

INTEGRATED QUALITY MANAGEMENT OF TOURIST DESTINATIONS IN PROTECTED AREAS, THE CASE OF PIATRA CRAIULUI NATIONAL PARK

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Abstract:

In an increasingly competitive marketplace, viable destinations must develop competitive products in a framework of responsible development. Many destinations operate within highly competitive environments where customers have a wide range of choices even within a country or a region. The challenge is for destinations to develop a service culture, physical environment and a set of products that can satisfy not only first-time visitors but attract repeat visitors. Due to the obstacles of ensuring a quality destination experience many communities are missing significant opportunities to create productive employment for the residents and realize opportunities for poverty reduction due to the ineffective planning and management. Maintaining and improving high quality supply in Romanian tourist destinations situated inside or close to protected areas is fundamental to meeting the challenges of competitors and increasing their market share. Integrated Quality Management (IQM) is an argumentative and efficient method proposed by the European Commission to reach and maintain tourist products and services quality in destinations. This paper aims to explain how Integrated Quality Management (IQM), as an integrated management tool, can improve the level of sustainability in Piatra Craiului National Park keeping its comparative advantages and enabling long-term market competitiveness. Improving the quality of this tourist destination is essential in satisfying tourists' needs, making the local tourism industry more competitive and ensuring that tourism development is in a balanced and sustainable way.

Keywords: protected areas, tourist destinations, integrated quality management, partnership, Piatra Craiului

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1. INTRODUCTION

Providing a quality facility or service for tourists is a fundamental part of developing a sustainable product, especially when dealing with the smaller and less accessible market segments based on natural and cultural heritage. In these circumstances, the better the quality of the tourism product, the more satisfied the tourist is likely to be of his holiday experience and the more likely he is to stay longer, come back, tell others and be concerned about the conservation of local heritage (European Commission, 2002). To be effective, quality needs to be assured all along the tourism chain from first marketing messages through to the provision of accommodation, food, information, orientation, town planning etc. Each one of these products can make an important contribution to the overall level of visitor satisfaction. In tourist destinations covering or surrounding protected areas there is a need for a well-organized and coordinated tourism strategy, which encourages all partners to work together in enhancing the overall quality of the destination and in ensuring that the quality standards are maintained.

Romanian protected areas provide a variety of rich experiences for visitors. Both domestic and international visitors are turning to tourist destinations covering or surrounding

protected areas for holidays, but changes in the length and type of visit sought and a rapid growth in alternative destinations worldwide has meant that these areas are facing a need to be even more competitive (European Commission, 2000). At the same time, there is an increasing need to be sensitive to both the positive and negative impacts of tourism on the environment and local communities. One approach is to focus on quality, putting the right management process in place to ensure that visitors have a special experience, meeting or exceeding their expectations, while maximizing the benefit to the destination.

Integrated quality management (IQM) is a European-led initiative aimed at encouraging the development and implementation of a sustainable and quality-oriented approach to tourism. A quality service only exists as much as the visitor perceives it to meet their expectations and requirements. It is important therefore to take into account all aspects of the visitor experience, from initial planning through travel, destination information, accommodation to the "after-sales" care and communication (Serra, 2006). The IQM approach is based on two key elements: a focus on visitors and the involvement of local people and local tourism businesses in the management of the destination. When it comes to the quality of the services, as much importance is attached to offering a personalized, genuine and informed service as to being efficient and professional (European Commission, 2002).

The aim of this paper is to propose the application of the integrated quality management in Romanian tourist destinations covering or surrounding protected areas, including practical recommendations for a specific area – Piatra Craiului National Park.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Total quality management systems are a common feature in the approach developed for specific tourist service providers (tour operators, travel agents, hotels, restaurants, etc.). However, as far as the tourist is concerned, the satisfaction derived from staying at a destination depends not only on experience of specific tourist services, but also on more general factors, for example hospitality, safety and security, sanitation and salubrity, traffic and visitor management (European Commission, 2000). A large number of elements have an impact on the tourist's perception of a destination, on the level of his/her satisfaction and, in consequence, on the tourist's willingness to make a repeat visit and to recommend the destination to potential visitors.

