

CONCEPT OF ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN UNESCO BIOSPHERE RESERVES: CASE STUDIES FROM CROATIA AND SERBIA

KONCEPCIJA RAZVOJA EKOTURIZMA U UNESCO REZERVATIMA BIOSFERE: STUDIJE SLUČAJA IZ HRVATSKE I SRBIJE

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ABSTRACT

Ecotourism is a sustainable form of tourism in protected areas that provides support for nature protection and sustainable development of local communities. Biosphere reserves are special areas with a relatively original nature and active socio-economic development, as well as with cultural characteristics that must be in harmony with the ecological environment. Understanding the interaction of environmental, economic and social factors in a biosphere reserve is the basis for setting the concept of sustainable development of ecotourism. In respect to that, this paper includes an analysis of the concepts of ecotourism within the protected areas Kopački rit (Croatia) and Gornje Podunavlje (Serbia), in the biosphere reserves Mura – Drava – Dunav (Croatia) and Bačko Podunavlje (Serbia), with the main aim of making a comparative analysis of their organization. The main findings are providing the knowledge basis in terms of nature protection according to the national legislation and international nature protection statuses, nature degradation and challenges of protected area management, organization of tourism, cooperation between nature protection and tourism development, projects supporting the nature protection and ecotourism development and involvement of the local population.

KEY WORDS: Ecotourism, biosphere reserves, UNESCO, sustainable development, nature protection.

INTRODUCTION UVOD

Ecotourism has become a growing industry (Diamantis, 1999; Carvache-Franco et al, 2020). One of definitions of ecotourism explains that ‘we may define ecological tourism or ecotourism as that tourism that involves travelling to re-

latively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific object of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals’ (Ceballos-Lascu-rain, 1996). The World Tourism Organization highlights five important features of ecotourism: (1) ecotourism is nature-based form of tourism in which the main motivation of the tourists is the observation and appreciation of nature

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and traditional culture in natural areas; (2) it contains educational and interpretation features; (3) ecotourism is generally, but not always, organized for small groups of tourists; (4) it minimizes negative impacts on the natural and socio-cultural environment; (5) it supports the protection of natural areas by generating economic benefits for local communities, creating jobs and income opportunities and increasing awareness about natural and cultural assets (UNWTO, 2002).

Ecotourism definitions are quite diverse in tourism literature, where authors focus on various perspectives, from the welfare of local community up to sustainable resource management (Diamantis & Johnson, 2003). Overall, ecotourism and its products are mostly based on nature, involve educational aspect of the tourism experience, and are focused on providing benefit to local communities through sustainable sociocultural, environmental and economic development (Blamey, 2001). As stated in Mondino et al. (2018) ecotourism is characterized by a number of biosphere reserves throughout the world, in order to establish the bond between conservation awareness and sustainable local development. In theory of ecotourism it is suggested that economic development and natural resources conservation are compatible, which is relevant in the context of biosphere reserves. But even so, there are some challenges to be addressed (Mondino et al., 2018).

According to Hoppstadius and Dahlstrom (2015) UNESCO Biosphere Reserves represent the exploration fields for ecotourism due to their objectives that focus on learning, experimentation, and sustainable development. However sustainable development is essential prerequisite for activities in biosphere reserves. In the context of biosphere reserves, sustainable development acts as connecting line between conservation and economic development, which is not supposed to prevail on neither of sides, but to focus on compromise and exploration of both equally. The major contribution of biosphere projects is the knowledge gained in that specific areas, which would be valuable in improving the conservation and development of the area and might be implemented at other localities. Investigating ecotourism in biosphere reserves contributes to understanding sustainable development in practice (Hoppstadius and Dahlstrom, 2015).

This research emphasizes the importance of mutual knowledge of geographically close protected areas, which are part of a unique natural unity and which share the common ecosystems, habitats and species. No matter the fact, these protected areas are not only a part of the biosphere reserve, but are located in different countries. The main goal of this paper is to indicate the necessity of harmonizing the policies of nature protection and development of tourism (ecotourism) in such cases.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

PODACI I METODE

Study Area – *Područje istraživanja*

Biosphere reserves Mura-Drava-Dunav and Bačko Podunavlje are the result of an initiative that appeared in the second half of the 1990s and which was dedicated to the protection of the river corridors along the Mura, Drava and Danube. In 2012, Mura – Drava – Danube Biosphere Reserve (Croatia - Hungary) was declared, while Bačko Podunavlje Biosphere Reserve was declared in 2017. Biosphere reserves Mura River in Slovenia (2018) and Lower Mura Valley in Austria were declared after that.

In September 2021, four biosphere reserves were declared as unique and the first pent lateral in the world - Mura – Drava – Danube, which is also known as European Amazon. Protected areas of Kopački rit and Gornje Podunavlje are now an integral part of this large Biosphere Reserve in fact.

