

The Importance of Documenting and Including Traditional Wisdom in Community-Based Ecotourism Planning: A Case Study of the Nature Park Ponjavica in the Village of Omoljica (Serbia)

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Abstract

This article accords to the theory of community-based tourism, which represents a concept that respects natural and cultural resources of a particular community and encourages participation of its members in the process of tourist product creation. The article operates in the planning phase and aims to give insights into the process of establishing the groundwork for community-based tourism. The key element is documenting and illustrating everything that could be a part of what is known as “traditional wisdom,” namely, the skills and knowledge of traditional life practices. The methods of case study, content analysis, and observation of the village of Omoljica, Serbia, were used. The positive aspect of this locality is reflected in the existing short-term initiatives of organizations and individuals engaging in preserving traditional practices, but without systematic, long-term planning and management of community-based tourism, these individual efforts to revalue traditional life practices would stay unrecognizable and invisible for visitors and stakeholders. Thus, the main goal of this article is to understand the relation between short-term bottom-up initiatives and long-term top-down strategic planning of specific ecotourism destinations, one that would embrace the traditional ways of rural community life. The contribution of this study, in addition to documenting and illustrating “traditional wisdom” of the specific rural community placed in the protected area which encompasses a particular local social system, will be reflected in the creation of a set of guidelines for sustainable, rural, community-based ecotourism as a soft-driver development of protected areas near big cities of the postsocialist countries.

Keywords

community-based ecotourism, traditional wisdom, planning

Introduction

The aim of this article is to present current theories on community-based ecotourism and tourism planning, as well as try to connect them with the traditional wisdom of rural communities.

The interests of the community within tourism development have been a topic since the nineties of the 20th century. After a wave of “advocacy tourism platforms” (Jafari, 1990), in which only the positive economic effects of tourism development were considered, major negative changes in social and cultural elements of destination communities became apparent. Attempts were made to mitigate these negative changes through the inclusion of as much of each respective community as possible into both planning and active participation in the tourism industry. Gradually, over the past 20 years, the importance of community has become a key factor

in tourism planning, which has led to coining the term “community-based tourism” (CBT) describing a concept of tourism that is based on local human and natural resources, “managed and owned by the community, for the community, with the purpose of enabling visitors to increase their awareness and learn about the community and local ways of life” (The Thailand Community Based Institute, 2013). Such a concept declares that the local community could be involved in tourism in two primary ways—through profit distribution

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and decision making. Both aspects are vital for community well-being, though challenging to achieve.

In this article, we will examine the particular case study of the Nature Park Ponjavica and the village Omoljica, which falls within the territory of the administrative, industrial, cultural center of the Southern Banat Province of Serbia and the city of Pančevo. With this aim in mind, we address the specifics of a region that contains both natural and cultural assets, and which is additionally situated within a postsocialist society in transition that has its own characteristics regarding the relations of culture and nature. Underdevelopment and isolation from main economic centers has positively contributed to the preserving of nature and traditional ways of life in this community. This could be considered an advantage, especially in the context of the contemporary urban industrial crisis in the developed world. In addition, from a planning and development perspective, the well-preserved nature and traditional ways of life could be treated as an opportunity for the better appreciation of repressed notional concepts representing the polar opposite of the developed world's dichotomy (a focus on interior culture, endogenous development, rural communities); a rediscovering of values within those concepts that are worth reviving, as well as incorporating such concepts into contemporary development strategies. The key question being raised in this article is, "Could tourism be a soft-driver development, one that would embrace the traditional ways of rural community life?" Main goal of this article is to understand relation between bottom-up initiatives of the civil sector and top-down strategic planning and management of specific ecotourism destinations who decide to activate traditional ways of rural community life for tourists and visitors.

For this case study, the Nature Park Ponjavica in the Village of Omoljica (Serbia) has been chosen as a locality that offers both natural and cultural resources, where old practices are still actively employed, but rarely considered as an asset that could be valued for future development. The answer to the question raised in this article is complex and, at this phase, rather unclear. This article attempts to establish some key issues related to community-based ecotourism planning, with special reference to the documenting of traditional practices that could be of value both in the contemporary life of today's rural communities, as well as in responsible, CBT development.

Theoretical Framework

This article is grounded on the theoretical concepts of community-based ecotourism, tourism planning, and postsocialist transitional society, and how these concepts relate to traditional wisdom based on sustainable land and water use practices.

