

Nature-positive Tourism: Prospective Regional Models

Abstract: *The concept of nature-positive tourism has its regional forms, each leading to certain organisational, economic, social and technical solutions, thanks to which it is reflected in the regions throughout the world. The UNWTO Global Tourism Highlights 2023 developed a roadmap, including general principles of nature-friendly tourism. The strategy to be followed is a hierarchy of algorithms that will allow, on the one hand, to implement the process of restoring biodiversity, while on the other, to achieve prosperity for the tourism business in the region.*

Keywords: *positive tourism, roadmap, tourism strategy.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, tourism has focused on limiting its uncontrolled growth taking place since the middle of the last century, and has begun to pay significantly more attention to the main resource of any type of tourism activity, i.e. natural resources that are used for its implementation. Starting from the first protected areas and ending with the formulation and practical application of the concept of sustainable tourism, a lot has been done to preserve the environment in recent years¹.

It has to be noted, however, that mass tourism in recent decades has created such conditions that even meeting the highest environmental requirements, tourism activity continues to have a negative impact on the environment with the most vulnerable natural systems suffering most from mass forms of tourism activity, a significant part of which either cannot be restored in foreseeable future or their restoration will be too difficult and too resource-intensive².

The main reason is the need to constantly increase the level of service in the field of tourism, the emergence of increasingly modern means of transport and means of communication, as well as the need to adapt natural landscapes and ecosystems to the needs of tourism activity. Despite following the most precise norms of ecological compatibility, these factors continue to have a negative impact.

Changes in land use lead to fragmentation of the environment and, accordingly, to the death of a number of ecosystems. Pollution and the carbon footprint that tourism cannot help but leave (no matter how high the standards are, still means of transport, energy production and a number of other elements leave their mark on nature), as well as the risk of introducing atypical biological forms that threaten existing ecosystems and under certain conditions can lead to their extinction. In addition, it should be noted that such processes do not affect only exotic destinations in the equatorial belt, but apply to all regions, including the Balkan region.

This is precisely why there is a need to move to a new stage in the protection of natural complexes and systems, with the path of unlimited prohibitions being one of the most unproductive, both because of the need for appropriate control over its observance and

¹ Nature Risk Rising: Why the Crisis Engulfing Nature Matters for Business and the Economy (World Economic Forum, 2020).

² Nature Positive Travel & Tourism Report p.32 (WTTC, 2022).

because this approach will disrupt the production processes of a number of tourist companies, a significant part of which strictly comply with environmental requirements. Such a new stage is nature-positive tourism - a model in which the environment is not only the object of protection but also of active restoration of already caused damage, not incidentally but also on a permanent basis. The concepts of sustainable tourism and positive tourism do not contradict each other. They complement each other, with the concept of positive tourism complementing and expanding the general concept of sustainable tourism. It is to a greater extent adapted to new and promising technologies in tourism management, transport, energy, construction and environmental protection.

As one of the specific concepts of sustainable tourism, the concept of nature-positive tourism has its regional forms, each of which is the basis for finding organisational-economic, social and technical solutions, thanks to which this concept finds its expression in a particular region. Therefore, speaking of positive tourism, one should look for its regional forms adapted both to the natural conditions of the respective region and to the socio-economic and technological possibilities³.

SECOND PART

The Balkans are the region where tourism is an activity that has been developing for millennia. This is precisely because of the unique natural resources available in the region. Today's tourism is no exception, considering that it is here that one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world is located. It should also be taken into account that the Balkan Peninsula is the place where agriculture and animal husbandry developed earliest, and quite intensively. Today, intensive agriculture is also developing significantly in our region. These features of the Balkans are directly related to the development of tourism in Bulgaria.

The problems of tourism and environmental protection do not go unnoticed by international organisations. Thus, in the UN Global Tourism Highlights 2023⁴, the problems mentioned are noted, and at the same time certain measures are identified that should be adopted in this regard.

Based on the presented guidelines, a roadmap has been developed, including general principles of nature-positive tourism, and at the same time, in each of the regions, decisions should be made based on the specificities of the respective countries and the level of development of tourism activities⁵. According to the roadmap, the implementation of the positive tourism model consists of four main phases, each of which distinguishes separate steps that have to be taken. The phases are as follows:

a) the first phase is defined by the document as the assessment and determination phase. It concerns the determination of those activities that by their nature cause the greatest damage to biodiversity, as well as individual natural species. At the same time, within the framework of the first phase, the roadmap does not rely solely on a normative approach, implying the prohibitions of certain activities.

³ Cancun Declaration on Mainstreaming the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biodiversity for Well-being (UN Convention on Biological Diversity, 2016).

⁴ World Tourism Organization, The Integration of Biodiversity in National Tourism Policies (UNWTO, 2024) The book will be available soon.

