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Cheile Turzii Nature Reserve, Between Conservation and Tourism

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ABSTRACT

When it comes to natural protected areas, there has always been an antithesis between conservation and tourism, even though the latter bears the name of eco-tourism. This opposition is frequently expressed by many stakeholders in “Cheile Turzii” Nature Reserve, who come up with proposals that involve even the complete interdiction of tourists in the area. This paper does not intend to fully argue in favour of tourism in natural protected areas, phenomenon that has significant negative impacts on the protected elements within them, but actually intends to emphasize some aspects regarding the positive influence of tourism on the conservative management of natural areas and the improvement opportunities for such management practices through tourist involvement.

1. INTRODUCTION

The management of natural protected areas was faced, time and time again, with a strong antithesis between conservation and tourism, even though the latter has borne the name of eco-tourism.

This opposition was and still is frequently expressed by many stakeholders in the Cheile Turzii Nature Reserve (mountain rescuers, non-governmental organizations, public institutions, etc.), that made several proposals, some of them even suggesting the complete interdiction of tourism in the area.

The paper at hand does not plan to fully argue in favour of tourism in nature reserves, as this phenomenon is one that has major negative impacts on the protected elements within them.

The intention is actually to emphasize some aspects regarding the positive influence of tourism on the conservative management of natural protected areas and the improvement opportunities for such practices through tourism involvement, specifically in the Cheile Turzii national nature reserve and Natura 2000 site (“Site of Community Importance” or SCI for short).

Following this presentation of the paper’s general direction, I would like to put forward the most important aspects regarding Cheile Turzii nature reserve, in terms of legislation, protected elements, and current management.

This natural protected area, situated in Cluj County, Romania (fig. 1), on the territories of three administrative units (Mihai Viteazu, Sănduleşti, and Petreştii de Jos), was established in 1938, and “grew” in terms of surface area and degree of conservation, especially after the fall of the communist regime.

In 2000, it had 104 ha and received the title of nature reserve of national importance, as stated in Law no. 5/2000 regarding the approval of the national territory’s arrangement plan - Section 3 - protected areas [1]. This law was quickly followed in 2004 by the Government’s Decision no. 2151 regarding the establishment of natural protected area status for new zones [2], which increased the surface of the nature reserve to 324 ha. 2007 was the year in which the reserve was introduced in the Natura 2000 network (through Minister’s Order no. 1964/2007 [3]), the ecological network of natural protected areas in the

territory of the European Union, while in 2011 it gained two more hectares of land.



Fig. 1. The location of Cheile Turzii Nature Reserve.

As a Natura 2000 site, code named ROSC10035, Turzii Gorge contains a wide range of protected habitats (Asperulo-Fagetum beech forests is one example), and species of mammals (such as the Long Winged Bat, *Miniopterus schreibersi*), amphibians (the Ridged Newt, *Triturus cristatus*), fish, butterflies (for example Fenton’s Wood White or *Leptidea morsei*) and plants (*Echium russicum* among others).

The reserve and the site are currently managed by Cluj County Council, which signed, in April 2012, a custody agreement with Natura 2000 Trascău Administration.

The latter is in charge of a more extended Natura 2000 site, namely Trascău Mountains Special Protection Area, which includes both Cheile Turzii and Cheile Turenilor reserves.

2. TOURISM, FINANCIAL RESOURCES, CONSERVATION

Any type of management, including that of natural protected areas, depends on financial resources and the basis for many nature reserves has been public financing. Many administrators and wardens however lack sufficient funds to answer the demands of habitat and species conservation, a phenomenon found even in countries with a very long tradition in biodiversity protection, such as the United States of America.

The situation is even more dramatic in the People’s Republic of China, where the nature reserves are dangerously underfinanced by the State Forest Administration. While in developed countries, nature reserves receive an average of 2,058 US dollars/km², and in developing countries an average of 157 US dollars/ km², Chinese nature reserves get a meagre 52.7 US dollars/km² [4].

Administrators must therefore be creative and many of them resort to tourism, since it can generate much needed income for their work in biodiversity

conservation and protection, ecosystem integrity and cultural heritage preservation.

K. Linderg and J. Enriquez have studied the issue of nature reserve financing in 1994 and put together a list of the main financing sources for natural protected areas. The second place on the list was occupied by entry fees for tourists, with an average of 43% in developed countries and 54% in developing countries. [5]. In the case of Cheile Turzii Nature Reserve, administered by Cluj County Council, the revenues from such fees represented 100% of the total funds in the last 10 years. If we think about it, the situation is even more critical than the one in China, as there are no funds coming from the Ministry of Environment and Forests, and the administrators are basically left to fend for themselves.

