THE BEHAVIOR OF DOMESTIC TOURISTS IN PROTECTED AREAS IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA AND ABROAD

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ABSTRACT

Protected areas are places that attract a large number of tourists. The behavior of tourists in protected areas is of great importance for their sustainable development. In every protected area, there are certain measures and conditions for how the tourist should behave when visiting, but self-awareness is also important. Based on field research and survey questioning of domestic tourists about the perception and expectations of the management, arrangement and presentation of the protected areas in the Republic of North Macedonia and the region, a comparison was made for them. This paper aims to give a clearer picture of the thoughts of a certain number of respondents, where the current state of the protected areas in the Republic of North Macedonia will be perceived concerning the protected areas in the region. From the survey-based research, the respondents will answer questions related to the arrangement and availability of the protected areas, their promotion and the included activities that take place in the protected areas, their management and of course the degree of their protection and taking measures. The main challenge in preventing the negative impact of tourist activities is inviting tourists to protect and preserve the natural environment through effective and efficient media for communication and greater engagement of the institutions responsible for protected area.

Keywords: domestic tourists, protected areas, questionnaire, Republic of North Macedonia

INTRODUCTION

Nature has always attracted people with the beauty it creates. However, for the natural potential of certain territories to be appropriately used, nature should be valorized, geo-conservation, and sustainable development. The protected areas are the ones that attract a large number of tourists. The protected area is a geographically defined area, allocated or declared by the competent authorities to be managed in terms of achieving specific goals of protection and conservation, it is a place that is subject to legal or administrative protection regime intended for the conservation and promotion of species who live in it (Official Gazette of RM, no. 84/07). According to IUCN, a protected area is: "A clearly defined geographical space, recognized, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values" (Dudley N., 2008). Protected areas possess high values and attractions that are adequately interpreted, arranged and promoted for geotourism purposes. The way they are promoted raises public awareness of their importance but also highlights the degree of danger they are exposed to.

The economic value of protected areas can be interpreted through different forms of tourism, that is, through geotourism. Geotourism is based on the values of the abiotic environment. Geotourism is a form of natural area tourism that specifically focuses on geology and landscape. It promotes tourism to geosites the conservation of geodiversity and an understanding of earth sciences through appreciation and learning. This is achieved through independent visits to geological features, use of geo-trails and viewpoints, guided tours, geoactivities and patronage of geosite visitor centers (Newsome and Dowling, 2010). Tourism offers a privileged means of raising environmental awareness among the general public. It also represents a valuable opportunity to support traditional economic activities and to improve the quality of life. To meet the needs of the protected areas as well as the expectations of visitors, it is essential that tourism preserves the environment on which its activity is based. The number of "interested people" depends of course on the activities of the protected area management, but it is also influenced by the concrete location of a protected area: Close to a big city or neighboured by a well-developed tourism destination there are "automatically" more visitors coming to the area (The PARKS & BENEFITS project, 2012). Any natural or cultural object, representing Earth sciences knowledge, which may generate tourism activity, after appropriate provision and promotion (Doktor, M. et all, 2015). The behavior of tourists in protected areas is of great importance for their sustainable development. In every protected area there are certain measures and conditions for how the tourist should behave when visiting, but self-awareness is also important. If the visitor does not comply with the given measures and rules determined by the nature protection law, he will face criminal sanctions (Official Gazette of RM, no.67/2004, 14/2006; 84/2007; 35/2010; 47/2011; 148/2011, 59/2012 and 13/2013). With the system of protected areas, valuable, representative and rare treasures of natural heritage are protected for the benefit of present and future generations. To have sustainable development in the protected areas, it is necessary to systematically manage the existing resources in a certain location, use all its potential, establish good marketing, and all this should be in line with the preservation and protection of nature. (Kolchakovski and Dimitrovska, 2009). Every country, region and area that strives for the development of geotourism simultaneously devote great care to the protection of the natural values of that area. This is for the simple reason that most tourists come to a destination precisely to enjoy and "discover" those unique attractions, which they cannot see in their region or their country. Therefore, the development of geotourism is inextricably linked to the protection and preservation of the landscape, nature and natural values. With the development of geotourism in a country, natural values are promoted, which creates an economic benefit on the one hand, and the other hand, they should be properly protected and provided with sustainable use.