Community tourism development is a concept "proposed in the context of sustainable development" (World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2008, p. 2). Namely, it stems out of

the "adoptancy platform" which Jafari (1990) has recognized as a third platform within which tourism as a social activity has been operating. The first platform was the "advocacy platform," related to the rapid tourism development of the seventh decade of 20th century. Tourism was seen as a means of economic progress for destinations and tourism operators, without any stance regarding its development. After two decades of tourism development, negative sociocultural and ecological effects had been noticed (demonstration effect, acculturation, pollution due to mass transportation, and demands for tourist destination's adaptations for tourist's needs). After this period of uncontrolled development, more voices were risen against tourism (especially its environmental impacts), and more researchers in the tourism field were addressing the negative consequences of tourism development (Doxey, 1976; Murphy, 1983; Pearce, 1977, 1982; Wall, 1982, 1997; Wallace, 1993). Jafari describes this second platform as a "cautionary platform." Following these two platforms, the third, more balanced "adaptancy platform" occurred, which represented "an attempt to avoid the extremes of the first two platforms with their contradictory arguments by positing *alternative tourism* development models" (UNWTO, 2008, p. 2). Arguments have been made that "both ecotourism and community-based tourism grew out of this 'adaptancy platform'" (UNWTO, 2008, p. 2). Such arguments appear to be applicable, since the first "advocacy platform" was characterized by tourism development without regard for the communities, their local characteristics, and their traditions. On the contrary, the "cautionary platform" prioritized raising awareness of the degrading, negative effects that tourism can invoke. At this point in time, we can use all of the advantages of each of the previous scenarios—having insights into what effects uncontrolled tourism development can bring about, while at the same time being aware of the importance of developing appreciation of traditional living practices of local communities.

We should bear in mind that the platforms mentioned relate to the highly developed tourist environments of South and Western Europe, Northern America, and South-East Asia. In contrast, in the Balkans, there are communities that are not yet "touristically" active, or industrially developed. They stand somewhere "in between"—modernization and traditional practices existing in a sort of vacuum of time and space, not celebrated enough to be commercialized, yet not completely neglected or abandoned. This position could be a positive starting point, since there are decades of touristic practices and theories which could be used as lessons in tourism development, as we may be able to avoid past pitfalls and adverse activities.

Community-Based Ecotourism

The renewed interest in the community as a basic unit of tourism development, management, planning, and marketing can be traced to the changing meaning of the concept of

community (Richards & Hall, 2000, p. 2). *Community* in the context of tourism planning and development is usually defined from a geographical perspective as “a body of people living in the same locality” (Wisansing, 2008). But we cannot refer only to territory and geographic location when describing community. Community encompasses “a particular local social system” (Richards & Hall, 2000, p. 2) and “an ideology, often hiding the power relations which inevitably underlie communities” (Richards & Hall, 2000, p. 2). Urry (1995) describes community existing when “there is ‘community,’” a particular kind of human association implying personal ties, a sense of belonging and warmth” (p. 10). As Murphy (1988) elegantly puts it:

Communities are groups of people residing in the same region with common interests and identity and as such they represent a bonding of people and place, which creates its own distinctive character and force for survival in an increasingly impersonal and big business world. (p. 96)

“Community” can embrace notions of spatial contiguity, social interaction, reflexivity, notions of shared aspirations, and values. It tends to be used implicitly in a consensual sense, even when potential conflict and competition, particularly in relation to the power relations involved in decision-making processes, are the reality of place-based (and non-place-based) social relations (Joppe, 1996; Pearce, Moscardo, & Ross, 1996). “Communities” may not be geographically bounded or homogeneous entities, but can be socially differentiated and diverse. Considerations of gender, income, age, class/caste, origins, and other aspects of social identity can be reflected in the holding of conflicting values and resource priorities rather than the predominance of shared interests and aspirations (Leach, Mearns, & Scoones, 1999).

We can say that today communities are key items when we speak about tourism. There are host communities that are “a basic reason for tourists to travel, to experience the way of life and material products” (Richards & Hall, 2000, p. 1). Community could be considered one of the central points of a contemporary perspective on tourism and “the rights of local communities must be integral to considerations of sustainable development” (Howie, 2000).

In an effort to mitigate the tensions resulting from the more negative impacts of uneven/unplanned development, many researchers are suggesting that tourism-dominated/interested communities should plan their evolution more systematically, thereby taking into account residents’ attitudes and perceptions about its growth at the outset (Beeton, 2006; Haywood, 1988; Murphy, 1983, 1985; Okazaki, 2008; Reid, Mair, & George, 2004; Richards & Hall, 2000; Simmons, 1994; Timothy, 1999). CBT is a

tourism that takes environmental, social and cultural sustainability into account. It is managed and owned by the community, for the community, with the purpose of enabling

visitors to increase their awareness and learn about the community and local ways of life. (The Thailand Community Based Institute, 2013)

Salazar emphasizes the importance of local initiatives that should stipulate whether CBT becomes an acceptable model for different stakeholders in particular local communities (Salazar, 2012).