Nature park Kopački Rit (23,126 ha) is situated in the north-eastern part of Croatia in the region of Baranja, between the rivers Drava and Danube (Osijek-Baranja County). There are two settlements in the Kopački Rit Nature Park, Tikveš and Kozjak, with a population of 108 inhabitants. In the area outside the Nature Park, there are mostly rural settlements Bilje, Kopačevo, Podunavlje, Vardarac, Lug, Grabovac and Zlatna Greda, while the city of Osijek is only 5 km air distance away from the park (Spatial Plan, 2006).

Nature Park Kopački Rit is one of the best-preserved floodplains of large rivers in Europe. It is characterized by the exceptional beauty of the landscape and rich biodiversity. Special Areas of Conservation important for species and habitat types POVS Kopački rit - HR 2000394 (Narodne novine (NN), 80/19), and Special Areas of Conservation important for birds POP Podunavlje and Donje Podravlje - HR 1000016 are integral parts of the Ecological Network of the Republic of Croatia (Natura 2000 network) managed in whole or in part by the Public Institution “Nature Park Kopački rit“. The list of flora for the Park area currently contains more than 500 plant species (<https://pp-kopacki-rit.hr>). The park is internationally recognised for birds. It is inhabited by as many as 300 different species of birds, which makes up 80% of the species recorded in the ornitho fauna of Croatia. Particularly interesting are the species that nest in large colonies, such as the grey heron, the white-bearded tern, the great blackbird, and the river gull. The largest population of the white-tailed eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) in the entire Danube basin nests in the area of Kopački Rit. It is also a symbol of the Park (<https://pp-kopacki-rit.hr>).

Kopački Rit was legally protected as early as in 1967 as a managed nature reserve (Official Gazette No. 45/67), while in 1999 it was declared a nature park (Official Gazette No. 45/99). Kopački Rit is also an internationally important area. As early as in 1986, it was included in the List of Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBA) of Europe, and since 1993 it has been fully included in the List of Wetlands of International Importance of the Convention on the Protection of Wetlands (RAMSAR).

The Public Institution “Kopački Rit Nature Park” (PI-KRNP) was established in 1999. Its aim was protection, maintenance and promotion of the protected area. The scope of work of PI-KRNP consists of several major management aspects included in the ten-year Management Plan according to the Guidelines for planning the management of protected areas and / or ecological network areas, Version 1.1. UNDP, Croatia (Smjernice za planiranje upravljanja zaštićenim područjima i/ili područjima ekološke mreže, 2018: Ministarstvo gospodarstva i održivog razvoja (2020), UNDP, Hrvatska), i.e., protection of natural values, cultural heritage and traditional values. Visitation management includes interpretation and education as well as cooperation with the local community and other stakeholders.

Protected Area Management plan is further implemented through the development and implementation of the Annual Program for the Protection, Maintenance, Preservation, Promotion and Use of Kopački Rit Nature Park.

Kopački Rit is the backbone of the network of protected areas on the Danube - DANUBEPARKS, founded in 2007. Since 2012 UNESCO has declared the transboundary Mura - Drava - Danube Biosphere Reserve (Croatia and Hungary), which includes an extremely valuable part of Kopački Rit (<https://pp-kopacki-rit.hr>).

Kopački Rit Nature Park is also included in the area of the Natura 2000 ecological network, namely Podunavlje and Donje Podravlje (HR 1000016) and Kopački Rit (HR 2000394).

Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve (22,480 ha) is situated in the north-western part of Serbia (Vojvodina), near the Danube banks, including numerous habitats in three landscape units: Apatinski rit, Monoštorski rit and Karapandža. This area has always attracted people for its abundance in natural resources, and currently the reason is primarily nature protection. In broader surroundings of the Gornje Podunavlje SNR (Special Nature Reserve) there are settlements with the population of about 83,000 (Stojanović & Savić 2013).

Gornje Podunavlje SNR is an important center of landscape, ecosystem and species varieties. The number of plants consists of about 1,000 species, among which there

are extremely endangered species listed in the Red book of flora in Serbia, e.g. winter aconite (*Eranthis hyemalis*), water violet (*Hottonia palustris*) and mare's tail (*Hippuris vulgaris*). The total known number of ornitho fauna is 230. The member of the group is also the rare and endangered species of white-tailed eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*). Also, Gornje Podunavlje is the largest habitat of red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) in Serbia (Panjković, 2000).

Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve has been managed by Public Enterprise Vojvodinašume from Petrovaradin since 2001. With the aim of its long-termed protection and preservation ten year management and annual management plans are designed with the following activities: planning documents and managing documents; custody and inspection; monitoring the condition; cooperation with users and stakeholders; protection and preservation of natural assets; measures for protection and exploitation of natural resources; development activities; scientific and research activities; cultural, educational, tourist – recreational activities; project activities; regulating and equipping the area; international cooperation (Stojanović & Savić 2013).

These activities are in accord with the obligations of the management pursuant to the Law on nature protection (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 36/2009).

In 1989, Gornje Podunavlje was included in the Important Bird Area (IBA) on approximately 1,000 ha, based on its ornithological values (Tucakov, 2018). The process of revision confirmed this status, while the area has been expanded to 22,949 ha (www.birdlife.org). In 2007, Gornje Podunavlje with its surroundings, obtaining the area of 22,480 ha, was included in the list of water habitats of international importance under the protection of Ramsar Convention (www.ramsar.org). Besides that, Gornje Podunavlje Region is on the list of Prime Butterfly Area (PBA) and it has the status of Important Plant Area (IPA) (Tucakov, 2018).

Data collection

Data for a comparative analysis of the development of ecotourism, which is presented in this paper, were collected primarily in field research. This part included contacts with the protected areas managers. The second part of the research was based on the study of secondary material sources. First, these are the development plans of these areas in the field of nature protection, and then the reports on the state of nature. Then, plans and strategies for the development of tourism were taken into analysis, both at the level of protected areas and wider at the level of counties (Osijek-Baranja in Croatia) or municipalities (Sombor and Apatin in Serbia).

NATURE DEGRADATION AND CHALLENGES OF PROTECTED AREA MANAGEMENT

DEGRADACIJA PRIRODE I IZAZOVI UPRAVLJANJA ZAŠTIĆENIM PODRUČJEM

The main forms of nature degradation in Nature Park Kopački rit and Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve are similar in their character, which additionally emphasizes their belonging to the same type of environment, primarily to the wet habitats of the spacious floodplains in the Danube valley.

Threats in the Kopački Rit Nature Park are numerous and are mostly caused by various human activities. One of the most dangerous threats is unsustainable management of water resources, i.e., the disruption of natural processes on rivers, their channelling, adjustment for easier navigation, and flood prevention. Irrigation of agricultural land also affects the loss of wetlands and swamp habitats, while intensive agriculture, using fertilizers and pesticides, negatively affects water and soil quality representing at the same time a complete loss of biodiversity due to the use of monocultures. Absence of systematic waste disposal and drainage causes a further negative impact on water quality in Kopački Rit (Management Plan, 2006).

The change in the groundwater regime causes the succession of vegetation, drying of forests, and the increased occurrence of invasive species. Finally, poaching and poaching in fishing, as well as inadequate fishing, also pose a threat to the natural values of the Park, especially poaching during spawning can disrupt the stability of the fish population (Management Plan, 2006).

The manager of the protected area tries to fight the identified threats in Kopački Rit by carrying out numerous activities for the protection and preservation of natural values envisaged in the management plan as well as by participating in numerous national and international projects. The projects are related to the suppression of habitat fragmentation, i.e., to the revitalization and maintenance of the connection of all elements of the habitat, and the preservation of biodiversity (<https://pp-kopacki-rit.hr>). Then there is also an important project aimed at clearing mines, and

Table 1. Nature degradation in Nature Park Kopački rit and Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve

Tabela 1. Oblici degradacije prirode u Parku prirode Kopački Rit i Specijalnom rezervatu prirode Gornje Podunavlje

	Kopački rit	Gornje Podunavlje
Disruption of natural processes on rivers	***	***
Fragmentation of habitats	**	***
Forestry	*	**
Poaching and poaching in fishing	**	**
Tourism	*	*

*small, **medium, ***strong

biological reforestation (Franjić, 2020), as well as a project developing a framework for the management of the Natura 2000 ecological network.

Gornje Podunavlje SNR is the most endangered by melioration works, embankment construction and construction of canal network which has intersected natural river flows (Karapandža and Monoštorski rit are the places that have been struck the hardest). Poplar plantations have been systematically replacing the areas of the old autochthonous forests of white poplar for decades (Stojanović, 2005). Loss and fragmentation of habitats, especially in terms of natural forests of pedunculated oak, willow, white and black poplar, wet meadows and ponds, as well as the raising of embankments in the past, negatively affected biodiversity. Besides that, this protected area is endangered by the spread of invasive species that is also affecting the native and protected species in negative manner (Puzović et al, 2015). Habitat fragmentation is also affected by the construction of forest roads, which make this area significantly more open and accessible through the road infrastructure (Panjković & Stojnić, 2011).

In order to overcome the cases of nature degradation, the Manager of Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve, together with other nature protection institutions (such as Institute for Nature Conservation of Voivodina Province, Provincial Secretariat for Urban Planning and Environmental Protection), implements activities and measures in order to revitalize the wetlands, habitats of protected species, as well as with the aim of preserving the birds and their habitats (Puzović et al, 2015).

