

The effect of the tourism of the Hortobágy National Park on the surrounding settlements – lesson of a questionnaire survey

Réka Bodnár

Department of Landscape Protection and Environmental Geography, Debrecen University,
Debrecen, Hungary
fyp@freemail.hu

Abstract: The Puszta in the Hortobágy represents an important, individual natural and historical-cultural value, which has been deservedly possessed the rank of UNESCO World Heritage since 1999. Due to its speciality, in 1973 the first national park in Hungary, the Hortobágy National Park was founded here. In the course of the survey we examined how the Hortobágy National Park can utilize the World Heritage status in its tourism, how it utilizes the possibilities in its ecotourism. What effects does the tourism in the national park have on the economy, basic and tourist infrastructure, and society of the affected settlements? What characterizes the tourist supply and cooperation of the HNP and the settlements? What conflicts can be derived from the two sides, and what possibilities do they have to develop?

Introduction

The international tourist trends of the last decades indicate an increase in the demand for the value-oriented tourist activities, one consequence of which the increasing utilization of national parks for tourist purpose. At the same time to develop the national protection attitude is among the important tasks of the national parks as well. Therefore the demands of tourists and the tasks of national parks especially meet in the field of ecotourism.

The Hortobágy Puszta in Hungary provides an unusual and unique landscape experience for the European eyes since a similar one only can be found in the steppes in South-Italy. Besides the spectacle of the white alkali Puszta extending to the horizon, its riches in species of its flora and fauna, its special composition, the pastoral traditions looking back on past centuries and the ancient Hungarian domestic animals rightly make the Hortobágy a treasure which is worth of preservation on a world scale and can be proud of the World Heritage rank by the UNESCO from 1999.

Due to its speciality the first national park in Hungary was founded here in 1973 (Kapocsy 1993), the Hortobágy National Park on the area of 821.25 km² – henceforth HNP (Figure 1). Its international importance is increased by the fact that more than one fourth part of its area (23 thousand hectare) is a valuable habitat of international importance for waterfowls according to the Ramsar Agreement, 1971. Furthermore, in the framework of the Programme of UNESCO MAB it is a Biosphere Reserve protecting swamp and alkaline associations.



Figure 1. The area of research, the HNP.

The database of the analysis is constituted on the basis of Internet information as well as the questionnaire survey and interviews among the local governments of the 19 settlements surrounding the national park (Figure 2). Of the 19 settlements 10 are towns and 9 are villages, of which five did not fill in the questionnaire with 25 questions (Figure 2).

Results

The national Parks can minimize the unfavourable effects of the tourism on the natural and artificial environment by **directing and controlling the tourist activity**, marking out the IUCN-zones providing different stage of protection. The zone system (Figure 2) in terms of tourism means the following possibilities and limits:

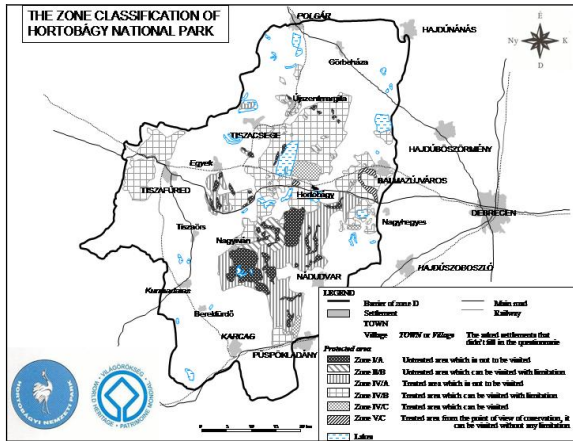


Figure 2. The environmental protection and tourist zone system of the HNP and the surrounding settlements.