According to Romanian law, more specifically Government’s Emergency Ordinance no. 57/2007 [6] and Law no. 49/2011 [7], all these revenues from entry fees must be reinvested in the conservation of both Cheile Turzii and Cheile Turenilor. The latter reserve is also administered by Cluj County Council, but there is no entry fee system in place for it, so it depends on the revenues from its “big sister”.

The following table presents a general view on the revenues gained from entry fees in Cheile Turzii reserve, in 2011, and on how this money was set to be used the following year, in 2012 (Table 1).

Table 1. The planned budget for Cheile Turzii and Cheile Turenilor nature reserves in 2012.

No.	Object of contract	Estimated value without VAT (lei)	Estimated contract start date
1	Footbridge maintenance	3000	September
2	Fee collection, ecological guard and control, information and awareness raising services	11200	March
3	Cleaning the noncompliant waste dump of Tureni commune, situated in Cheile Turenilor Natura 2000 site	7000	March
4	Waste collection services	10000	March
5	Thematic path design	9000	May
6	Building 2 waste bin platforms	15000	June
7	Mapping natural protected areas of county significance	30000	July
8	Mountain gear acquisition	3000	March
Total 2012		88200	
Revenues 2011		104261	

There are a few things that must be explained in regards to the table shown above. Firstly, as one can

see, the revenues gained in Cheile Turzii nature reserve from tourist entry fees, during April-October 2011, amounted to 104,261 RON. Secondly, when the financial plan was approved, the percentage that had to be reinvested in the natural protected area, according to GEO no. 57/2007, was only 75%, the rest being transferred to the National Agency for Natural Protected Areas. The ordinance was later modified to specify that all revenues must be reinvested in the reserve of origin, as mentioned earlier, partly because the National Agency for Natural Protected Areas no longer existed. This explains the difference between the revenues of 2011 and the approved sum for 2012. Thirdly, the remaining sum was approved later in the second semester of 2012, but there were no specifications for which type of activities.

In short, eco-touristic activities are this nature reserve's lifeline, as however dedicated the people involved in biodiversity conservation and protection might be, nothing can be done without some sort of financial support.

3. TOURISM, EDUCATION, CONSERVATION

The tourists that visit natural protected areas have always been a good „audience” for ecological communication-education programmes, especially when participative processes that include deliberation, debates and monitoring are involved. For example, the visitors of Itala Reserve, KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, are issued observation cards to help track wildlife movement [8].

This is even more noticeable when tourists have a higher education. Most studies have shown that the visitors of natural protected areas have a high education level. J. C. Hendee, G. H. Stanley and R. C. Lucas stated in 1990 that 60%-85% of the tourists that visit the American wilderness have a tertiary education [9], meaning at least one college degree. The numbers are similar for the tourists that spend time in Cheile Turzii Nature Reserve, 65% of their total number having a bachelor degree.

Furthermore, the tourist, acting as an „awareness agent”, tends to disseminate ecological information, as well as good and bad practices in nature reserves, aspect that is proven by the fact that roughly 67% of the tourists stated that they had known about the fact that Cheile Turzii is a national nature reserve and a Natura 2000 site, which harbours a significant number of protected species of wildlife, from other tourists that previously visited the area.

Moreover, more than 50% of the tourists (53%) could tell the dos and don'ts in Cheile Turzii Nature Reserve and more than 30% (32.5% to be precise) were able to name at least one protected species found in the area. These findings paint quite a promising picture in terms of the tourist's role as an ecological education

agent, mostly due to the fact that reliable and readily available information on this particular reserve is quite scarce. However, the custodian or administrator of the reserve should not rely solely on this status quo and must continue to build on this phenomenon.

One must admit that there are some things that education cannot fix. It is rarely able to solve long term issues, and specific problems require more direct, more immediate actions. But there are some things it can do. It can contribute to impact management since: it supports other, more direct actions than restricting access; it can make the administrators proactive and not reactive; tourists can have the opportunity of an informed choice and, last but not least, it can be used in any reserve, no matter how primitive its organization is, the latter being a perfect fit for the Romanian nature reserve management system.

4. CONCLUSION

In a natural protected area like Cheile Turzii Nature Reserve, visited by tens of thousands of people every year, the careful control of tourists is paramount, but at the same time, I believe it is imperative to change the preconception of the „tourist as a damaging factor” for such areas, and to encourage the idea of gradually transforming he/she in a multipurpose for conservation.

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