ORGANISATION OF TOURISM ORGANIZACIJA TURIZMA

Tourism has traditionally been an activity of marginal economic importance for the Slavonia-Baranja County. However, but during the last 10 years significant breakthroughs have been made. Kopački Rit Nature Park is recognized as one of the main carriers of tourism development in the County (Master Plan of Tourism of the Osijek-Baranja County (OBC), 2016). As a protected area, Kopački Rit Nature Park has been more intensely engaged in the increase of visits, either through development of strategic planning documents related to tourism development or investments in visitor infrastructure improvement, as well as focusing on providing accompanying interpretation and education services. The visitor reception plan, i.e., the carrying capacity, was developed for the Special Zoological Reserve and for the entire area of the Park. According to the plan Kopački Rit can accommodate a maximum of about 250,000 visitors a year without compromising natural values (Institute for Spatial Planning, 2006). The structure and attitudes of its visitors were also explored (TOMAS, 2006).

Tourism in the protected areas in Croatia is being developed within the framework of various strategic documents, from the national to the local levels. Thus, tourism in protected areas and in the Kopački Rit Nature Park is covered by the Strategy and Action Plan for Nature Protection of the Republic of Croatia for the period from 2017 to 2025. National Tourism Development Strategy until 2020 with the accompanying Green Tourism Development Action Plan, the Osijek –Baranja County Tourism Development Master Plan until 2020, and other strategic documents at lower levels also tackle this topic. The preparation of the second generation of the Management Plan and the Management Study of the Visitors of the Kopački Rit Nature Park is in progress.

In the area of Osijek-Baranja County, there are 11 tourist boards of different levels, from county, city and municipal to the Tourist Board of Baranja, being the most active in the county (Master Plan of Tourism in OBC, 2016).

Tourism does not have a long tradition in the Gornje Podunavlje region and its surroundings because economic development plans in the past mainly relied on the potential for agricultural development, and partly on industry as well. However, in the previous two decades, this trend has been slowly changing.

The Protected Area Manager - Public Enterprise Vojvodinašume is responsible for the basic level of tourism organization. This public enterprise also obtains the Travel Agency Vojvodinašume – Turist in the organization of the overall business. The agency is specialized in selective forms of tourism, including the ecotourism (www.vojvodinasume.rs). The Manager in Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve also organizes ecotourism on the basis of the study of the protection of this area. According to this study, arrangement, construction and infrastructural equipping of space for tourism and recreation purposes in a manner that will not jeopardize special values in this area is allowed, together with presentation of natural values (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 45/01). Accordingly, the Protected Area Manager organizes a preparation of planning documents for development of ecotourism, arranges the space within the Reserve (rest areas, ecological-educational trails, information boards), organizes ecotourism tours, provides a guide and contacts with the local community representatives involved in the tourist offer (ethno-houses).

At the level of the local government, tourism is under the jurisdiction of tourist organizations of the City of Sombor and the Municipality of Apatin. The work of tourist organizations is mainly focused on the promotion of the entire Gornje Podunavlje Region.

The activity of tourism is regulated by numerous planning documents, starting from the local to those of national im-

portance. The Visitor Management Plan, a document commissioned by the Manager of Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve, systematically regulates tourism zoning and care for natural values, recording of visitors' arrivals and researching their attitudes, defining the ethical codes, as well as preparing the plans of marketing and control activities (Visitor Management Plan in Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve, 2019). Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the period between 2016 and 2025 recognizes Gornje Podunavlje, within the tourist region of Danube, as one of destinations where tourism must be a priority for future development (Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia, 2016).

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATURE PROTECTION AND ECOTOURISM POVEZANOST ZAŠTITE PRIRODE I EKOTURIZMA

The visitor infrastructure at the main entrance to the Park includes the Reception Center (RC) Mali Sakadaš, built according to traditional architecture. The main building of the Mali Sakadaš Centre consists of a central interactive hall with a museological display, an open pavilion for screening a film about Kopački Rit, an information desk, a souvenir shop with souvenirs interpreting the natural and traditional values of the area, and a parking lot with charging stations for electric vehicles. Additional facilities are connected to the reception centre forming a whole - the White Water Lily Promenade (2550 m long) with the popular Sulejman Bridge connected to the pier Sakadaš, which is the starting point for exploring water treasures of Kopački Rit by electric boats, boats and canoes. There are also a children's playground and a catering object. Nearby are an interpreted replica of a *suvara* (mill) and an orchard of old varieties for educational purposes.