The natural conditions in the Republic of North Macedonia (geological composition, relief, climate, hydrography, soils, flora and fauna) made it possible to count as one of the few countries in Europe with a wealth of natural rarities (Todorova, et all, 2019). The network of protected areas in the Republic of North Macedonia includes 82 areas with a total area of 357,778.05 hectares, which represents about 13.92% of the total territory of the country. (SSORM: Environmental statistic, 2024). Tourism is an important mover of economic development in the Republic of North Macedonia, but the potential for the development of geotourism has not yet

been fully utilized. (Todorova et all, 2018). Geotourism is one of the newest concepts in the field of tourism, which is developing rapidly and has become widespread in the last few years. More recently, domestic tourists have shown interest in visiting the protected areas in the Republic of North Macedonia, but still more interest in visiting the protected areas outside the country's borders.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the thoughts of domestic tourists about their behavior in protected areas the perception of management in protected areas, their arrangement and their presentation in the Republic of North Macedonia and outside the country's borders. From the obtained data, a comparison of the data will be made and the thoughts and problems indicated by the domestic tourists will be seen, and based on that, appropriate measures will be proposed to raise public awareness for greater promotion, protection and conservation of the protected areas in the Republic North Macedonia and the same to be realized soon. The protection of the protected areas in the Republic of North Macedonia should be achieved through some currently most acceptable ways, such as the protection of natural rarities by setting aside zones for recreation, their treatment in spatial organization plans and their protection according to the law (Zikov and Atanasov, 1993).

OBJECTIVES AND METHODS OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of this research is to see the thoughts of domestic tourists about their behavior in the protected areas in and outside the borders of the Republic of North Macedonia in relation to the arrangement and availability of the protected areas, their promotion and the included activities that are carried out in them, their management and certainly the degree of protection and taking measures in the protected areas. The sampling method was used as the method of this research. The sampling method is based on the examination of a relatively small number of randomly selected persons, to obtain information about the observed characteristics of the entire population.(Risteski and Trpkova-Nestorovska, 2014). For this purpose, as part of the labor needs survey, 119 respondents were randomly selected according to a predetermined anonymous questionnaire. The research was conducted in the period from 20.05.2024 to 26.05.2024 through social media. According to the gender structure in the survey, respondents from the female gender dominate (72.3%), on the contrary, the male gender is represented by (27.7%). In the course of conducting the survey, some of the protected areas in the Republic of North Macedonia and outside the country's borders were selected, which served us to obtain results on what knowledge the respondents have regarding their tourist arrangement, their accessibility, their promotion and their protection, but of course also their geotourism potential. The ability of a site to attract and receive tourists with concerns about accessibility, resource quality, interpretation of resources, and so on. The totality of natural, cultural, historical and socio-economic background for the organization of tourist activity in a particular area (Yan, L.; et all, 2017). The questionnaire is composed of 44 questions, which are adapted to respondents with different age structures, according to the topic belong to four groups, namely: visit to protected areas, knowledge about protected areas in the Republic of North Macedonia, knowledge about protected areas outside the borders of The Republic of North Macedonia and the respondents' opinions on knowledge of protected areas within and outside the borders of

the Republic of North Macedonia. The answers to the questions are statistically processed and refer to the knowledge of the relevant concepts, areas, their protection, or the thinking of the respondents on certain problems. The questions contain from 3 to 7 categories, which correspond to an evaluation from the best (excellent) to the weakest (unsatisfactory). For each question, the percentage ratio of the answers that belong to the previous grades has been calculated, and some of the questions include the text answers of the respondents.

Table 7. Part of the protected areas within and outside the border of the Republic of North Macedonia was used for the needs of the survey research

PART OF THE PROTECTED AREAS WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE BORDER OF THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA WAS USED FOR THE NEEDS OF THE SURVEY RESEARCH	
Natural Monument **"Canyon Matk**a" - - North Macedonia	**- Rila Monastery Nature Park-** Bulgaria
Natural Monument **"Vevchani Springs"** - North Macedonia	**Frushka Gora** National Park- Serbia
Natural Monument **"Kuklica"** - North Macedonia	**The Djavolja Varos (Devil's Town**) Natural Landmark- Serbia
Pelister National Park - North Macedonia	**Plitvice Lakes** National Park- Croatia
Natural Monument **"Demir Kapija Gorge"** - North Macedonia	Natural monument **Postojna Cave** - Slovenia
Mavrovo National Park - North Macedonia	**Meteora** - Greece
Natural Monument **"Smolarski Waterfalls"** - North Macedonia	**Vjetrenica Cave**- Bosna and Hercegovina
Natural Monument **"Markovi Kuli"** - North Macedonia	**Valbona Valley** National Park - Albania
the **Ezerani** Nature Park - North Macedonia	**Petralona Cave**- Greece
Galichica National Park - North Macedonia	