To establish a rational relationship between CBT and ecotourism, we must embrace an explanation of ecotourism as “a sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism that focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature and which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive and locally oriented” (Fennel, 1999). UNEP and the World Tourism Organization emphasized the characteristics of ecotourism that are based on responsible project management. They include “an appreciation of indigenous cultures prevailing in natural areas as part of the visitor experience, education and interpretation as part of the tourist offerings, and the engagement of small visitor groups organized by small, specialized, and locally-owned businesses” (World Wildlife Fund International, 2001). The terminology of community-based ecotourism is relatively new, though the concept has become familiar due to the theoretical development of sustainable and CBT—it is the most responsible tourism development for all the aspects of a community in which it takes place—regarding at once nature, culture, and socioeconomic status of a locale. As a concept, it “entails people’s commitment to responsibly use all available local resources and to trigger development and prosperity through local initiatives” (Đukić, Volić, Tišma, & Jelinčić, 2014). If we look more thoroughly, we can see that there is an overlapping of CBT and ecotourism (low-impact, locally oriented, presenting a local way of life). In addition, there are some concepts that comprise ecotourism (indigenous cultures, natural areas, small visitor groups, specialized and locally owned businesses) and that are easily adaptable to the concept of CBT. For these reasons, we have chosen the term community-based ecotourism as one of the theoretical backgrounds for researching traditional wisdom and practices.

Tourism Policy and Planning With Special Reference to CBT

Tourism policy and planning are two interconnected activities. Policy creation “is unique to each state and it should set the regulations, rules, guidelines, directives and development/promotion objectives, and strategies for long-term tourism development” (Edgell, DelMastro Allen, Smith, & Swanson, 2008, p. 32). Once policies are established, plans are written to ensure that developments reflect overriding policies (Sharpley & Telfer, 2008, p. 93). A more specific definition linked to sustainability and planning is a “process which aims to anticipate, regulate and monitor change to

contribute to the wider sustainability of the destination, and thereby enhance the tourist experience of the destination or place” (Page & Connell, 2009, p. 477). Jamal and Getz claim that “strategic planning of tourism destinations is a complex task due to the interdependence of multiple stakeholders and the fragmented control over a given destination’s resources” (Jamal & Getz, 1995). Usually, the governor’s office and administration, working together with the state legislature, serve as the architects, budgeters, and planners for initiating, implementing, and supporting a state’s tourism program. But there are many other stakeholders that are occasionally left behind: “citizens, local governments, private businesses, and economic, as well as environmental, social, and other groups that should all be involved in the process” (Edgell et al., 2008, p. 32). To achieve “continuous tourism planning that is integrated with all other planning processes for social and economic development, it must be modelled as an interactive system” (Gunn, 1988).

Planning could occur at different scales—international, national, regional, and community. All of them are important for tourism, “but planning at the community level is vital if any region wishes to deliver tourism experiences which ensure both visitor satisfaction and ongoing benefits for the residents of destination areas” (Simmons, 1994). There are different aspects of tourism planning at the community level:

- the knowledge present within the community of their own resources,
- an understanding of the nature of tourism and its potential benefits/disadvantages,
- the participation of different stakeholders,
- environmental sensitivity,
- an awareness of power relations within the community, and the potential economic and sociocultural benefits.

In this article, we are prioritizing the first level of building community capacity—knowledge about the resources and the importance of traditional practices preservation and use according to contemporary needs. After gaining knowledge and an appreciation of the surroundings, the next logical step should be the examining of information regarding the tourist industry, along with all of its positive and negative aspects.

Where there is limited local knowledge of tourism, few, if any, local leaders emerge, and external agents hold the balance of power over tourism development decisions. Under these conditions, it is not surprising to find that tourism planning is not often conducted and that little effort is made to coordinate the interests of local stakeholders (Moscardo, 2008, p. 10). On the contrary, planning the growth and development of tourism where local participation is encouraged by public agencies could lead to a conflict whereby a vociferous minority influences decisions, while the silent majority remains unheard, suggesting a passive but tacit acceptance (Salazar, 2012).

One more very important thing is that

most of the planning literature dealing with tourism focuses on what should be done in developing the industry at the expense of providing an understanding of what is actually being pursued and what can be done given a destination’s local conditions. (Timothy, 1999, p. 371)

As Moscardo (2008) explains, many existing tourism planning models are prescriptive and start with the assumption that tourism should be developed. The option of not developing tourism is not considered and this omission is fundamentally inconsistent with CBT (p. 6).

To avoid these potential conflicts, effective coordination mechanisms and tourism plans should be created; otherwise, it becomes increasingly difficult for destination communities to get involved in either tourism development decisions or to participate in tourism-related businesses. Moscardo argues that more research and better information on different options for involving communities in tourism through better coordination mechanisms, partnerships, and other cooperative ventures would be useful in assisting communities in overcoming these barriers (Moscardo, 2008, p. 10). In the process of community tourism planning, the most important thing is to start with the residents and their standpoints on tourism, whether regarding their potential involvement or simply the general development of tourism in their community. Our impression is that before building capacities for tourism development, community residents should be empowered through knowledge about their own resources and through the valuing of the residents themselves as an element of high importance, which will in turn bring them closer to their “true core values” (Anholt, 2010, p. 46).