⁵ Nature Positive Travel & Tourism Report (WTTC, 2022).

At a stage, it is envisaged to prepare the necessary analysis related to the essence of the actions of tourism companies and, accordingly, an analysis of business processes and technological opportunities that exist for changing business processes which integrate them to a greater extent into the system for the protection of individual species. Moreover, the roadmap does not provide for a unified model of action. It suggests that in each of the regions, depending on the specific natural and climatic conditions and economic situation, adequate and sufficiently individualised actions are to be taken.

As one of the first steps, the roadmap suggests the preparation of a list of protected and endangered species, as well as species that are threatened by the impact of other biological species incompatible with them⁶.

To a significant extent, the first phase can be implemented in most countries of the Balkans. In particular, it can be fully implemented in Bulgaria. It is enough to create the relevant administrative bodies (and they can be completely built on the basis of the existing structures of the Ministry of Environment and Water and the Ministry of Tourism). In this regard, it is essential to achieve compliance between the costs and benefits that certain actions will have on the natural complexes of the respective region.

For the time being, however, serious problems arise from the need to accurately estimate the losses that the tourism business would suffer as a result of the implementation of positive tourism measures. In many cases, such calculations can only be made with the help of local authorities, since a significant part of the tourism business, both in Bulgaria and in the Balkans as a whole, is built on the basis of already developed tourist centres, where the damage to the natural complexes occurred too long ago and cannot be described and properly valued⁷. In order to achieve an accurate analysis of the damage and especially with a view to valuing the already destroyed natural environment, biological and mathematical algorithms for the restoration of destroyed natural complexes have to be compiled and then the financial expression of this process have to be presented.

Solving this extremely complex task requires the presence of two conditions: on the one hand, the development of accessible new technologies that will enable the effective restoration of destroyed and maximally endangered ecosystems, and on the other hand, the creation of such organisational conditions that will allow the implementation of such technologies.

It is clear that the tourist business (which in most cases is medium or small) will not be able to cope with such tasks independently. It is precisely for this reason that it is extremely important to attract the bodies of both state and local government. Thus, the state government could fully provide the necessary financial conditions, both in the form of a targeted fiscal policy and in the form of active investment in the development of fundamental and applied sciences. Local authorities should actively cooperate with tourism business structures by building public-private partnerships, thus increasing the likelihood of attracting additional investments in activities that are positive for nature;

b) the second phase of the roadmaps defined as a reduction phase. It provides for the gradual release of those activities that most threaten biological species and can be eliminated from the practice of tourism companies.

⁶ Assessment Report on Invasive Alien Species and their Control (IPBES, 2023).

⁷ Buszewski, B., Baranowska, I. (eds.). (2022). *Handbook of Bioanalytics*. New York: Springer.

An important element is the determination of priorities, and those of them that are related to the specifics of the region. Unfortunately, such an analysis in the conditions of Bulgaria is extremely difficult to carry out and affects only those regions where the problems have reached a high degree of severity. In order to implement such an approach, active activity is required both by local authorities involved in environmental protection and by business. Several stages can be outlined that have to be implemented to this end:

– first of all, the systemic environmental problems in a specific region have to be determined, classified and systematised, along with indicating the main causes of the occurrence of the relevant problems. Based on this systematization, the riskiest factors have to be determined, indicating those tourism activities that most provoke the manifestation of the relevant factors. Naturally, this process has to be implemented with the help of state institutions that can support the conduct of relevant research. It is important that the assessment of these factors be as objective as possible, as the tourism business has a high degree of trust in the relevant activities;

– next, tourism companies have to analyse their business systems, the main goal being to exclude those elements that threaten natural complexes both at a specific moment and those that may threaten natural complexes in the future. Evidently, this does not mean that the tourism business should simply reduce its activities. Companies should develop such approaches that, on the one hand, reduce the harmful effects on natural complexes, and on the other hand, maintain and even improve their competitiveness. At first glance, this process is very difficult, if not impossible. In fact, however, this is not the case.

The solution can be found in the implementation of three main processes: the introduction of new technologies, the use of optimised tourism products and processes, and the creation of a new type of information space for tourism activities.

New technologies that should find a place in tourism should not only be within the framework of environmental standards, but also be able to be included in the process of restoring natural complexes, by being integrated into the relevant business processes of tourism companies. With the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, tourism enterprises have to start acquiring such equipment that best meets their individualised needs, and the leading guideline in this regard should be precisely the protection and restoration of natural complexes⁸.

Optimising tourist products, in the context of the restoration of natural complexes in the region, does not mean their banal reduction. Moreover, today's tourist products already need a certain improvement, thus they have to correspond to the new requirements that tourists have.