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the first group (visits to the protected areas), three questions are included that give the general situation of how often the respondents visit the protected areas, the reason why they would visit them and whether they think that the Republic of North Macedonia has geotourism potential. According to the respondents, about 38.7% answered that they spend their free time several times a year visiting a protected area. However, about 75 respondents answered that the reason for their visit was because of the unique natural phenomena and forms that formed in the protected areas, but also to learn something new about their country and beyond. When asked if they think that the Republic of North Macedonia has a geotourism potential, a large percentage of about 86.6% answered that it has a great geotourism potential, but it is not used enough for the state to have an economic benefit that will affect all sectors of its development from it.

The second and third groups of questions refer to the protected areas inside and outside the borders of the Republic of North Macedonia. The answers to the questions from both groups will be analyzed and compared in parallel to get a result about how the respondents think about the protected areas. After all, ten protected areas from different parts of the country and nine protected areas from the region were proposed in the survey for the research, which are shown in table no. 1, all to have greater efficiency in the results. Concerning the tourist arrangement

with paths, signposts, information boards, catering facilities, souvenirs and other, of the proposed protected areas in the Republic of North Macedonia, the respondents declared that the best tourist arrangement is the Matka Canyon (113 answers or 95%), followed by Vevchanski Springs (76 or 63.9 %) and in third place is Smolarski Waterfalls (75 or 63.4%), while among the proposed protected areas outside the border of the Republic of North Macedonia, the respondents declared that Meteora in Greece is the best tourist destination (80 or 67.2%)), then Postojna Cave in Slovenia (77 or 64.7%) and NP Plitvice Lakes in Croatia (76 or 63.9%). On the other hand, from the results of the survey, it has been established that the weakest tourist arrangement in the Republic of North Macedonia has the PN Ezerani (5 answers, i.e. 4.2 %), while in second place is the Demir Kapija Gorge (14 or 11.8 %), but outside the borders of the Republic of North Macedonia as the weakest tourist arrangement, the respondents pointed out that they have NP Valbona in Albania (5 or 4.2%) and Vjetrenica Cave in Bosnia and Herzegovina (10 or 8.4%). About 92.4% of the respondents declared that they prefer to visit the protected areas in the Republic of North Macedonia on their own, i.e. independently, but on the contrary, about 73.9% of the respondents declared that to visit the protected areas outside the border of the Republic of North Macedonia, they decide to organize it with a travel agency. This comes from the fact that tourist agencies include more protected areas from the region and beyond in their offers, while an organized visit by tourist agencies to protected areas in the country is omitted or not realized at all. According to the information of the respondents on the quality of a visit to the protected area in general, the information board with all the attractions in the protected area has the most influence, then a tourist information center has been set up in the protected area itself and there are numerous brochures and informational materials. It is also of great importance if they are included in the service when visiting the protected areas and some of the new technologies such as a website with virtual tours and a visit to the protected area with the help of an audio guide (to receive information about the protected area through headphones several world languages). In addition, regarding the method of obtaining the information about the protected areas that were proposed in the survey inside and outside the border of the Republic of Macedonia, the analysis shows that of the total respondents (119), the majority (109 or 91.6 %) answered that they were most useful information received from internet sites, while in second place is information received from friends (86 or 72.3%). Regarding the accessibility of protected areas in the Republic of North Macedonia, a large percentage of the respondents, about 74.8%, stated that they are partially accessible. This means that there is no suitable path to them that will be accessible to all generations and there are not enough signposts on the roads to reach them. On the contrary, regarding the accessibility of the protected areas outside the border of the Republic of North Macedonia, the respondents stated that some protected areas are partially accessible, but a larger percentage, about 59.7%, are easily accessible to visitors. Accessibility improvements to protected natural areas should be planned in line with the goals of nature conservation and tourism development (Tverijonaite E. et all, 2018). This question is followed by the following, where the respondents gave a divided opinion, of which 38.7% said yes, and 37% said they were not sure if there is still good marking (road signs) and a landscaped path to the protected areas in the Republic of North Macedonia, while on the other hand, for the protected areas outside the border of the Republic of North Macedonia, 68.1% of

the respondents declared positively. About the tourism arrangement of the protected areas, 60.5% of the respondents stated that the protected areas in the country are partially arranged for tourism, and on the contrary, about 59.7% of the respondents answered that the protected areas in the region and beyond are well arranged for tourism.