Postsocial Transitional Society and Tourism—Local Context

In this section, we examine the local context of the Balkans, and more precisely North-Eastern Serbia, the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, the lower Danube basin, the Municipality of Pančevo, the village Omoljica, and the nature reserve Ponjavica. Serbian society could be described as a “transitional society” that is faced with a change of sociopolitical systems, while coming to terms with the contemporary global crisis of culture, economy, and ecological disaster. This kind of situation effects the creation of new development strategies. Together with an innovative creative economy and nature conservation, awareness about cultural development is beginning to be raised. In defining cultural development, endogenous development (based on the internal resources of the specific country) and exogenous development (induced or stimulated by external factors) refer to the processes of progress in all spheres of human activity and life. Cultural development is thus conceived as “a consequence of the mutual influence of

different cultures, economic prosperity, technological development, changes in the sociopolitical system, etc” (Dragičević-Šešić & Stojković, 2011, p. 63).

An important aspect that must be mentioned when discussing traditional wisdom and life practices in the local context mentioned above is that the practical public policy of the former Yugoslavia was to impose a single model of social behavior, much to the detriment of cultural diversity among cities and villages (Đukić, 2012, pp. 207-228). Therefore, traditional cultural forms, experiences, and values were at times forgotten. Villages were overloaded with urban culture and rural culture was moved to the city’s museums, archives, and libraries, all of which the rural population would barely visit. In such a manner, the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of a people is almost completely separated from that same rural population whose generations were creating that culture. However, the “cultural public” in contemporary Serbia is not interested in the problems of the village, nor does it recognize the diversity of cultural expressions and identities of particular villages and towns (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2005), a wealth that should be saved from oblivion, developed, promoted, and transmitted to future generations for its cultural value. On account of this neglect, there has been a constant migration from villages to towns, so that since the Second World War onwards, roughly 50% of the rural population has left the villages; once home to 90% of the population in the early fifties, the countryside now accounts for about 40% of the total population of Serbia. In such a situation, the local government and public cultural institutions continue to perform their missions as in the time of the dictatorial, centrist regime of the former Yugoslavia.

Currently, in the field of cultural policy, a concept of *territory driven cultural policy*, which includes taking responsibility for raising the quality of cultural life, is being developed (Dragičević Šešić & Dragojević, 2006). This kind of policy implies turning to the internal resources of a very specific location and cultural functionalism as a special model of cultural policy action (Dragičević Šešić & Dragojević, 2005, p. 21). It differs from cultural diffusionism in its inventiveness, dynamism, dispersion, and involving of various local actors who operate within public, private, and civil sectors. Focused on the cultural life of local communities, not the elite culture as the dominant model, it affirms different cultural models that correspond to the diverse cultural needs of citizens.

Worthy of mention, the tourism-developed Western countries turning to local resources was a key issue during the 80s of 20th century. In that time, Murphy (1988) explains that the

rise in community consciousness has been a growing awareness of local heritage, both natural and cultural, which has created the local way of life; such awareness has provided local roots to the conservation movement and broadened its perspective from concern over international landmarks, to more local issues, like saving the downtown facades or local vistas.

In the same period Yugoslavia was a country with developed tourism (with tourism development based on Jafari’s “advocacy platform”) with a tendency to develop more and more tourist destinations (Bakić, 1988). In the 90s, a civil war occurred, leaving tourist actual and potential destinations without any possibility for development. During the first and second decades of the 21st century, some touristic activities began to develop. Major planning documents had been created (National tourism strategy of the Republic of Serbia, and several destination master plans), and a high percentage of major public investments were directed toward tourism development. In light of this context, we can regard present-day Serbia as a country with underdeveloped tourism that is planning for tourism to serve as one of its key strategic economic activities. Despite these complications, territorially driven cultural policy, as well as more jurisdiction for local communities (municipalities), is opening up possibilities for community-based activities, especially CBT planning.

Research Method and Techniques

The article used the historical method to study and determine the facts, analysis, and synthesis of the vertical development of rural communities in whose territory is placed the protected natural park and its associated cultural heritage. Based on studies of relevant theories and data on community-based ecotourism and tourism planning gathered during theoretical and empirical desk research, three methods of qualitative analysis were used in this article—*participant observation*, *content analysis*, and *case study with narrative inquiry*.

Observation is used as a qualitative field research, note-taking method aimed at collecting data about the current state of nature and culture in a specific rural community placed in south-east of the Vojvodina province. The observation was carried out continuously in the period from 2012 to 2015 in the rural hinterland territory of the City of Pančevo, which stands as the largest industrial and cultural center in the region. The aim was to observe the extent to which natural and cultural heritage reflect the traditional wisdom of the rural population, and to what extent is this heritage still intact and usable in the everyday life of the community.

