

RUSSIAN PROTECTED AREAS OF RUSSIA AS PART OF THE WORLD ECOTOURISM SYSTEM.
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Summary.

Russian protected area managers have only recently started realising the advantages of developing ecotourism within protected areas. National Parks are the most promising category in terms of implementing ecotourism programs. Characteristics of Russian national parks are compared with those of international protected areas. In general, Russian National Parks face the problems typical to newly established protected areas in other countries. We propose the introduction of changes into the Annual Activity Report questionnaire of National Parks submitted by the Administration of Protected Areas and Objects of the Ministry of Natural Resources. The new characteristics should represent the current state of ecotourism development and serve as a tool for managers to address a range of issues associated with the environment, infrastructure and visitors.

Over the last decades, ecological tourism has become more popular all over the world. The definition of ecotourism is becoming wider. In the beginning, ecological tours were understood as those that occur in the protected areas, the main aim of a tourist being observation and study of nature. Now many specialists observe that the segment of ecotourism in the market is rather narrow and to make it successful in the future it is important to transfer the principles of ecotourism into more wide market of tourism.

Nevertheless in the Russian Federation Ecotourism is poorly developed. According to Moraleva and Ledovskih (2002) the main reasons are the following:

- lack of the common conception of the ecotourism,
- lack of information on the international and national levels,
- lack of clear national strategy,
- little demand for the ecological tours until very recently.

At the same time, as Drozdov A. observes, old traditions of adventure tourism (hiking, boating, mountain hiking) exist in Russia. Its characteristics are rather similar to those of ecotourism.

Another source of the development of ecotourism in Russia may be recreational and interpretative activities of the protected areas. There are seven types of protected areas in the Russian federation. Reserves and national parks have more possibilities than others to develop ecological recreation.

The definition of the Russian reserves (zapovednik) are very much similar to the definition of Strict Nature reserve / Wilderness Area given by IUCN (Biodiversity and tourism, 1997), as its main objective is observation and study of the nature. Another objective of the reserves is interpretative and educational work with the visitors. The legislation provides the possibility to organize sightseeing tours, large range of environmental activities and establish visit-centres on the territory of the reserves.

But the development of ecotourism in the reserves is limited, as there could be organized only educational excursions and it is not possible to organize other recreational activities. Hence, only certain type of tours may be organised and the number of tourists is limited. So ecotourism cannot be widely developed there. In the reserves may be organized birdwatching and scientific tours, short-term excursions. As an option ecotourism may be developed in the adjacent territory, where the main infrastructure is built. The reserve then becomes a place of interest and destination of the excursions.

Russian national parks have more advantages to develop ecotourism. "National park" category is similar to "national park" definition of IUCN. According to the Federal Law on the protected areas one of the main objectives of the national parks is the promotion of the controllable tourism and ecological education. Even now national parks are rather popular with Russian and foreign tourists. But if we compare the main reason of visits to Russian and Latin America's national parks it becomes clear that in Russia there are not many genuine ecotours. In Latin America countries the main aim of tours is nature observation, e.g. animal and birdwatching. The most popular tours in Russia are sport hiking and rafting. Travels on motorized vehicles are practiced in more than 50 % of the parks, and only 5 or 6 parks (of 35 established) develop ecotourism itself.

As in most of the world's protected areas, Russian National Parks are managed by the governmental agencies. There are no private protected areas in Russia. The foreign parks use the increasing amount of volunteers, especially seasonal. Russian parks usually attract students and pupils, especially on the ecological holidays, such as the Day of the Earth, the Day of Europarks, the day of birds and the festival of parks. Volunteers help to clean up territory.

These activities help parks to keep its territory clean and at the same time occur to be an important source of help considering the lack of staff and financial support. At the same time this type of activities serve as an educational and interpretative tool.

As most of the foreign parks, Russian national parks try to collect data on the amount of visitors. In developed countries the main sources of information are unofficial contacts with tourists. Russian parks (as most of the parks in the developing countries) collect the information when raising the entrance fee.

The developed countries receive the greatest number of visitors, even despite of a tourist "boom" experiences by the Asian region and growing number of visitors in the national parks of Latin America. Unfortunately, Russian parks have much less visits. For example, according to estimates, one of the most popular national parks, Marii Chodra is visited by 500,000 people annually, comparable to the number of visitors to the Denaly National Park in Canada. But the number of visitors in the Russian Parks include one-day tourists and the locals that visit park on their purposes.

As in other areas, with the exception South America, where there are more foreign visitors, most visitors of the Russian parks are of national origin. It does not mean that the national tourists are more interested in the natural heritage; it is just that parks do not have possibilities to receive foreigners due to the low level of infrastructure and services.

In the developing countries, more than 80 % of the territory is used for recreational activities. Information about the size of recreational area in Russian parks is not available. According to the Law on the protected areas Russian parks may demarcate up to seven zones on its territory, including:

- strict reserve zone,
- zone of the educational tourism,
- visitor service zone.

The differentiation helps to effectively combine conservation of nature and recreation, minimizing negative impacts of the latter.

About 70 % of the foreign parks organise different activities that involve local people. In Russia, about 80% (27 out of 35 parks) organise lectures, competitions, festivals and seminars, 70 % of the participants being school students.

Among the infrastructure objects and facilities most frequently named are trails, picnic areas and visit centres. Russian parks seem to understand the importance of visitor centre as an educational tool and every year more visit centres are established. According to the data of the year 2001, 40 % of parks have visit centres (some of them have more than one). There are trails in 32 parks but only 26 parks report that their trails are well developed and ready to be used.