Figure 20. The level of tourist arrangement in the protected areas.

During the very visit to a protected area, if the visitors do not behave accordingly, its degradation or destruction may occur, thereby affecting the ecosystem itself. In the questionnaire, the question "Are the visited protected areas in the Republic of North Macedonia degraded by man"? In response to this question, about 48.7% of the respondents declared that the protected areas are highly degraded. As a result, it is necessary to encourage public awareness of the need to protect the values of protected areas and appropriate behavior when visiting them. To this question, 94 respondents answered that there is insufficient public awareness of how a visitor should behave, while only nine respondents believe that some of the visitors behave appropriately in harmony with nature. Therefore, it is inevitable to note that part of the protected areas in the Republic of North Macedonia, although they are protected by law, are not given sufficient care, and this contributes to degrading (destroying) their values. To stop the anthropogenic degradation of the protected areas, it is necessary to take appropriate measures and protection. According to the total number of respondents in our country, about 68.1% believe that measures for their protection are poorly taken. Measures for their protection should be undertaken by the appropriate institutions, municipalities and non-governmental organizations, but their efforts in this direction are very weak and almost imperceptible. To encourage public awareness of the need to protect the values of protected areas and to emphasize the ways of appropriate behavior in protected areas, it is necessary to promote and present them more to the public, but also to emphasize the threats posed by visitors if they do not properly behave during their visit. In connection with the presentation of the protected areas in the Republic of North Macedonia, about 74.8% of the respondents declared that they were not adequately presented and as a result, they stated the following remarks: insufficient promotional material, insufficient promotion of domestic and foreign tourists, raising the environmental awareness

of improving the state of protected areas and more massive promotion and financial investment in them, then insufficient marketing and well-trained, professionally prepared staff, greater accessibility and the marked through mobile applications and web tools, but and there is not enough information on social networks, mostly used by the younger generations. Little attention is paid to them in teaching. Their organized visit and on-site lectures are more beneficial than a textbook lesson. Those areas are a real treasure trove of knowledge. From the school desks, the attitude of protection is built, building the awareness among the young generations of how important these areas are for us in general. On the other hand, regarding the way of presenting the protected areas outside the border of the Republic of North Macedonia, about 46.2% of the respondents stated that they are well presented through good advertisements and internet portals and that they are included in the offers of travel agencies and therefore attract a large number of visitors.