- Zone A (15% of the area of the HNP): strictly protected, visiting is forbidden except for scientific observation;
- Zone B (80% of the area of the HNP): it can be visited with limitation with the permission of the national park, or with professional guide;
- Zone C (5% of the area of the HNP): it can be visited without any limitation;
- Zone D: the protective or buffer zone surrounding the national park, it can be visited without limitation, potentially it is the main site for the tourist activity (Lisztes 2001). (The studied settlements can be found here as well.)

The 5% area of the Zone C is too small for the visitor to really get something from the Hortobágy landscape experience, and to stare at its values, and by it the national park should contribute to develop her/his nature conservation attitude. If it doesn't want to increase the portion of the Zone C at the expense of the Zone A and B, a rational solution will be the use of the Zone D for tourist purpose to a greater extent. The question is how the settlements surrounding the national parks have prepared for receiving the tourist demand and what tourist supply they have at present.

The quality of the tourist supply is determined considerably by the **basic infrastructure** of the settlements. The values connected to the individual indexes are on a fairly broad scale in relation of the individual settlements, i.e. there are things to improve for example in the field of the sewer system, waste management etc. (Figure 3).

The **accommodation bed supply** is an important measurer of the stage of the tourism of a settlement. The Hortobágy National Park doesn't have commercial accommodation. Thus the tourists requiring accommodation can use accommodations in the settlements in the buffer zone, among which there are great differences in terms of this as well. Of them Tiszafüred (>3000 rooms) and Berekfürdő (<2000 rooms) are far more outstanding. Even Tiszacsege precedes the Hortobágy which is consid-

ered as the tourist centre of the HNP. Balmazújváros, Egyek, Nádudvar and Nagyhégyes have modest supply (Figure 4).

The present **programme supply** of the HNP is not too rich compared to the conditions. It has had no visiting centre yet. Four study-trails are available for the visitors and they can meet the wildlife and folk art of the Hortobágy in exhibitions. Many people like the Puszta Animal Park showing the ancient Hungarian species. On the supply palette bird-watching, watching the bird repatriating site, craftsman presentation, puszta riding, and flying appear.

The tourist programme supply of the settlements is not based on the ecotourism but it form on the basis of the medical and thermal tourism. Only some people undertook to organize free time programmes based on the natural condition of the Hortobágy landscape, management traditions and its folk art values. For example Hortobágy settlement, local council organizes walks, tours and rides showing the values of the puszta together with the HNP. The riding and puszta riding facilities of the Epona horse village with four stars constructed beside the Hortobágy settlement make the supply complete. Tiszacsege has similar programme supply.

All the settlements surrounding the HNP are suitable for organizing the programmes which were

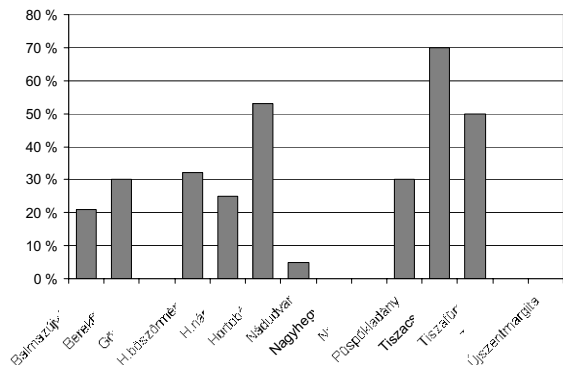


Figure 3. The extent of the sewer (Local Council 2001).

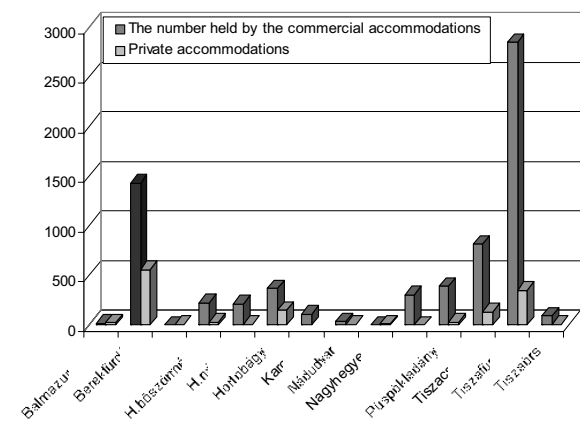


Figure 4. The number of rooms held by the commercial and the private accommodations (KSH 2000).

flashed above, however it seems that they do not know sufficiently of these possibilities. This supposition is well supported by the fact that from the 14 questionnaires filled five did not even mention the HNP among the attractive factors (Bodnár 2002).