Content analysis is focused on documents related to protection and management of natural and cultural heritage, with the purpose of studying the extent to which cultural, tourism, educational, and other public policies encourage development of CBT.

Finally, the case study was related to the area of both the Ponjavica Nature Park and the Village of Omoljica, where particular life practices and cultural heritage were analyzed as traditional wisdom that could be a starting point for interpretation through CBT. The first reason why this particular location was chosen for in-depth research is that this Park is one of 16 protected parks in Serbia, yet it remains virtually unknown as a tourist destination, despite possessing

considerable development resources. Another reason is that we wanted to explore the extent of the development of the awareness of the local people regarding the value of resources embodying traditional wisdom. Methods used include narrative inquiry and a number of interviews with representatives of the local government, cultural institutions, civil organizations, and residents, all of which were conducted during the period of observation, assuming that community-based ecotourism, as a form of alternative tourism, must embrace individual initiatives within the community.

Results

Ponjavica Nature Park is located in the villages Omoljica and Banatski Brestovac, which fall within the territorial jurisdiction of town Pančevo, in the Vojvodina province of the Republic of Serbia. In the document titled *Proposal for the Protection of the Ponjavica Nature Park*, the Park is characterized by

a variation of habitats in a natural and semi-natural condition representing the last remains of the formerly large water and swamp complex standing as part of the diluvial area of the Danube river, as well as a refuge for many species whose habitats were destroyed during water regulation. Ponjavica also represents an ecological corridor connecting the torn remains of the original, native vegetation along the flow of the Ponjavica river with the ecological corridor of the Danube. (Provincial Institute for Nature Protection, 2012)

Those characteristics mean that this park could be included in the Ramsar “wetlands” (Stojanović et al., 2011, p. 20), 10 of which exist in Serbia. From the standpoint of legislation in the field of nature conservation in Serbia, Ponjavica was recognized in the aforementioned proposal as a protected area with local significance, which until recently did not have an international dimension (Đukić et al., 2014).

In accordance with the aim of this article, which addresses and prioritizes the traditional wisdom of rural communities and relies on community-based ecotourism and tourism planning theories, we must examine the most significant issues facing this geographical region. More precisely, it is a village of Omoljica, founded in the 18th century. Today, it has 6,518 inhabitants, the majority of whom are Serbs, though in the past, there also lived Germans and Hungarians.

The village was founded in the 18th century, which is a starting point for studying its development. Although this is a rural area, its uniqueness lies in progressive development and innovations, with special reference to local needs and the surrounding nature. As a result of our previous research, we have established that the territory of Omoljica village has access to several cultural and historical elements which exist and yet were not recognized in the Proposal for Protection. Thus, their developmental role has not been considered so far. Industrial–technical heritage that was identified as a part

of early industrialization is of great importance and could be preserved and used as a valuable document of the past. For the purpose of this article, we will mention the pump station on the regional hydro system Nadela in Ivanovo, built in 1897. Regardless of the fact that it has been recommended for conservation status as an example of industrial–technical heritage worthy of preservation, it has not yet been included in the conservation regime. Other example of industrial–technical heritage are two machine mills dating from the period between 1910 and 1930 that is considered as the period of the greatest industrialization of the village. As Đukić (2014) explained

they have been classified as entities of industrial-technical heritage, representing a way of life and work of the village population, which was primarily agricultural in the past, owing to the exceptionally fertile soil of the diluvial area of the Danube. (p. 54)

Along with the industrial-technical heritage, we should mention a “miraculous” spring with healing water that was used in the first half of the 20th century for treatment of diseases. It could be considered as a part of traditional wisdom that is fading since “numerous accounts regarding this custom and its associated beliefs failed to be recorded” (Đukić et al., 2014). We strongly believe this is the time when projects of documenting customs and beliefs should be conducted to reestablish the connection between past and current generations.

Traditional wisdom, considered in its wider sense, is not connected only to the industrial-heritage and medical beliefs. The religious tradition, myths, and customs are also incorporated in tradition that had an impact on life practices. Some religious artifacts, monuments, and rituals are still a part of today’s life. In Omoljica, there is one of the oldest Orthodox Christian churches in Vojvodina, built in 1780. The church continues to maintain an active role among the Orthodox population in the village, by holding the liturgies on the main traditional celebrations (Christmas, Easter). The days of the patron saint of the village are celebrated here each year. This unique custom is called “slava,” and it is included in the UNESCO’s list of the intangible cultural heritage of Serbia. It is a “celebration closely associated with the social and economic development of local communities” (Đukić, 2014), and as such it has always gathered the vast number of village inhabitants that paid respect to the patron saint that provided a village prosperity and welfare.

