

Tourism in protected areas: potential or risk? A case study from the World Heritage Area Lake Baikal

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Summary

Tourism in protected areas is a worldwide growing phenomenon. Numerous scientific studies deal with the effects, advantages and inconvenients that tourism bring in nature reserves. Depending on the individual circumstances, tourism in protected areas can be a potential or a risk.

Widespread nature based tourism has a potential to contribute to the sustainable development in the Baikal Region.

The study was carried out to get information about the status and problems of nature based tourism and its effects on areas of the Lake Baikal World Heritage Site, with focus on the Island of Olkhon. Olkhon's suitability for nature based tourism, the characteristics of the tourists and the institutional prerequisites were analyzed to evaluate the potential or risk for the protected area and for their inhabitants.

Results of this study show that the Baikal Region and the Island of Olkhon, despite some infrastructural defects, have a great potential for nature based tourism. However, this tourism does not contribute to a sustainable development today because the existing efforts are too weak to regulate the current form of tourism.

Keywords

Nature based tourism, protected areas, sustainable development, Lake Baikal, Olkhon Island

Nature based tourism is increasingly more important worldwide. Because of this, visits by tourists in protected areas are rising. However, a bigger number of tourists in protected areas can be a double-edged sword. On one hand tourism in protected areas can bring money, a support for conservation issues and can improve the livelihood of local people and the financial situation of the local communities. On the other hand it can have negative impacts on the natural and cultural heritage (BUSHELL & EAGLES 2003: 2,6). Whether tourism can support or not the conservation issues depends on diverse factors. The protected areas must be suitable for nature based tourism. It is only with the help of a purposeful institutional framework that tourism can contribute to the protection aims of protected areas (MÜLLER 1998: 31).

In 1996 parts of the economically weak Baikal Region became the status of the UNESCOs World Natural Heritage. Three National parks and other protected areas are located within the Baikal region. In this region, nature based tourism is seen as an important instrument to reaching sustainable development (BBN 2002: 140).

Since tourism in protected area does not have a long tradition in the Russian Federation (BBN 2002: 156), it is very interesting to show whether the growing tourism in Russia is compatible with the objectives of nature conservation and whether this type of tourism really has the potential to promote a sustainable development of the region or not.

In order to collect information on tourism as well as its institutional framework and contribution to a sustainable development, quantitative and qualitative methods were used. During the summers of 1987, 2006 and 2007 field surveys at touristic sites in the World Heritage Area Lake Baikal were held. In 2007 observation and mapping of the previous years were broadened with interviews.

The World Heritage Area Baikal includes the Lake itself and its coastal regions and bordering protected areas. Big cities are excluded from this area.

In 1987 and 2006, observations and mapping took place within the Pribaikalski National Park with a focus on the Island of Olkhon. The Island of Olkhon was in the focus of the observations in 2007.

With a surface of 720 km² Olkhon is the biggest and only inhabited island of Lake Baikal and one of the main Baikal tourist destinations.

The recreational potential (attractiveness) and the recreational capacity (receptivity) of the Baikal Region, and especially of Olkhon Island, were observed to verify the suitability for nature based tourism. Additionally interviews with tourists, residents and providers of touristic performances helped us to analyse the behaviour of the tourists.

To detect if tourism can support a sustainable development and, if so, how, the institutional framework and the effects of tourism on ecology, economy and socio-cultural milieu were evaluated.

This study shows that Lake Baikal and the Island of Olkhon, with its unique natural and cultural heritage, have a great potential for nature based tourism. However, the lack of transportation and accommodation infrastructures, the existence of scarce waste disposals and harsh climatic conditions in winter are factors that hinder nature based tourism. This is especially true during the main touristic season when the infrastructure is overloaded. Another lack is the existence of only low level touristic management in the protected areas.

Nevertheless tourism at Lake Baikal increased during the last decades. National and international tourists come to Lake Baikal seeking its unique nature. Exceptionally attractive locations at the shore of Lake Baikal become touristic hot spots during the main tourist season. One of these hot spots is the Island of Olkhon.

The interviews show that enjoying the nature is the principal motivation of tourists for coming to Lake Baikal. Thus camping, with a preference to wild camping, is the favourite accommodation form. Wild camping and the uncontrolled construction of resorts are the main reasons for the conflict between tourism and nature protection at the Baikal Region. Hence, the so called "Baikal Law" and the legislations referred to national parks call for a regulated, nature saving tourism. However, the understaffed and underfinanced protected nature reserves are bad prerequisites to guarantee this.

This situation produced a broad spectrum of negative effects on the environment of Olkhon due to touristic activities. The sensitive vegetation gets destroyed by hikers, wild camping and the need for firewood. The fauna also gets disturbed by uncontrolled tourism tours. Rubbish left behind in touristic places is a common feature.

Tourism is indispensable for the economy of Olkhon Island. Most of the residents of the island work in the tourism sector. Among the asked residents, 93 per cent offer tourist services. That is why tourism improves the living conditions of the locals. Critically must be seen that tourism on Olkhon is characterised through a limited seasonality. However, the economic development depends on it.

In general, the residents of Olkhon Island do not see the tourism as a stress. However, tourists often do not respect the cultural heritage, rites and traditions.

The potential of nature based tourism in the World Heritage Area Baikal is still not used in a protected area adapted way, and the "wild" tourism can flourish. To stimulate that potential it is obviously necessary to create a more effective tourism management in the Heritage area and the nature reserves. The deciding question consists in the strategy for an effective tourism management. More, intensive studies on the tourism could bring the answers by demonstration the needs of the tourism and the specific conflicts between tourism and nature conservation.

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