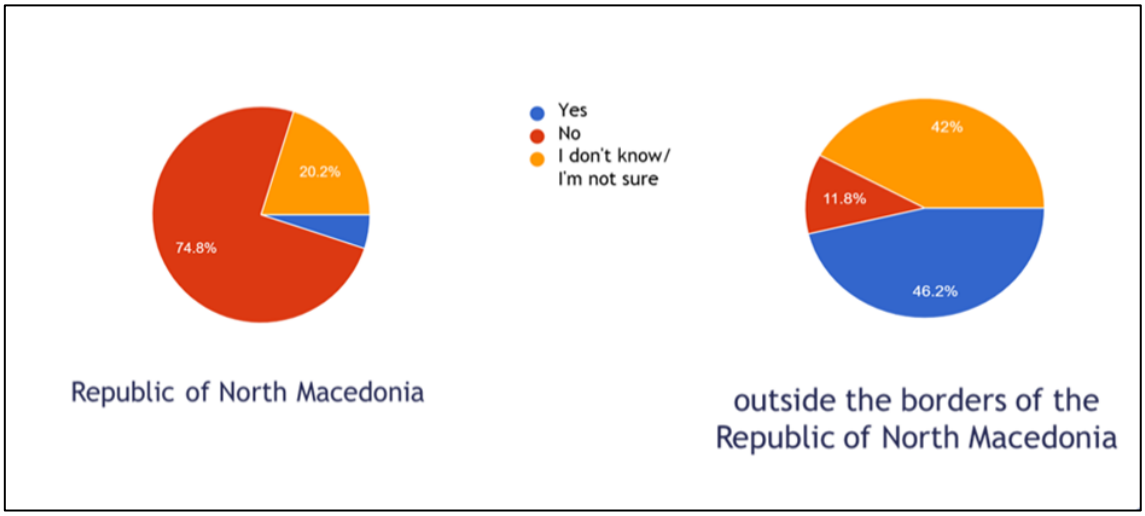

Figure 21. Adequate presentation of the protected areas

The fourth group of questions in the questionnaire refers to the respondents' opinions regarding the protected areas within and outside the borders of the Republic of North Macedonia. According to the Law on Nature Protection, when an area is declared protected, it becomes a public institution responsible for protecting and managing the protected area. For this purpose, it is necessary to have the obligation to pay the fee for entering and visiting a protected area, which is of great importance for the management of the area. Therefore, in the questionnaire, respondents asked whether they would pay an entrance fee to visit a protected area inside and outside the borders of the Republic of Macedonia, and about 79% of them answered positively. When visiting a protected area, apart from its natural beauty, visitors are also attracted to other activities or attractions that complement the entire tourist content for that area. In connection with that, the questionnaire asked the question "Are you satisfied with the tourist content and offer that is available in the protected areas within and outside the borders of the Republic of North Macedonia?" In response to this question, the respondents stated that they are not satisfied with the tourist content and offer in the protected areas in the Republic of North Macedonia and have stated several remarks in this regard, and they are: to insert more activities and animations for visitors, to add more tourist content with affordable prices, each

area has its own story, unique features, buildings, nature, anything that would serve as a basis for a tourist story and experience. This could be called branding, that is, the creation of easily absorbed content - stories that will attract attention, and the spot - content that will generate unique experiences for visitors. While, in response to the protected areas outside the borders of the Republic of North Macedonia, the respondents declared that they are satisfied with the tourist content and offer they offer. About the tourist arrangement of the protected areas specifically for the installation of tourist signposts and signs and the availability of tourist educational and informational materials (prospectus, flyers, monographs and other publications) the respondents stated the same as in the previous question. They are not satisfied with how it works in our country, but in the region and beyond, the answers are always positive. This is the result of the fact that in our country, when a protected area is arranged with nicely paved paths, installation of gazebos, information boards about the area and waste bins, they do not always remain in their original state because they are also exposed to visitors with deviant appearances. they destroy them, and with that, the whole beautiful picture of the tourist arrangement of that area is lost (Official Gazette of RM, no. 16/2019). To prevent the degradation of natural phenomena and forms, the endangerment of ecosystems and the destruction of infrastructure in the protected area, it is necessary to comply with the law on nature protection, which creates conditions for taking measures to protect nature to preserve and rationally manage certain components of biological and regional diversity, as well as sustainable and rational use of natural planning and spatial arrangement. Regarding the observance of the laws for the protection of the protected areas in the Republic of Macedonia, the respondents stated that a large percentage, about 81.5%, do not respect the laws. It is due to insufficient knowledge of the rules, measures and regulations for behavior in protected areas that are prescribed in the law on nature protection and that their non-compliance is regulated by penal provisions (Official Gazette of RM, no.67/2004, 14/2006; 84/2007; 35/2010; 47/2011; 148/2011, 59/2012 и 13/2013). On the contrary, in the answers that they stated in the survey sheet that we as visitors to the protected areas in the region and beyond respect their rules and measures of behavior, the respondents state that in most of the protected areas in the region and beyond, they have noticed employees who constantly follow the situation in them. Then they state that above all the areas are respected, they are marked, the rules of conduct are clearly written, the risky parts are properly protected and the visitors are informed about it, there is a tourist offer/guides/excursions for which information is easily found (in hotels, accommodation facilities, stands in frequented places, internet pages, etc.), are better advertised, maintained and better organization can be seen during the actual visit to these places. While it is of great importance that as visitors to the protected areas within the borders of the Republic of North Macedonia, we observe all the rules, measures and regulations of behavior in them for fear of large monetary penalties. To the question, "If we destroy part of the protected area, will we be properly sanctioned?" The answers of respondents about the destruction of a part of the protected area in the Republic of North Macedonia answered that about 62.2% think that they will not be properly sanctioned due to the non-functioning of the nature protection system, while for the protected areas in the region and beyond, the respondents answered that 69.7% think that they will be properly sanctioned for implementing the strict legal provisions.