In the Pančevo district, vineyards were planted as early as 1718, and in the Omoljica region, there were once 200 ha of vineyards. Today, while there is no more wine production, there is an old vineyard cottage from 1920 that was used for occasional stays related to this sort of use of agricultural land and vineyard maintenance. Near to the cottage is an old grapevine sort known as Dinka, which was typical of Vojvodina in these earlier times.

In addition to wine growing, the whole way of life of the rural population in the past was directly linked to the different ways of utilizing the extremely fertile Banat soil. Other traditional life practices are visible in Omoljica—residential houses and economic facilities made of earth (examples range from a Neolithic age pit to late 18th century representations to the traditional earthen architecture), industrial–technical facilities (which today represent the cultural heritage—mills, pumping station, vineyard cottages, etc.), the culture of work that is primarily based on agriculture (cereals, wine, industrial crops such as sunflower), the industrial processing of agricultural products in the food industry (flour, sugar, oil, wine, brandy, etc.), and the culture of dressing (silk that was created by the silkworms reared on mulberry trees), customs, beliefs, and other forms of intangible culture.

Current Initiatives

Tourism planning in Serbia is conducted as a top-down activity, where the government controls the framework for policy and industry development. The region of Southern Banat and Omoljica village is still not being planned as a tourist destination, as other localities are seen as priorities for this purpose. On the contrary, local civil initiatives have been starting their *bottom-up* activities for the preservation and promotion of natural and cultural assets. In the recent time, the Ponjavica Association of Environmentalists has been established to plan and conduct ecotourism in the protected area of Omoljica. The Association has developed a long-term integrated management project (2012–2017) which is aimed at creating a consistent and coherent concept of viable community-based ecotourism in Omoljica (Đukić et al., 2014). This management project comprises three different, yet connected groups of activities that comprehensively approach ecotourism development. Those are “research of natural and cultural potentials, interpretation of heritage, functioning as a preparation of the destination for potential visitors, and promotion, aimed at attracting visitors” (Đukić et al., 2014). The first group of activities, research, was aimed at bringing out the stories and narratives of the locals (intangible heritage), as a development potential of the Omoljica village. Results that came out of the research served as a platform for selection and prioritizing the stories and narratives that can serve as a base for CBT product creation. Those were promoted and published on the website of the Association, in the form of short stories with a goal of awareness raising of the local population regarding its natural and cultural values, while, at the same time, redefining the identity of the protected area, creating a recognizable spirit of the place that could attract local visitors (Đukić et al., 2014). The stories are structured in such a way that each represents a particular topic from the village life (barn, cinema, water, mulberry tree, Žisel, soil, mill, Nadela, etc.), reconstructed from written sources or from the memories of the local population. In addition to

being adaptable for guided tours, the stories and project aims to motivate the local population to participate in the development of ecotourism in the area of their village. This is particularly significant, “since the village school and library have not been designed particularly as institutions of local memory” (Đukić, 2014, p. 77), due to which locals are not well-acquainted with their past, lacking an awareness of the natural and cultural values of the village and its potential attractiveness for domestic and international visitors. The project has been continued through the creation of tourist routes that include the most significant natural and cultural localities in Omoljica village. They currently exist only as an online map, with possibilities for walking, bicycle, and canoe tours organizing.

Efforts of the Association are devoted to the tourist activation of Omoljica and Ponjavica, based on existing resources. Thus far, the association’s activities have been manifested in efforts to set up a website intended for the local population and visitors and to organize gastronomic and sports-recreation events (the making of mulberry brandy in the traditional manner, a photo safari by canoe, a contest in the fish pot specialty making that is a part of the traditional celebration of the village *slava*—Preobraženje). In the period to follow, the Association is planning to finish the restoration of the vineyard cottage, which would increase lodging capacities for visitors. The main problem that remains for all of the activities—realized, as well as planned, is unsustainable funding. From the Association’s cash flow analysis, we can see that “all the funds invested to this point have been acquired from sponsors and individual donations of the Association founders” (Đukić et al., 2014). Because many activities are still at a start-up level and they tend to activate members of the local community, we argue there should be more sources of funding, with additional financial help from the municipality of Pančevo. The funding diversity would unburden the individuals and assist accelerating sustainable ecotourism product creation.