The concept of Total Quality Management emerged in business management theory in the 1980s. It is a way of meeting an organization's objectives by improving the customer's experience of the product or service provided. It is concerned with effective use of resources, and the level of participation and satisfaction of the people in the organization (European Commission, 2000). The concept of Integrated Quality Management (IQM) follows this approach but is broader and more flexible. It recognizes that an organization may have a wide range of objectives, and that it should approach them in an integrated way.

Tourist satisfaction can be observed in five phases of quality (expected, perceived, given, wanted and quality prescribed by business system), but there is a "gap" and variation between each of these phases. The goal is to eliminate the difference, to level the "gap" as much as possible and to bond particular phases. In a tourist destination there are a number of considerations and interests such as: interests and satisfaction of entrepreneurs, management, employees, guests, inhabitants and society, that should be coordinated and also to find a quality that shall satisfy all interested parties and their interests because it is the only way to achieve business excellence of every tourist destination (Vujic, 2007). When it comes to business excellence and the model of sustainable development of tourism, it should be noted that sustainable development of tourism is based on consideration of the following three components: ecological, socio-cultural and economic sustainability.

According to the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (1999) sustainable tourism development is a concept that is already widely accepted at an international level and in most tourist destinations. It is about keeping a balance between the needs of the visitor, the environment and the host community for current as well as future generations. The concept of IQM must embrace this, emphasizing policies and actions which address all these needs together.

Typically, a tourist destination manager has twin objectives: to increase local income and employment through tourism and to ensure that the environment and quality of life of local people is not damaged and if possible is enhanced by tourism. IQM can meet both these objectives by improving visitor satisfaction and monitoring and managing impacts on the local environment and economy (Denman, 2000).

The working definition of IQM in tourist destinations developed by the European Commission (2000) describes it as an approach to managing a tourism destination which focuses on an ongoing process of improving visitor satisfaction, while seeking to improve the local economy, the environment and the quality of life of the local community.

The Integrated Quality Management (IQM) is the optimal concept and model of quality management in tourism, because it integrates all elements of quality tourism within itself. IQM enables satisfaction of ever increasing needs, requests and expectations of modern tourists. At the same time, it provides balanced and sustainable tourist development (Vujic, 2007).

A model of quality management devised by the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) is being widely applied in Europe in the public and private sectors. The model identifies nine elements; five of them are to do with structure and functions: leadership; strategy; personnel management; use of resources; and processes of delivering the service. A further four are to do with results: client satisfaction; staff satisfaction; integration into the community; and operational results (European Commission, 2000).

IQM should simultaneously take into account and have a favorable impact on the activities of tourism professionals, tourists, the local population and the environment (i.e. the destination's natural, cultural and manmade assets). The integrated quality management strategies implemented in destinations must have the requirements of tourists as one of their major considerations. In this way, the tourist destination is described by two independent elements: its internal reality, i.e. a given space that is internally coherent (a set of actors working together) and makes its own decisions; and its external reality, based on its image and perception by the outside world, i.e. its meaning for the tourist (European Commission, 2000). Also, for a tourist destination, IQM can be seen as a systematic quest for internal quality and external quality.

The process of improving quality in line with identified standards requires a close working relationship between everyone involved in tourism in the destination, and well constructed training and assistance programmes which meet their needs. As well as obtaining feedback from visitors, it is important to maintain a check on the wider impact of tourism so that adjustments can be made in management, with a view to contributing to sustainable tourism development. However, monitoring impact is still currently a weak point in many tourist destinations, probably because efficient and user-friendly tools and indicators are not available (Godin, 1999).

3. TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN PIATRA CRAIULUI NATIONAL PARK

Piatra Craiului National Park (PCNP) is a Romanian protected area, established in 1990 for the purpose of preserving the biodiversity, landscape and valuable species. Another goal of the National Park is promoting and encouraging tourism development, public education and

awareness regarding the protection of nature and its values (The Administration of Piatra Craiului National Park, 2005). Situated at only 30 km from the main city of the County - Brașov, Piatra Craiului National Park benefits from the proximity to this well-known tourism destination. Day trips or longer journeys are available from Brașov for tourists interested in climbing, wildlife watching or just a breath of fresh air in the idyllic villages included in the park. The park is crossed by 30 tourist trails leading the tourists to several beautiful areas. The main tourist attractions are:

- the outstanding rich flora, including the specie *Dianthus callizonus* - unique in the world;
- the wild fauna includes the chamois and the large carnivores - the symbol of unaltered nature - which have disappeared from most of the European countries;
- the traditional lifestyle in the areas neighboring the massif, especially in Măgura and Peștera villages.