Accordingly, optimising tourist products will make it possible, on the one hand, to eliminate those elements that both tourists and management are trying to modernise, and on the other - the protection of natural complexes can be considered as an independent factor around which relevant tourist products can be formed, or to modify those that exist today⁹. In this way, the optimisation process leads not to the reduction, but to the development of tourism products, which can have a very high degree of individualisation¹⁰. In practice, such optimisation can be implemented in any type of tourism. As an example, culinary tourism can be cited, in which,

⁸ Majumder, A., Sarkar, J. L., & Majumder, A. (2023). *Artificial Intelligence and Data Science in Recommendation System: Current Trends, Technologies and Applications*. Bentham Books.

⁹ Page Stephen, J. (2019). *Tourism Management*. 6th edition. Routledge.

¹⁰ Braga, V., & Duarte, A. (2022). *Economics and Management of Geotourism*. Springer.

187 within the framework of offering certain products, a number of elements related to the
188 protection of natural complexes can be included, as this process is closely linked to culinary
189 art.

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191 In this sense, the soil for such tourist products on the Balkan Peninsula is particularly
192 favorable, since most of the national dishes and drinks have a direct connection with the
193 products of a certain natural system. Tourists can be offered the opportunity to gain
194 experience not only in preparing dishes, but also to actively participate in the restoration of
195 the natural system that produces the products for them.

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197 The third element, namely the information environment of tourism, is perhaps, in today's
198 conditions, the most significant for the active development of nature-positive tourism. A well-
199 modeled and purposeful information environment can form the basis of the needs of this type
200 of tourism. Of course, in this regard, a number of activities are already being carried out that
201 promote the ecological behavior of tourism.

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203 It should be said, however, that these elements of the information environment are more of a
204 cognitive nature, detached from specific tourist products and destinations. This, to a
205 significant extent, also determines their relatively weak impact on both tourists and tourist
206 operators.

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208 Creating an information environment for positive nature implies a different approach.
209 Creating messages in this environment has to relate to a specific object, territory, specific
210 natural species or system. The possibilities for restoring natural systems has to be clearly
211 demonstrated, incl. the specific steps to be implemented for this.

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213 It is also important to demonstrate how positive tourism will achieve a certain result for the
214 environment. The more detailed presentation of the process is possible, significantly increases
215 the level of trust, generates an element of empathy on the part of tourists. In the process of
216 creating an information environment, it is important to create feedback between the source of
217 information and its recipients. It is precisely for this reason that social networks and other
218 electronic media have an important contribution to the process. In them, feedback is
219 significantly easier, and its mass nature allows for reducing the tension in its implementation.

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221 When modeling the information environment, one of the main accents should be placed on
222 the active position for the restoration of natural complexes and, above all, on the activity of
223 tourist enterprises in this direction¹¹.

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225 Today, the creation of such a full-fledged information environment in the Balkan countries is
226 lacking. Obviously, much needs to be done in this direction, and here competition between
227 countries is a counterproductive approach. Joint efforts are needed to implement the relevant
228 information strategy;

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230 – Creation of a unified strategy for nature-positive tourism. Isolated positive actions related to
231 the implementation of nature-positive tourism cannot produce the expected effect if this
232 activity is not planned in advance and systematically implemented over a significant period of
233 time.

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¹¹ Manca, E. (2016). *Persuasion in Tourism Discourse*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

This requires the creation of a unified strategy in this direction, and the strategy should be not so much of a recommendatory nature as of an imperative nature. Otherwise, environmental protection authorities will continue to observe a decrease in biodiversity and, accordingly, a decrease in the opportunities for competitive advantages over the tourism industry in the Balkans.

It is essential for the implementation of the strategy that it covers a sufficiently long time horizon, and the most suitable in this regard may be the period of 20-30 years. This is the time needed to begin the process of restoring biological species and safely preserving existing ones.¹² During this period, conditions are also created for the operation of economic mechanisms that allow the implementation of the approach.

The strategy should be based on the systematic nature of the process, and all aspects of the introduction of this model of tourism activity should be reflected in it - from technical solutions to the activation of local communities in the implementation of the strategy. In addition, it would be appropriate for the strategy to consider more than one option for addressing problems related to biodiversity and especially models of action related to the restoration of biological species.

The strategy should include a hierarchy of algorithms that will allow, on the one hand, to implement the process of restoring biodiversity, and on the other - to achieve prosperity for the tourism business in the region. The presence of a hierarchy of algorithms will make it possible to implement an appropriate version of the strategy for each element of it, as well as to stimulate the multivariate nature of decisions to be adopted in different conditions.

The strategy should set completely specific goals that are presented in short, medium and long-term aspects. This will allow for gradual implementation of new approaches to tourism activities and, at the same time, the results of the activity will be clearly outlined at any given moment.