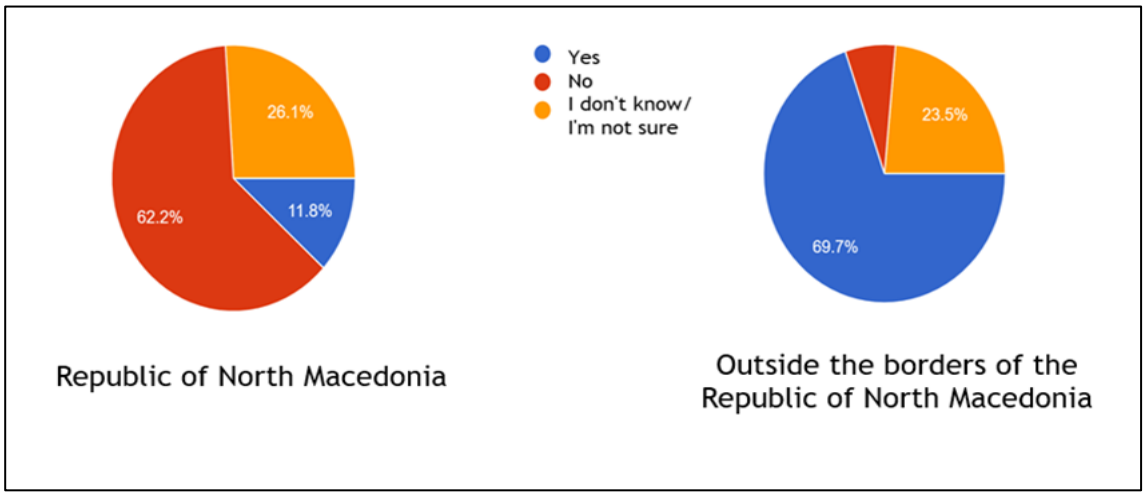

Figure 22. Will we be properly sanctioned if we destroy part of the protected area?

When analyzing the data of the respondents, it can be seen that as visitors in the protected areas in the Republic of North Macedonia, they would behave the same as in the protected areas outside the region and more broadly, primarily if the penal provisions of the nature protection law are implemented. Then if the basic infrastructure is improved, the installation of more information boards, more media coverage and installation of info-centers for visitors in the areas and the same should be maintained.

CONCLUSION

The abiotic environment can be said to have attracted people since long ago, but in the last few years, great importance has been placed on geotourism, as it has become more and more attractive. This is due to the great promotion of natural phenomena and forms in protected areas by inserting rich tourist content to attract more tourists. Compared to European countries, the Republic of North Macedonia lags far behind in the promotion of protected areas as a function of tourism. A large percentage of respondents answered that the Republic of North Macedonia has great geotourism potential, but it is not used enough for the state to have an economic benefit that will affect all sectors of its development from it. A major handicap for the promotion of protected areas is the basic infrastructure, the lack of information boards, media coverage and info-centers for visitors. Cooperation with local communities, tourist and non-governmental organizations is important for their preservation and promotion. With the development of geotourism in a country, natural values are promoted, which creates an economic benefit on the one hand, and the other hand, they should be properly protected and provided with sustainable use.

From the obtained results of the total number of respondents, it can be concluded that we appreciate and respect the protection laws in the protected areas outside the borders of the Republic of North Macedonia more than in the country itself and therefore we are careful how we behave when we visit them. To change that, appropriate measures should be taken which will be implemented by the institutions competent for that purpose, municipalities and non-governmental organizations. To implement this, it is necessary to take measures such as the introduction of educational content from the preschool age about the protected areas and how we should behave in them, then there should be media advertising about the protected areas

and how to respect the laws in them, to have more promotions and to be included in the offers of the tourist agencies in our country, to punish any offense in the protected areas and to have a greater commitment from the institutions for their management in the presence of appropriate staff and others. To prevent the degradation of natural phenomena and forms, the endangerment of ecosystems and the destruction of infrastructure in the protected area, it is necessary to comply with the law on nature protection, which creates conditions for taking measures to protect nature to preserve and rationally manage certain components of biological and regional diversity, as well as sustainable and rational use of natural planning and landscaping. The main challenge in preventing the negative impact of tourist activities is inviting tourists to protect and preserve the natural environment through effective and efficient media for communication and greater engagement of the institutions responsible for protected areas.

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