In the northern part of the Park, there is the "Tikveš Castle" Complex, consisting of a forest and a park area within which residential buildings are situated. In 2022 it will become the new reception Centre of the Park. There are three promenades in the Park area: The White Water Lily Promenade, Stari Brijest and Veliki Sakadaš, as well as the Pannonian Peace Trail and the Baranja Greenways Ecopath, which are part of an international cycling route. Worth mentioning is recently opened bicycle path "European Amazon" 5-country UNESCO Mura-Drava-Danube Biosphere Reserve with a total length of 1822 km. European Amazon is a brand focusing on sustainable tourism. It returns a share of income for co-financing nature conservation programs in the region. It will offer a full package comfortable cycling holidays connecting local tourism offer of regions, situated along rivers in five countries: Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary and Serbia (

of-europe.com/en/bike-trail/). Kopački Rit Nature Park provides a diverse offer for visitors, i.e., sailing on an electric boat and a boat for smaller groups, canoeing, bird watching programs, and educational programs for primary and secondary school. The offer will be thoroughly upgraded through development of seven new educational programs related to the national curriculum.

The zoning in the Management Plan of the Kopački Rit Nature Park in 2006, defined two main zones – the Basic and the Transition Zones, within which there are three sub-zones (strict protection, active protection and use zone covering a very small area). There is a visiting infrastructure in the use sub-zone, i.e., the majority of visiting activity takes place there (PUPPKR, 2006).

Osijek-Baranja County is one of the most successful counties in funding drawing in Croatia. 41 projects related to tourism were applied for in the previous programming period, while the Manager of the Protected Area and the Association for Nature and Environmental Protection - Green Osijek particularly stand out. Investments have resulted in increase in visitors' number and diversification of tourism into selective forms; gastro-oenological, eco-tourism, cyclo-tourism and rural tourism (Koprivnjak, 2020). The majority of tourists and visitors are still domestic tourists (around 55-60%), but with the entry into the EU, this percentage began to change and the increasing arrival of foreign tourists has been recorded. In the last ten years, PPKR has recorded between 30,000 and 40,000 visitors a year, i.e., the Park has recorded a positive visiting trend.

The offer of ecotourism is primarily related to the status and protection of the Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve. The richness, variety, specificity and uniqueness of the living world have started initiatives for the development of ecotourism (Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve – Sustainable Tourism Strategy, 2021). There are two main types of facilities in the ecotourism of Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve: (1) Eco-center Karapandža and (2) facilities along the marked ecological-educational trails at sites Karapandža, Štrbac and Bestrement: interpretive boards, wooden trails, bridges, rest areas and viewpoints (Visitor Management Plan in Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve, 2019).

Eco-center Karapandža is located in the northern part of Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve. It was equipped in 2013, for a group of 50 visitors. The central 24th building of the entire complex is an outdoor classroom, intended for ecological interpretation and visual presentation of the Reserve. At this place, visitors might receive organized information about the natural resources, endangerment and nature protection.

The arrangement of ecological-educational trails in Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve is based on the strategy

of zoning in tourism. Three main zones of ecotourism development in Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve are determined: Karapandža, Štrbac and Bestrement. The criteria for the separation of zones are: (1) the value and attractiveness of nature and (2) the nature protection regime of I, II and III degree, where tourism is not allowed only in the area of I degree protection (Visitor Management Plan in Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve, 2019). Total length of ecological-educational trails in the Reserve amounts 12,150 m. They are passing through the valuable habitats and they are equipped with facilities such as information boards and observation sites, which helps tourists to move more easily, as well as to better understand and experience the natural values along their route.

COVID – 19 pandemic influenced visitation in NPKR as in most of the PAs in Croatia where the number of visitors was cut for 2/3 (Malić-Limari, 2020). For the first few months during the pandemic, all the facilities offered by the park were closed. However, after a few months - during April 2020, the possibilities of visiting various facilities in the park were selectively reopened, with strictly controlled conditions and in smaller groups.

COVID-19 pandemic influenced additional changes in the manner of tourism development in Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve. Before the occurrence of this pandemic, the main site of tourist visits (Eco-center Karapandža) was open mainly for the group visits of tourists arriving by buses. As the pandemic imposed the prohibition on gathering in groups, in 2020 the site was open only for individual visits. The working hours of the Eco-center Karapandža have been extended in order to meet the needs of tourists.