As a part of current initiatives, but dating back to 1970, we can mention the “Žisel international film festival.” It was established on the presumption that “indigenous cultures prevailing in natural areas are the basic characteristics of ecotourism” (Đukić et al., 2014), and since the establishment, it has contributed to the international activity of Omoljica village and its surrounding protected area. This manifestation bears witness to the unique cultural relationship between the inhabitants of Omoljica and their natural environment, demonstrating the synergy of nature and culture using arts as its means. At the same time, “it contributes towards establishing and broadening the international perception of Omoljica from the standpoint of filmmakers worldwide, who participate in the competition of this festival with their films” (Đukić et al., 2014). However, the local community still does not relate to this event as a potential for tourism development. Since its foundation in 1970, “Žisel has not been supported by the town’s tourist or cultural policy; it has neither stable sources

of financing, nor promotional channels” (Đukić-Dojčinović, 1992, pp. 193-194). The specificity of this festival is that it was the only film village festival in the entire former Yugoslavia and as such it attracted thousands of visitors and tourists back then. In recent years, “it has been of interest primarily only to filmmakers, whose films have been entered in the competition, as well as only minor elements of the local population” (Đukić et al., 2014). This situation caused an activist reaction of a group of young inhabitants of Omoljica

which started the initiative for the International Volunteer Camp Sunflower to be held immediately before the start of the festival, so that local and international volunteers could have time to help in the organization of the festival Žisel, as well as in its promotion and cultural program. (Đukić et al., 2014, p. 76)

This activism reflects the core of the community-based ecotourism that should be initiated and developed by members of the local community. Current initiatives of mostly young people represent an affirmative circumstance. With more stable projects funding and more visitors coming to the municipality, it could be a certain path to CBT development.

Discussion

Regarding the results of the desk and field research, some insights have been made that could be useful to the further development of community-based ecotourism that would include and prioritize the traditional wisdom of the Omoljica rural community.

First of all, it is a fact that tourism development, planned as a top-down activity, leaves out small communities that have some resources, yet not enough motivation to carry out development activities. In the case of Nature Park Ponjavica,

it is obvious that different levels of territorial jurisdiction are present—on the one hand, there are state and provincial activities reflected in legislative regulation and occasional funding and, on the other hand, there are efforts of individual and small group initiatives in the local community with a number of activities financed by their personal means. (Đukić et al., 2014, p. 60)

The Municipality of Pančevo as local government does not represent a significant role in the protection, management, and funding. As a key stakeholder that is in charge of development and funding issues, Municipality should position itself as an active player in development of strategic activities and it should collaborate with the “Tamiš Dunav” public utility company that serves as a caretaker in charge of managing the Ponjavica Nature Park. Currently, this company

lacks the planning processes and motivation that could define priorities and measurable aims for future development, based on which destination management, products, services, and marketing could be developed to bring about positive economic,

social, cultural, and environmental impacts, as well as stimulate offerings to visitors. (Đukić et al., 2014)

As opposed to the lack of activities on the side of the government and public institutions, private and civil sectors are active in the fields of research, interpretation, and promotion of the tourism resources. The existence of such initiatives is important because they represent the actual strength, willingness, and capacity of individuals associated in small groups with the aim of encouraging CBT development. Yet, as we have already concluded, most of these efforts are “short-term” and ad hoc in nature, while there is only one legitimate bottom-up integration management project, conducted by the recently founded Ponjavica Association of Environmentalists” (Đukić et al., 2014). In the longer run, individual civil and private initiatives could not be sustainable without developmental framework provided by the local government. Tourism policy and planning should have a key role for such a framework, assuming they are created with the respect to natural and cultural resources and current individual initiatives.

Second, we would like to emphasize the importance of documenting the village’s past, the lack of which has caused a discontinuity of remembrance. This means that the people living nowadays in the village are not appropriately aware of the local history and tradition, due to the aforementioned Yugoslav practical cultural policy that segregated rural culture from the rural citizens, placing the artifacts of rural culture in museums located in cities and towns. This tendency, which lasted over 50 years, has left its traces that are visible in the cultural oblivion and identity loss of the rural population. The only initiatives that are happening in Omoljica and Ponjavica are the ones coming from individuals and private civil associations. They are active in the field of investigating, research, and documenting cultural and natural assets. They have, as a matter of necessity, taken over activities that public institutions should be in charge of; the activities that are of public importance. The initiative of the civil sector is valuable, but it cannot handle nor replace the systematic and coordinated work of public institutions in charge of documenting and protecting cultural heritage. However, their initiative could serve as an impetus and starting point from which the activities of the public institutions could expand.

Third, it is easily apparent that elements of the cultural tangible heritage whose traces are documented remain visible in the territory of the village (hydro system, mills, brickworks, pumping station, vineyard cottage), while the intangible heritage has begun to be illustrated in the stories of the inhabitants and “slava”—the celebration of family saint patron’s day as an active traditional living practice, one which was inscribed in November 2014 onto the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Humanity upon a proposal from Serbia. All of these elements, together with the natural surroundings, could serve as a resource base for tourism planning. One positive circumstance is visible in the expanding jurisdiction of the municipality for activities

related to tourism. The key approaching challenge would be how to systematically maintain and preserve current resources while preparing local inhabitants and the municipality for tourism development. Another significant challenge would be the documenting and gathering of data needed for protected area ecotourism planning.