There is no statistical data on the tourist arrivals or expenditure in Piatra Craiului National Park as the local authorities believe this is not their responsibility, but that of Brașov County Statistics Institute and local tourism stakeholders either do not have these statistics or do not wish to make it public.

The first stage of tourism activities monitoring took place in year 2000 for the purpose of assessing the tourism traffic both from a quantitative and qualitative point of view. According to this survey, each year, approximately 86.000 tourists visit the national park (The Administration of Piatra Craiului National Park, 2005). The main visiting motivations are: appreciating the mountain, the nature, to escape from crowded cities, to be alone, to be with one's family, to camp. As for the activities that the visitors plan to develop inside the PCNP, the following were most common: relaxation and landscape (80.7%), camping (68.4%), picnic (48.8%), climbing (44.7%), cave visits (25.1%) and mountain biking (22.1%). From the total number of tourists about 48% were aged 18-29, 45% 30-49 and 6% under 18. An important aspect of the matter is the amount of time allowed for the visit: 17% of the tourists spent a day or less, 44% spent 2-3 days, 30% spent 4-7 days and only 9% of the tourists spend more than a week inside the National Park.

Concerning accommodation, there are several guesthouses in the villages inside the park (Peștera and Măgura), in the villages neighboring the park (Bran, Moeciu, Irineu, Zărnești, Ciocanu, Podul Dâmboviței, Dâmbovicioara and Știc), and also the chalets and the camping sites inside the park. In Moeciu-Bran area, there are over 150 guesthouses rated at one to three stars, located at distances from 100 meters to 10 km from the park's border.

A qualitative research conducted in 2008 (Candrea & Bouriaud, 2009) reveals the necessity of implementing sustainable tourism strategies in Piatra Craiului National Park. The study identifies many issues that show unsustainable practices of tourism in the Piatra Craiului:

- the problem of waste disposal in the communities included in the national park;
- negative tourist behavior;
- the lack of tourism statistics;
- little support for the local communities from the local authorities;
- the presence of buildings that do not respect the local architecture;
- little understanding of the sustainable tourism concept by the local community members;
- infrastructure problems;
- little tourism signs and tourist information;
- excessive land parcelling;
- hunting and logging;
- little funding for conservation purposes.

4. AN INTEGRATED QUALITY MANAGEMENT APPROACH OF PIATRA CRAIULUI NATIONAL PARK TOURISM

The first step in the process of integrated quality management of a tourist destination covering or surrounding a protected area would be the creation of an organization or association resulting from the partnership of local authorities, the administration of the protected area, tourist service providers and other association interested in quality promotion. In order to ensure the success of such a partnership there is a need for permanent involvement of local authorities, projects development to finance quality initiatives, the involvement of regional and national tourist offices and the interest of tourist service providers. In Piatra Craiului National Park there have been unsuccessful attempts to build and maintain a local partnership, especially due to the divergent interests of local businesses, but also because of the lack of interest of local authorities and the administration of the protected area. This situation is mainly caused by the dispersion of tourist services providers and the fact that the park territory is bordered by three different communes that are not efficiently communicating to find solutions for the common problems. The existence of a local partnership will ensure a better promotion of the area and will enable financing for common projects that can increase tourist arrivals and sustainable local development.

In order to achieve the objectives of the strategy it is necessary to have a complete promotion plan for the protected area, including:

- Tourists' experiences begin before their arrival in the destination and ends with their memories of the trip and future plans for other holidays in the region. The communication of

promotional information must take place during the entire tourism experience and not lead to false expectations. This is why it is very important to survey tourists both before arrival and especially at the end of their trip in order to identify their opinion on service quality and destination image. Piatra Craiului National Park should have a client data base gathered from each service provider and centralized by the destination management organization.