Information materials acquaint visitors with the regulations and thus appear to be an important visitor management tactic. Besides information materials containing information about places of interest, hotels or lodges are used as advertisements. The guides, maps and brochures spread on the territory of parks tell about its nature, interesting and endangered species. Researches confirm that tourists are willing to pay for such information. Russian parks do distribute brochures, nature guides and postcard. As a rule, the volumes are very low, so tourists have few chances to get acquainted with the natural heritage of the parks.

It is of interest to compare the lists of concerns among parks. Lack of infrastructure and habitat degradation top the list in the foreign countries. Besides, developed countries experience more problems linked with excessive tourism pressure.

According to the analysis of the reports the most serious problems of Russian national parks are:

- Lack of infrastructure (hotels, lodges, transportation, equipped trails) or its low quality. Among different types of accommodation, hotels make up only 5 %. Summer camps make up 36 %, it is the most popular type of accommodation. It means that the recreation is limited to summer months in most of the parks.
- Lack of information on the regions where ecological programs are developed and on the places of interest within the territory of parks. 50 % of the parks publish information about its activities in local press, only 10 % of the parks use central press to tell people about itself.
- Lack of tourist information on endemic and endangered species with comments, though scientific researches are conducted and this kind of information is accessible. The question is to put it in popular form.
- Parks have few possibilities to represent themselves on national and international market of ecotourism. In year 2001 only 12 parks took part in tourism fairs. One of the main reasons for that is lack of financial support, as it is rather expensive to take part in the exhibitions. But another reason would

be insufficient coordination among parks, as they could promote themselves as a Net of National Parks, sharing the costs and benefits of partnership.

- Lack of information and experience that are indispensable when organising ecotourism.

There are few professionals with deep knowledge of ecology and at the same time, experienced in ecotourism. There are different types of tourism departments in 20 parks, but as a rule the staff consists of scientists or specialists in ecological education but very few of them have tourism education.

- Parks do not offer additional services that would help to increase income and increase the satisfaction of visitors – different types of sight-seeing tours, souvenirs shops, rental services, etc.

It is evident that many problems in Russian national parks emerge because of the shoestring budget. The largest source of money is federal budget with 47 % of all money income. Other sources are: revenues of its proper activities (32 %), non-budget resources (grants, etc.), sponsorship (less than 1%). Among profitable activities of parks the most significant is sale of timber (37 %). According to the reports parks receive almost third part of its income from recreational activities. Unfortunately most of the money comes from selling fishing and hunting licenses. Fishing and hunting activities should be strictly controlled so as not to harm sensitive ecosystems. Besides, this kind of activities cannot qualify as ecotourism.

Overall, the situation in Russian national parks is similar to that in parks of developing countries. Most of newly established parks have lack of finances that does not let them develop proper infrastructure and lack of experience in organizing ecotourism. On the other hand as a rule habitat degradation is not still a grave problem. Thus, Russian parks have a chance to profit by using developed countries experience in part of organizing ecotourism activities. At the same time they should take into consideration issues that arise on the latter stages of development in parks popular with tourists.

To make decisions administration of a parks need up-to-date information that reflects the abilities of a park to develop ecotourism (level of infrastructure, assumed number of visitors, etc) and weak points.

The form of the report that is used now to evaluate the results of yearly activities was developed in the Administration of Protected Areas and Objects of the Ministry of Natural Resources. It was done four years ago when management of protected areas was transmitted from the Ministry of the Timber Industry to the Ministry of Natural Resources. It is assumed important to modify this questionnaire so that the reports received would give more sufficient and adequate information. Results of Russian parks questionnaire and foreign parks' experience were considered to propose new characteristics. Ecotourism requirements were taken into consideration as well.

First when organizing ecotourism the administration of a national park should work out a plan of development (a strategy) that would define prospects. Worked out strategy means that ecotourism will be developed under control and without destroying the habitats (when following the plan, of course).

The information about functional zoning is very important. In the report should be reflected the number of zones, its functions, areas, its allowable and actual capacity. The latter two characteristics will help to evaluate the amount of visitor that park may receive avoiding ecosystems degradation and to correct the actual number of visitors. It is advisable to supply information not only for the whole territory but also per square kilometres to make possible the comparison of parks of different sizes.

Registration of visitors should reflect different types of visitors (age, sex, objective of the tour, transportation used, sizes of groups, etc.). Besides officials need to collect information that reflects the satisfaction of visitor (whether he liked the journey or not, the most interesting excursions, what other services he would like to use in future, etc.).

It is important to know more about visitor types so that parks can adapt their management strategies to better suit their visitor' expectations while protecting the resources. The administration will be able to consider the needs of real visitors when arranging routes, equipping visit-centres and organizing educational programs.

Data on waste management programs and facilities specially designed to lessen impacts evaluates management's efforts in putting into action sustainable development. It characterizes the inner part of ecotourism implementation. This information is also an important tool of attracting visitors.

The reports do not give information of the level of involvement of the locals in the activities of park. This kind of information will help to evaluate the benefits of developing ecotourism for the local communities.

The experience shows that when more tourism is developed financial resources should be invested to protect nature. Ecotourism is not an exception. Thus emerges the importance of up-to-date information about the state of most frequently visited objects of interest, about the state of trails and camping sites.

Information about income of tourism should be completed with the information about the share of funds directed to protection of nature and reconstruction of facilities.

Monitoring is an important part of the management process. Data on natural resources, infrastructure, staff and finances is essential when analysing efficacy of activities.

One of the main objectives of national parks is the development of sustainable recreation. This is why it is important to adjust the characteristics of the reports so that they would give many-sided descriptions of ecotourism development processes and could be used for comparison with the data of other countries reports.

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