It is obvious that within the Balkan Peninsula, the creation and implementation of such a strategy within a specific country would not yield the expected results. The reason for this is the fact that the most endangered biological species are found in more than one country, which implies efforts from all interested communities. An important reason for the transboundary nature of such a strategy is that its international nature will make it possible to avoid it becoming a hostage of certain political processes in a single country.

c) The third phase is related to the implementation of monitoring and reporting on the activities carried out.

The set goals of positive tourism are achievable only and only when the changes affect both the practice of tourism itself, and all economic and non-economic structures, as well as the management bodies of the public sector. It follows that monitoring and reporting are of essential importance for the implementation of the concept, since they are the basis for the coordination of actions in the individual elements of the implementation of the concept.

The implementation of monitoring and documentation of the activity requires the development of specific methodologies for this purpose, which, on the one hand, correspond

¹² Nakamura, F. (2018). *Biodiversity Conservation Using Umbrella Species: Blakiston's Fish Owl and the Red-crowned Crane*. Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.

to the specifics of the sites, and on the other hand, enable management to obtain information that is suitable for the implementation of management functions.

It should be noted that the methodologies developed have to reflect the processes in the positive concept of tourism not only in its static state but also in its dynamics. This in turn implies that within the framework of documentation, constantly operating indicators have to be used, which should be unified over a long period of time.

The methodologies have to include both quantitative and qualitative indicators, and these indicators should be supported by scientific data with a high degree of reliability. In order to achieve such a high degree of reliability, a data verification system should be developed, as well as a high degree of data standardisation.

Monitoring processes should be implemented in different, but highly standardised time periods, thus providing reliable information on the development of processes in the short, medium and long term.

The Balkan countries should carry out unification of monitoring and documentation processes, regardless of the differences in legal systems or political situations in individual countries. The reason for this direction has already been indicated: in many cases, the natural systems that are subject to protection and restoration are located in different state territories. At the same time, their protection and restoration is a priority for most countries in the region.

d) The fourth phase of introducing nature-positive tourism is defined as cooperation and communication.

As in any new area and in the field of nature-positive tourism, achieving results cannot be based solely on administrative measures. Obviously, for real effectiveness, there should be an internal understanding of the essence of the process and the presence of both individual and group interest in achieving results.

Accordingly, the effectiveness of the model can be realised in the process of cooperation, and this process has two main forms: cooperation between public administration and private tourism businesses and cooperation between states in the field of positive tourism.

Quite naturally, one of the most appropriate forms of cooperation between the tourism business and public administration is the creation of public-private partnerships, which could, if desired by legislators, receive a more special status, consistent with the specifics of the goals they set themselves. This form of cooperation has a different degree of development in individual countries of the Balkans. Therefore, it would be appropriate to adopt the experience of such countries as Greece, as well as Serbia, where such forms have proven their effectiveness.

Naturally, public-private partnerships are not the only form of cooperation important for the development of positive tourism. No less important is the active cooperation between the scientific community and the tourism business. The essence of positive tourism requires such a form, thus ensuring a high degree of scientific validity of the decisions made. In this form, different forms could also be considered, and each of the countries of the region can choose the appropriate model, depending on the historical features of such a type of cooperation. In

Bulgaria, this type of interaction is currently relatively poorly represented, and in this regard, the practical experience of neighbouring countries could be used.

Although I have already touched on some aspects of international cooperation, it has to be emphasised once again that the peculiarities of the Balkans, as well as the peculiarities of the natural environment in the region, require the development of international cooperation in the field of tourism and, in particular, positive tourism towards nature. It is important that these forms of international cooperation are not subordinated to momentary political influences, but are based on binding contractual forms that have a long-term nature. One of the promising opportunities for the development of tourism in the region is the creation of cross-border tourist routes. It would be entirely appropriate for them to be linked to events that also imply the development of positive tourism towards nature. In addition, it could also rely on the development of a regional strategy for positive tourism, which would unite the efforts of all countries in the region in this direction.

2. CONCLUSION

These two forms of cooperation, when introducing nature-positive tourism, do not exhaust all the possibilities. Of serious importance is the participation in the implementation of this concept of local communities, which can be defined as the main recipient of the benefits of positive tourism. Accordingly, they have sufficiently broad opportunities to support this business model. For the Balkans and in particular for Bulgaria, one of the serious and still unused opportunities is the creation of tourist cooperatives, which can, on the one hand, implement part of the individualised tourist services, and on the other hand, carry out a number of activities related to monitoring the natural environment in the respective destination.

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377 World Tourism Organization, The Integration of Biodiversity in National Tourism Policies
378 (UNWTO, 2024)The book will be available soon.
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