The **human resources** are important parts of the tourist supply. Since the aesthetics of the settlement, its environmental condition, the hospitality of the host community, its tradition preservation, its spirit to venture, knowledge of languages etc. considerably influence the environment of the tourists. The evaluation of the local councils is not so flattering! Summarizing, the knowledge of languages and the spirit to venture are very poor among the inhabitants, and their environment and conservation consciousness is in need of considerable development.

The successfulness of the tourism is considerably determined by its **organization stage**. The HNP does not do travel organization activities, does not deal with selling complete travelling packs but it provides services of tourist character by own organization or according to individual order.

The range of duties undertaken by the HNP is complex as well. Within the management of the national park the tasks connecting to the tourist activity directly are carried out by two tourist professional inspector and the caretakers of the demonstration establishments (4 persons). The twelve conservation guards (and some university students) join the tourism as an occasional guide. This number of staff is not sufficient to implement a successful ecotourist activity, i.e. to carry out the tasks of the national parks prescribed in the education and development of the conservation attitude.

It is another problem that very few travel agencies undertake to sell products offering the values of the HNP. Of the local councils filling in the questionnaire only three (Hajdúnánás, Hajdúböszörmény, Tiszacsege) indicated that they have this kind of activity in their settlements. The picture is more favourable in the case of hotels where this appears as an optional programme almost everywhere. This way the HNP as a tourist product – besides Hortobágy – appears as a supply in visitors' company in Hajdúszoboszló (and the near city, Debrecen).

The **cooperation** of the parties interested in tourism can form an important condition for a successful tourism. We asked the local governments to evaluate the contacts between the real and potential parties. According to the answers Hortobágy, Tiszacsege and Hajdúnánás have the best contact system. Görbeháza, Nagyhegyes and Balmazújváros gave considerably poor classification but the picture is unfavourable either in the case of Tiszafüred or Berekfürdő counted among the important tourist target (Bodnár 2002).

There is something which should be improved in the overall picture of the contact between the HNP and the settlements! 50% of the repliers qualified this contact as poor or very poor, only the Hortobágy Local Council gave excellent mark. According to the local councils the conflict, which derives from the provi-

sion, limitation of the national park for the nature conservation, makes difficulties over the development of the good contacts. They miss the compromise skills of the HNP, the sufficient information and participation in the development of ideas.

The **guest traffic** of the HNP is characterized by considerable seasonality in time and space. The considerable part of the 200 000 tourist per year (exact data are not known) visit one or a half day the summer programmes – Bridge Fair, Horse Days – the site of which is the Hortobágy settlement of special situation. This village is the central settlement of the national park, however, roads towards it cross the protected area (Figure 2).

On the present stage of the organization it is more difficult to evaluate the tourism traffic towards the national parks from the settlements in the buffer zone, which is very poor according to the questionnaires filled in by the local councils (Figure 5). They assume tourist traffic which is regular and with considerable persons only from Hortobágy village.

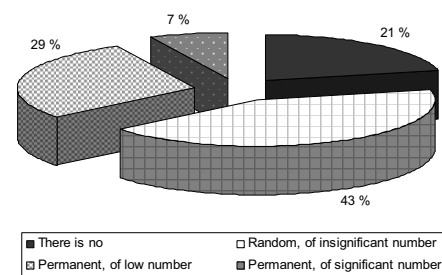


Figure 5. The extent of the tourism traffic towards the HNP from the surrounding settlements.