PROJECTS SUPPORTING THE NATURE PROTECTION AND ECOTURISM

PROJEKTI KOJI PODUPIRU ZAŠTITU PRIRODE I EKOTURIZAM

From 2012 to 2018, the Ministry of the Economy and Sustainable Development of the Republic of Croatia implemented two projects for national and nature parks. The first one, PARCS (Strengthening the Institutional and Financial Sustainability of National Protected Areas in the Republic of Croatia) aimed at improving the management model of national parks and nature parks through the mechanisms of standardization of business processes, more equal distribution of resources and education of employees, and at increasing their sustainability through development of visitor infrastructure and introduction of energy efficient technologies. The second project is the “EU Integration Project Natura 2000”, by means of which, among other things, the brand Parks of Croatia was realized. Visitor in-

infrastructure projects for funding from EU funds were also prepared, leading to improved management of national protected areas and the realization of potential for local and wider regions development. As part of the “EU Integration Project Natura 2000”, the overall facilities of RC Mali Sakađaš were renovated.

Two projects have been prepared in PPKR, “Presentation and Education Centre Tikveš” and “Port of Veliki Sakađaš” that are currently being implemented with the EU funds and should be completed by the end of 2021. “Presentation and Education Center Tikveš” is a project aiming to renovate and convert the Tikveš Castle complex into a modern visitor centre, which in addition to multimedia exhibitions interpreting natural and cultural values of PPKR will have all the accompanying facilities such as catering, parking, educational space, etc. With the realization of this project, PPKR will get the second main entrance to the Park, and a new reception centre for the reception of visitors in the northern part of the Park (Hrvojević, 2020). The aim of the second project “Port of Veliki Sakađaš” is to build a new pontoon port, and also increase the use of renewable energy sources by using solar generators on new ships and boats. It is situated near the reception centre Mali Sakađaš and is the main point for the dispersion of visitors by ships and boats in the Park (<https://pp-kopacki-rit.hr>). One of the basic criteria for the preparation of projects to be financed by the EU funds was the inclusion of the development of Visitor Management Plans. Thus, it was developed within the implementation of these projects.

First international projects in Gornje Podunavlje Region, which combine nature protection and sustainable tourism (ecotourism), were launched by the initiative of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in 2005 and 2006. Activities of arranging the ecological-educational trails, observation sites, as well as education for service providers in ecotourism were realized (Puzović et al, 2015). The next project on the initiative of WWF included extensive revitalization of wetlands in the locality Štrbac (Semenjača and Šarkanj ponds), which contributed to the preservation of original areas, development of sustainable tourism (ecotourism) and involvement of the local population in bird watching activities (www.panda.org).

WWF made a significant contribution in the initiative for applying for the EUROPARC Sustainable Tourism Charter, which Gornje Podunavlje Region first received in 2014. EUROPARC took the initiative in 1995 to launch the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas. The European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas is acknowledged globally as a model for sustainable tourism management (www.europarc.org). Thanks to the application for the Charter, the Manager of Gornje Podu-

navlje Special Nature Reserve initiated preparation and adoption of two strategies for sustainable tourism development, as well as two action plans in the period between 2014 and 2019 (Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve - Sustainable Tourism Strategy, 2014; Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve - Action plan for sustainable tourism development, 2014) and 2021-2026 (Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve - Sustainable Tourism Strategy, 2021; Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve - Action plan for sustainable tourism development, 2021). Development goals and strategic guidelines in the field of tourism development are now far clearer than it was the case before - cooperation with the local community has been improved, the same as in the case of tourist infrastructure and a creation of improved destination image.

The Protected Area Manager organizes projects for the arrangement of the Special Nature Reserve for ecotourism, by financing these activities from the own funds. In the previous period, such projects contributed to: arrangement of the Eco-center Karapandža, improvement of the offer that completes the stay of visitors and eco tourists through equipping the observatory at the site Labudnjača; arrangement of moorings for boats within the Eco-center Karapandža, renovation and refurbishment of the ecological-educational trail at the site Bestrement, research, preparation and implementation of the Visitor Management Plan in Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve, education of employees of different profiles in Public Enterprise Vojvodinašume on nature protection and the importance of sustainable tourism.

INVOLVEMENT OF THE LOCAL POPULATION IN THE NATURE PROTECTION AND ECOTURISM UKLJUČENOST LOKALNE ZAJEDNICE U ZAŠTITU PRIRODE I EKOTURIZAM

Tourism in protected areas might be considered as one of the key drivers of local community development, if properly planned. Establishment of cooperation between protected area managers and the local community, through the formation of a unified offer and joint promotional activities, could enrich the offer of a specific tourist destination, while strengthening the identity of the local community itself at the same time (Setini, Wardana, Sukaatmadja, Ekawati, Yasa & Astawa, 2021; Mohd Noh, Razzaq, Mustafa, Nordin & Ibrahim, 2020). Besides that, the interaction of the local community members with tourists improves their intercultural understanding. Other benefits of tourism development for the local community usually include improving the infrastructure, but also improving the skills of local community members through development and strengthening of competencies in the field of tourism, promoting cohesiveness, strengthening partnerships, which is

important from a financial and marketing perspective (Sangpikul, 2017; Stanculescu & Felicetti, 2020; Wondirad, Tolkach & King, 2020). Also, benefits for local communities and their natural environments can include community services and facilities, new technologies, increased cultural and environmental awareness, conservation and protection and improved land-use patterns (Dowling & Fennell, 2003).