In achieving these goals, educational and cultural heritage institutions have a particularly significant role, but thus far they have not shown appropriate levels of the awareness of the value of rural cultural heritage, or its role in its safeguarding, conveyance, and usage. Traditional forms of knowledge and organization, which have contributed to sustainable development in the past, can be learnt from and built upon (Leach, 1998) through educational and cultural programs and projects aimed at safeguarding, transferring, and promoting traditional practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces associated there with (according to the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage, UNESCO, 2003). On the contrary, in rural communities, in which these two types of institutions are organizationally separate, schools and libraries represent a complementary institutional framework of potential partnership for sustainable development and planning of CBT. Their role is especially important because the CBT theory indicates that before building capacities for tourism development, community residents should be more informed and empowered through knowledge about their own resources. Otherwise, it becomes increasingly difficult for destination communities to get involved in either tourism development decisions or to participate in tourism-related businesses.

Conclusion

Based on the theoretical background and research, the key issues related to documenting and including traditional wisdom in community-based ecotourism planning in Nature Park Ponjavica are

- a discontinuity in traditional wisdom remembrance, resulting in cultural oblivion,
- a lack of knowledge among the locals about the resources in their community,
- the non-existence of plans for tourism development, and
- a lack of interest from the administrative center (city of Pančevo) regarding Omoljica and Ponjavica.

Traditional forms of knowledge and organization, which have contributed to sustainable development in the past, can be learnt from and built upon through educational and cultural programs and projects aimed to safeguard, transfer, and promote traditional wisdom—practices, representations and expressions, knowledge, and skills—as well as the associated instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces associated.

Relying on the CBT theory, research, and current insights of the Omoljica and Ponjavica community, there are some steps that would seem to be rational when approaching community-based ecotourism in this locale. First of all, awareness raising and education about the local resources is the starting point in reconnecting locals with their heritage. Traditional forms of knowledge and organization, which have contributed to the sustainable use of local resources in the past, should be learnt from and built upon through educational and cultural programs and projects aimed to safeguard, transfer, and promote traditional practices and wisdom. By raising awareness, local inhabitants would gain a new perspective in valuing their natural and cultural assets. After gaining new perspectives about the values of their community, local inhabitants should be well informed and educated about tourism as a possible economic activity. In addition, they should decide whether they indeed want tourism to be developed in their municipality. In obtaining this statement from local community, we can be sure to avoid a prescriptive standpoint toward local tourism development. If a positive approach toward tourism has been established, the next step would be education of community members and their subsequent inclusion in the ecotourism development. By gradually developing tourism, conflict can be prevented, which can occur when locals do not feel the benefits of such development. Activities involving the local community should include specific planning for tourism and should enhance the destination community's abilities not only to implement the tourism plans but also to retain control over the plans themselves. Parallel to the processes of local community education and awareness raising, an infrastructure for the documentation and presentation of traditional wisdom and heritage should be established. Because the libraries in Serbia have been programmed as "memory institutions," the establishment of a rural native fund, or local history collection, could be the new system solution for cultural policy based on the documentation of traditional preindustrialization wisdom. This would be a first step toward the physical availability of rural heritage to the local population and to visitors as well. The second step could be horizontal multifunctional strategic partnerships among schools, community centers, and other stakeholders in the countryside and the city. These efforts would address the diversification of cultural and educational programs to interpret the value and importance of heritage to modern society and thus render it emotionally and intellectually accessible to different social groups in the towns and villages in Serbia. An interpretation, as an integral part of the process of creating narratives, could include educational programs for the development of skills and abilities to create programs and projects inspired by local heritages. In this way, the actors in the public, private, and civil society sector could create geographical and functional clusters, transferring competences, skills, experience, contacts, and resources to each other. Finally, the third step, which would encompass public activities and their associated promotion, could encourage local people to

participate in the creation of native funds through gifts and legacies, as well as to engage in the use of collected materials about the origin and development of the village. This would increase the number of users of library services (or “native fund” services), and allow these users to gain knowledge about the history, economy, and culture of the total territory of the municipality (both city as a centre and surrounding villages). These activities could develop an awareness that the village as well as the city is contributing to the sustainable development of the region.

These steps seem rational and easy to implement. Thus, we have no negative presumptions on how it would reflect on the particular local community of Omoljica. Theories of territorially driven cultural policy and CBT are a good starting point for the local community because the valuing of local resources could bring people closer to their “true core values.” It is, however, possible that these “core values” could turn out to be something other than expected, or not taken into account, and that other elements could appear. Either way, an effort starting with small steps should be initiated, which could begin with gathering the local community together so that they can begin to reflect on their surroundings, material and immaterial. Identifying and dealing with what is at the community’s disposal would be a starting point for the mapping and evaluation of resources, seen and felt by the locals themselves.

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