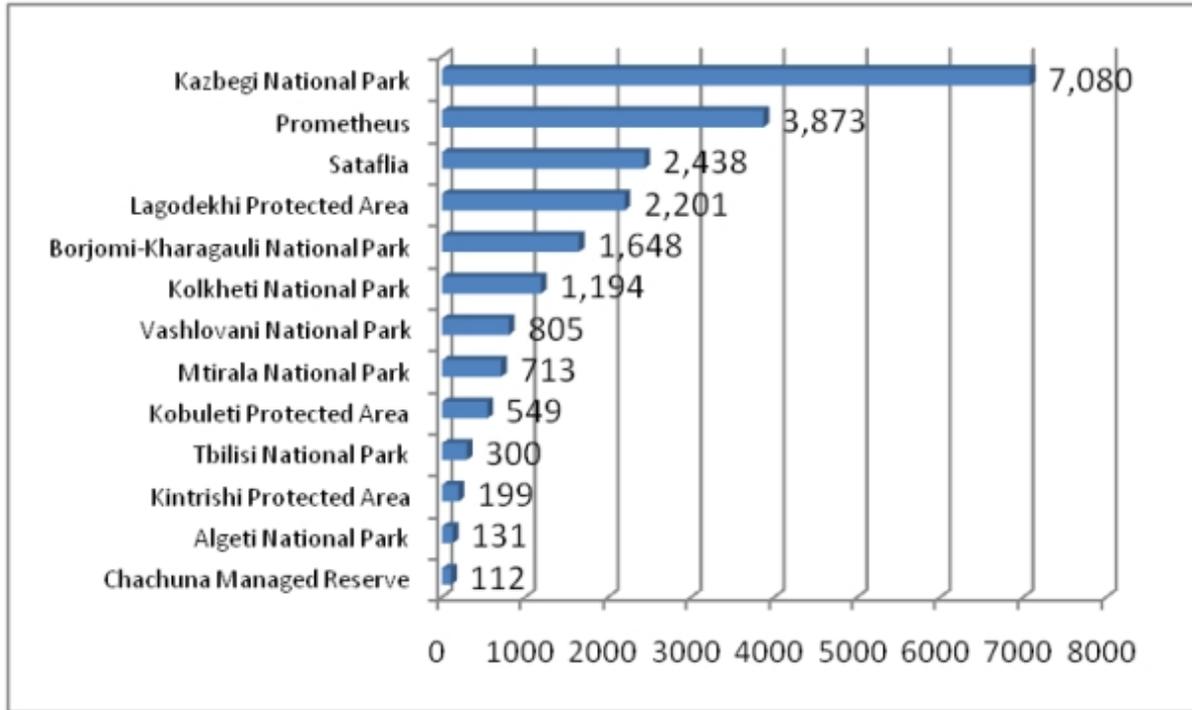
Source: www.apa.gov.ge Agency of Protected Areas

As for each protected areas in 2014, Kazbegi National Park is the first popular with 7080 visitors, Prometheus Cave is the second with 3873 visitors and Sataflia is the third with 2438 visitors (see graph 2).

The effort to introduce the environmental protection planning system in Georgia dates back to the 1990s. On April 21, 1994, the Georgian Parliament ratified the Convention “About biological diversity”. Georgia’s affiliation with the mentioned document was extremely important in respect of protection of environment and biodiversity.

The fact of the major principles of sustainable development being given in the Constitution of Georgia with its Article 35 entitling every citizen to live in the healthy environment, use natural and cultural environment, receive thorough, objective and timely information about his jobsite and residential environment can be regarded as an important step made towards the adaptation of the national-level measures oriented on the sustainable development.

Graph 2. Visitor Statistics by Georgian Protected Areas (2014)