Although formally there is no “permanent platform” for communication and cooperation with the local population and stakeholders in the Kopački Rit Nature Park, this cooperation has been going on since the establishment of the Nature Park. In recent years it has even intensified with the development of the PPKR. In Croatia, it is required that local stakeholders, including the local population, should be involved in the development of planning documents of the Parks. Thus, since the founding of the Park, one of the forms of cooperation with the local population and stakeholders has been based on this aspect. Also, local population is of crucial importance for Kopački Rit Nature Park in the implementation of its numerous activities in the field of tourism. Workshops and trainings are continuously conducted in order to raise the awareness of the local population (Naglav, Martinović & Mrvica Mađarac, 2019).

Cooperation with the local population, living in the settlements in surrounding of the Special Nature Reserve, is realized through the Stakeholder Forum. The forum was constituted in 2014 for the needs of providing the sustainable destination management and as a result of the applying procedure for the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism. Within the Forum, one of the key principles of sustainable development is achieved, directed to the cooperation of all local actors of importance for nature protection and tourism development in the Special Nature Reserve. These are mostly non-governmental organizations in the field of nature protection, ecology and heritage preservation (Visitor Management Plan in Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve, 2019).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

REZULTATI I RASPRAVA

This research was oriented towards analyzing the concept of ecotourism development in two UNESCO biosphere reserves, Mura – Drava – Dunav and Bačko Podunavlje. More precisely, the main aim was to make a comparative analysis of nature protection and ecotourism development in the case of Kopački rit Nature Park and Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve within aforementioned Reserve Biospheres, located in neighboring countries Croatia and Serbia. The main findings might be divided into the several sections, those related to nature protection according to the national legislation and international nature protection statuses, nature degradation and challenges of protected area

management, organization of tourism, cooperation between nature protection and tourism development, projects supporting the nature protection and ecotourism development and involvement of the local population.

In terms of nature protection according to the national legislation and international nature protection statuses, it could be said that both researched Biosphere Reserves are sharing the common characteristics, considering the fact that these protected Ramsar sites are part of the Pent Lateral Biosphere Reserve (Austria, Slovenia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia) and they are also a part of the Important Bird Area (IBA).

Furthermore, comparison of nature degradation and challenges of protected area management indicated the common characteristics, related to the unsustainable management of water resources and disruption of natural processes on rivers (flood wave). Besides that, Kopački rit Nature Park is faced with the spread of invasive species and poaching, while in Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve there is a loss of native habitats and plantations of Euro-American poplars.

The main findings related to the organization of tourism in the case of Kopački rit Nature Park are indicating to the fact that tourism is mainly organised at the level of the County and the protected area. Besides that, it is also important to indicate that all tourism activities need to be in line with Tourism Development Strategy in the Republic of Croatia and County Tourism Master Plan. The similar goes to Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve, where tourism in this protected area needs to be in line with Tourism development strategy of the Republic of Serbia. The entire organization of tourism development (including the planning documents, arrangement of the space, educational trails) is at the level of the Manager, while the main role of the local tourist organizations (City of Sombor and Municipality of Apatin) is related to marketing and propaganda.

Cooperation between nature protection and tourism development in Kopački rit Nature Park resulted in Mali Sakadaš Centre (interactive hall, museological display, interpretation of nature and tradition, walking trails and zoning with two main zones - Base and Transition Zone. On the other hand, in the case of Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve, such cooperation resulted in equipping and improving the offer within the Eco-center Karapandža, as well as in the Visitor Management Plan (2019), which envisages three zones for development of ecotourism: Karapandža, Štrbac and Bestrement.

Projects supporting the nature protection and ecotourism development in Kopački rit Nature Park are mainly at the state level (strengthening institutional sustainability in protected areas, integration into EU Natura 2000), or at the level of the protected area (Educational Center Tikveš). The main projects in the case of Gornje Podunavlje Special Na-

ture Reserve are related to marking of educational trails as a result of synergy of domestic and international organizations (WWF, IUCN, Institute for Nature Conservation of Vojvodina Province) and EUROPARC Charter for Sustainable Tourism in 2014 and nomination in 2021.

Finally, it might be said that implementation of numerous activities in protection and tourism in Kopački rit Nature Park is monitored by the local population. No matter the fact, development of planning documents should involve the participation of the local community. In future activities, while in Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve there is a Stakeholder Forum, so-called charter area (EUROPARC), which contains 30 participants.