The accommodation services play an important role in having a quality experience in a tourist destination situated inside or close to a protected area as tourists are more demanding concerning their comfort and facilities and prefer traditional accommodation units, especially those run by locals. In order to respect the conditions imposed by the integrated quality management the destination management organization of Piatra Craiului National Park should promote the following measures:

- making a standard survey questionnaire for all tourism providers and gathering tourism statistics from accommodation units;
- motivating accommodation units to reflect the local culture in their architecture and interior design;
- encouraging other types of accommodation in the area: camping sites, caravanning camping, hostels etc.

Traditional products and local gastronomy play an important role in the integrated quality management of protected areas as tourist destinations. In Piatra Craiului National Park the local gastronomy is insufficiently promoted and traditional products can be rarely found, mostly with the occasion of local events and fairs. There used to be a souvenir shop selling authentic products in Zărnești, but it no longer exists. For an efficient promotion of traditional products it is necessary to have a network of local artisans, weekly fairs, especially during the high season, several souvenir shops in tourist areas and workshops where tourists can see the artisans working. Traditional products could also be sold in the accommodation units. The promotion of local gastronomy could be made in local events where tourists can taste and appreciate local gastronomy, but also in restaurants and accommodation units.

The quality of tourist experience also depends on the variety and availability of tourist attraction. Piatra Craiului National Park has huge natural potential, which is unfortunately not well-promoted and managed. The existing hiking trail network is sufficient but a better signaling is necessary as well as interpretative techniques: personal (tour guides, info points, visitors centre), impersonal (publications, interpretative panels) based on art (sculpture, painting, drama, stories) or new media (internet guides, audio guides). Day trips to nearby cultural attractions should be promoted especially as weather conditions don't favor permanent outdoor activities.

As the main motivation of tourists traveling to a protected area is nature appreciation, the environmental quality is a key issue of the integrated quality management of these tourist destinations. Several measures should be taken in Piatra Craiului National Park in order to increase the quality of the environment:

- promoting good environmental practices among tourist providers;
- printing promotional materials on recycled paper;
- implementing a complete program of energy and water conservation, instructing personnel to limit consumption;
- protecting biodiversity;
- implementing a system of waste management;
- organizing public meeting to ecologically educate local stakeholders;
- raising tourists' awareness concerning nature conservation.

Another issue of the integrated quality management is the understanding of tourists' needs in order to improve service quality. Due to the lack of tourism market research there is no

A key component of the integrated quality management is monitoring tourism impact on the local economy and community in order to assure a sustainable development of the tourist destination. Sustainable tourism in Piatra Craiului National Park (adapted after MacGregor, Blumer & Florescu, 2006) and surrounding area must:

- Be educational and informative. Park visitors are particularly interested in discovering and learning about the park and adjacent region. For the most part, they also want to learn how to help sustain its character while deepening their own visitor experiences. Residents will also learn the value of resources they may have been taking for granted.
- Support the values of the region. International travelers to the region and the park are particularly interested in supporting the local values and resources. Therefore, they seek out businesses that emphasize local character in terms of architecture, cuisine, heritage, aesthetics, and ecology. Tourism revenues in turn raise local perceived value of those assets.
- Benefit local residents. Tour operators, particularly those from Romania, should try to employ and train local people, buy local supplies, and use local services.
- Conserve resources. Environmentally responsible tourists prefer to support businesses that minimize pollution, waste and energy consumption, water usage, chemicals and toxic materials, and that provide accommodation which is respectful of the environment.
- Be sensitive to local conditions. Stakeholders anticipate development pressures and apply limits and management techniques to prevent unnecessary changes to the existing conditions. Local and external businesses cooperate to sustain natural habitats, heritage sites, scenic appeal, and local culture.
- Emphasize quality over quantity. Communities measure tourism success not by sheer numbers of visitors, but by length of stay, money spent, and quality of experience.
- Provide a quality travel experience. Satisfied, excited visitors bring new knowledge home and send their friends and relatives off to experience the same thing - which will provide continuing business for the region.

Improving the quality in a tourist destination covering or surrounding protected areas implies a partnership of all local stakeholders and the necessity of assistance programs and training in this field.

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