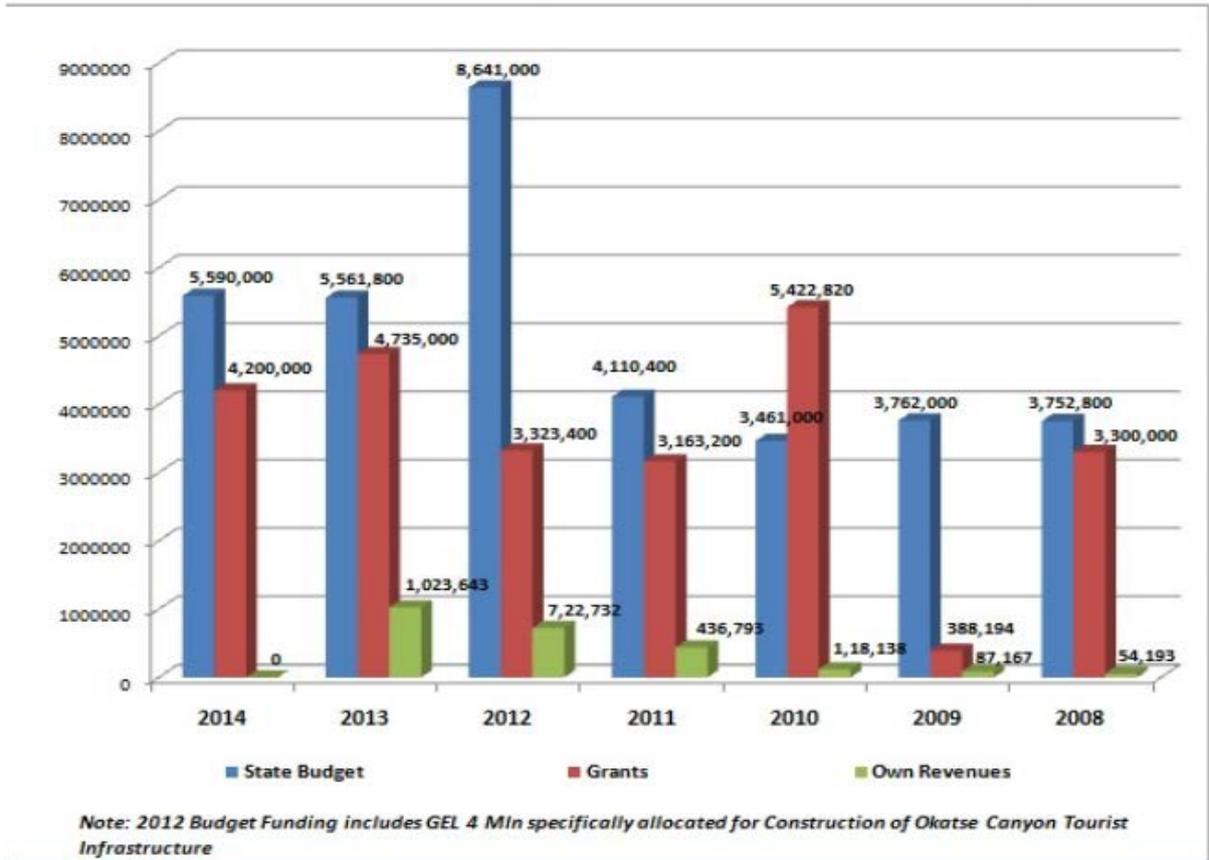
Source: www.apa.gov.ge Agency of Protected Areas

In 1996, a frame law “On Environmental Protection” regulating legal relations between the state authorities and physical and legal entities (regardless the type of ownership or legal status) in the field of environmental protection and nature management all over Georgia, including its territorial waters, air space, continental shelf and special economic zone, was adopted. In June of 2003, the Georgian Parliament adopted the law “On the Red List” and “Red Book” of Georgia. The law gives legal definitions (having recommendatory and methodic significance) of the Red List and Red Book of Georgia of the endangered wild animal and wild vegetation species. The law also defines the structure of the Red List and procedures to develop the list of species to be Red-Listed, and develop, adopt and renew (review) the draft List. The mentioned law also regulates the issues related to planning and financing the measures to include the endangered species in the Red Book, to protect, obtain, rehabilitate and preserve them.

Under the Decree of the Georgian Government of 2006, all ministries are obliged to develop and annually review an average-term action plan (strategy) defining the priorities in the country, measures and financial calculations for different sectors; efficient use of natural resources and forests, improvement of the environmental protection system and promotion of ecotourism.

In Georgia, it is the Ministry of Environmental Protection developing the state policy in the field of biodiversity and being responsible for its realization. The Ministry is also responsible for the development and coordination of the state monitoring system for biodiversity. The Ministry sets the admissible limits (quotas and limits) of using natural resources, specifies the places of use, conditions and rules.

Graph 3. Funding of Agency of Protected Areas by Years



Source: www.apa.gov.ge Agency of Protected Areas

We can see Funding trends of Protected Areas on graph 3. International and national NGOs contribute much to the environmental protection and conservation of biodiversity of Georgia. The major donor organizations in the field of environmental protection of Georgia are: Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Bank, United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA), Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Eurasian Fund and others.