Previous studies showed that local communities are generally skeptical towards ecotourism development, mostly because they do not see any (economic) interest in it. Besides that, inhabitants often have no knowledge that they live inside the biosphere reserve, or that knowledge is not entirely comprehensive. They also associate biosphere reserves and ecotourism development with some kind of the usage restrictions and additional obligations for them (Mondino et al., 2018). In study by Hoppstadius and Dahlstrom (2015) educational aspect of ecotourism, especially in biosphere reserves is found to be crucial for overcoming the local community skeptical perception of ecotourism. Mondino et al. (2015) additionally suggest that networking might be one of the benefits of ecotourism development in biosphere reserves. Stronza and Gardillo (2008) reported that expanded network between visitors, local community and tourism stakeholders provide support system for visitors. The study by Hearne et al. (2005) showed that both local residents and foreign tourists demonstrated positive preferences towards increased and improved tourist services in Maya biosphere reserve in Guatemala, even if it includes entrance fee. Habibah et al. (2013a) emphasize the importance of proactive involvement of the stakeholders and careful management of local resources. Ecotourism in biosphere reserves significantly promotes learning and research collaboration and smart partnership among all stakeholders which contributes to the generation of true eco tourist (Habibah et al. 2013b).

The strength of ecotourism and its development within biosphere reserves has its bias in the fact that the main goal of outdoor experiences is supporting the relationship between people and the landscape (Beery & Jönsson, 2015). Mahanta (2014) emphasizes that ecotourism could have significant economic benefits to local community and government since it represents employment opportunity for local population. Ryan et al. (2013) indicate the role of local residents and business support and interest. They also found that countries that promote biosphere reserves as attractive destinations, record better environmental results in terms

of resources conservation. However, Diamantis and Johnson (2003) emphasize that biosphere reserves in Central and Eastern Europe have rather passive role when it comes to implementing certain strategies towards sustainable management plan at a local level, and there is still a lot of room for the improvement.

Nature protection and tourism in Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve are indicating to a complex interaction. Nature protection is repeatedly and usefully reflected on tourism development, especially of ecotourism, which insists on the interpretation of natural values in Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve. Before the proclamation of the Special Nature Reserve, there were no ecological-educational trails, viewpoints, nor the eco-center. Eco-tours were not organized (Stojanović et al., 2021). Later, such tours improved the attitudes of visitors about the need to protect this area. However, research of this kind is in process, while concrete results are expected next year.

CONCLUSION ZAKLJUČAK

Biosphere reserves are of particular importance for the promotion of sustainable development policies and strategies, as a globally recognizable status in the areas of nature protection, cultural heritage conservation and diversity. If all this is happening at the international level, in the case of transboundary biosphere reserves, their role is even more significant. Transboundary biosphere reserves, such as Mura – Drava – Danube, the first pent lateral in the world, are single area, with one community of local population, joint activities and finally with a common future. Such territories are significantly visible within the world travel market. It could be said that there is a trend of perceiving the importance of border areas as prominent destinations, where tourists could see several protected areas and small communities of local population with all their unique characteristics. Finally, international labels under the auspices of the UNESCO have additional importance, considering the fact that they are sending a message to visitors that they are in the place of the most important natural and cultural values of the world we live in.

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SAŽETAK

Ekoturizam je održivi oblik turizma koji u zaštićenim područjima pruža podršku zaštiti prirode i održivom razvoju lokalnih zajednica u njihovu okruženju. Rezervati biosfere posebna su područja s relativno izvornom prirodom i aktivnim društveno-ekonomskim razvojem, kao i s kulturnim osobnostima koje moraju biti suglasne s ekološkim okruženjem. Spoznaja o interakciji ekoloških, ekonomskih, kulturnih i društvenih čimbenika u nekom rezervatu biosfere predstavlja temelj za postavljanje koncepcije održivog razvoja ekoturizma. Ovaj rad obuhvaća analizu koncepcija razvoja ekoturizma zaštićenih područja Kopački rit (Hrvatska) i Gornje Podunavlje (Srbija), u rezervatima biosfere Mura – Drava – Dunav (Hrvatska) i Bačko Podunavlje (Srbija), s glavnim ciljem da se napravi usporedna analiza njihove opće organizacije. Rezultati istraživanja pružaju ključne informacije o zaštiti prirode u skladu s nacionalnim zakonodavstvima i međunarodnim standardima zaštite prirode, degradacije prirode i izazova upravljanja zaštićenim područjima, organizacije ekoturizma, povezanosti između zaštite prirode i razvoja ekoturizma, projekata koji podržavaju zaštitu prirode i razvoj ekoturizma i uključivanja lokalnog stanovništva u daljnji razvoj.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: ekoturizam, rezervati biosfere, UNESCO, održivi razvoj, zaštita prirode.