By 2011, Georgia was a party to approximately 50 international multilateral and bilateral agreements, thus bearing high responsibility for the environmental protection. In Georgia, work for the development of system of national parks has begun since 90s of the past century and the first object has been Borjomi-Kharagauli national park. Afterwards, it was followed by Kolkheti and other national parks. Besides, range of services and values given by the natural territories causes the difference among management strategies. International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has developed the integrated system of determination of categories of natural protected territories.

National parks serve for protection of state’s natural heritage, but they also offer opportunities for enjoyment and research of nature. National parks contribute to the development of tourism which, in turn, causes the progress in economically undeveloped regions. Modern national parks have special linkage to the country’s regions because of their functional characteristics and help protection of environment and social-economic development.

The Agency of Protected Areas of the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection has finished the project called “Strengthening the Management of

Protected Areas of Georgia”. The project was carried out with the support of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) together with the German Government and aimed at the introduction of nine new eco-tourist products at 5 different protected areas.

Within the framework of the Project “Strengthening the Management of Protected Areas of Georgia” several new eco-tourist products have been developed, such as: cycling routes at Tbilisi NP, Educational Trails at Lagodekhi PA, Zipline and Canyoning at Mtirala NP, Geological trails at Vashlovani PA and paddling at Kolkheti National Park. With the beginning of new 2014 tourist season the services will be available for all visitors of the mentioned Protected Areas.

An agreement between the Agency of Protected Areas of the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection of Georgia and the German Consulting Group (GFA) was signed. The German Development Bank (KfW) in cooperation with the Agency of Protected Areas of the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection will be contributing 8.2 million Euros towards the development of 4 Protected Areas in Georgia. This grant will be spent during the next 5 years. According to the agreement, the development of infrastructure in Algeti, Kazbegi and Kintrishi Protected Areas, as well as strengthening the Administrations of the above-mentioned PAs is considered. Furthermore, establishing of Pshav-Khevsureti Protected Areas is planned. The project aims at elaboration of high standard management plans, development of eco-tourist trails, construction of shelters and picnic areas, as well as construction and equipment of administrative buildings, demarcation of boundaries of PAs, establishing of bio-monitoring system and capacity building of the employees of the PA administrations.

Vashlovani Protected Areas were nominated to be granted with the European Diploma at the European Council on March 24, 2014. The European Diploma of Protected Areas is a prestigious international award granted since 1965 by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to natural and semi-natural areas and landscapes of exceptional European importance for the preservation of biological, geological and landscape diversity and managed in an exemplary way. The next stage is a visit of Experts from European Diploma granting committee to Vashlovani Protected Areas and further estimation of its value. Within a year the decision will be made whether the application to receive this prestigious Diploma for Vashlovani Protected Areas has been satisfied.

Conclusion

International travelers are looking for new directions, and in spite of the numerous events, awareness of Georgia, as a tourist country, is still low. But consider this issue on the other side - bandwidth of tourist resources. Large crowds of tourists were collected on a limited area of operation of the park and create the danger of disturbance of natural ecosystems. If you look at the visitors’ statistics to protected areas, yet - so far there is no danger, but it is advisable to be thoroughly studied the National Parks throughout.

World Heritage Convention defines natural or cultural - historical types of objects that meet the specific criteria to be included in the World Heritage List. Several particular places of protected areas to be granted with the status of the World Heritage Sites in the future have been identified.

As the main action in the sphere of improvement of structure of ecotourism is:

- Creation of system of the information and tourist centers in the territory of areas as an example Polesye. The most important elements of investment process are promotion of the investment project, adequate representation to his potential investors.

- The ethno-ecological routes should include elements of the environment nature and changed by the person, settlements or separate dwelling of indigenous people, sacred place, cultural and historical monuments.

- Development of administrative decisions in the tourist organizations has a certain specifics.

- Requirements to professional competence of guides in the field of tourism assume: possession of technology of sales of a tourist product, skills of communication and knowledge of psychology of clients, knowledge of bases of regional geography and main directions of tourism, knowledge of legal bases of tourist activity, free possession of Internet technologies, use of positive models of behavior.

Income generated by ecotourism not only aims to conserve protected areas, but to satisfy socio-economic needs of local communities. Social effect from programs will provide education and recreation opportunities for people.

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