We can follow the guest traffic of the commercial and private accommodation, although not every visitor visits the national park by all means at all! In terms of the number of the quests Hortobágy has the first place (Figure 6). Most of the tourists staying here want to see the values of the puszta. Berekfürdő and Tiszafüred have rather swimming guests. The guest night numbers inform us about it, in terms of which both settlements precede Hortobágy (Figure 7).

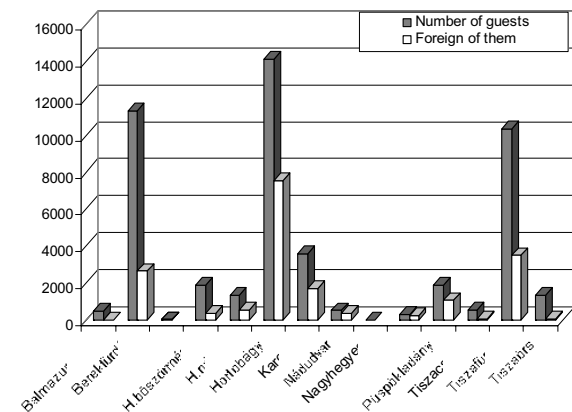


Figure 6. The guest number in the commercial accommodations (KSH 2000).

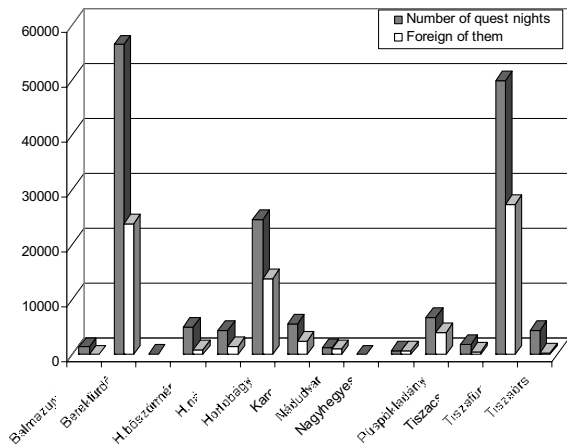


Figure 7. The number of the guest-nights in the commercial accommodations (KSH 2000).

Most of the foreign tourists stay at Hortobágy. The Germans (33.3%) and Ukrainians (30.8%) arrive in the greatest number, however this last one use the infrastructure of the business-conference tourism that the Epona Hotel provides (Marton-Erdős 2002). The share of the Austrian and American tourists in the third and fourth position is far less (3.3% and 2.2%).

I also wanted to know to what extent the local councils feel **the favourable and unfavourable effects of the tourism**. Of the damaging effects the crowdedness affecting the comfort of the inhabitants and the effect of tourism generating price increase were raised. Of the dangers counted by the national park only parking problems and wasting were raised.

Considering the multiplier effect of tourism the opinions fairly differ. In the settlements having more important tourism, the tourism influence positively the level of the trade and hospitality. In those places where there is no considerable tourism the classification is unambiguously poorer, thus this does not motivate either the local inhabitants or the local council to do tourist developments. It is surprising how poor the classification effect on the development of the basic infrastructure is, and the preservation of the folk traditions and profession from the Hortobágy Local Council. The reason for this is that the “local values” have become mass products, they have been put on the special clothes of kitsch.

Conclusion

In a special way, the World Heritage status has not resulted in making the HNP more popular among either the national or the foreign tourist. The fundamental reason for this is the poverty of the programmes, supply and the confusion which can be connected to the difficulties deriving from the lack of staff of the HNP and the financial limits. The national park region which can be characterized by a transit tourist traffic at present can meet the tourist development requirements on two condition.

It is easier to fulfil the first condition because it depends on the HNP having excellent expert guard: it should increase the number of its programmes and widen the selection. The greatest obstacle to its implementation is the lack of staff mentioned above which goes with a reduced circumstances of the financial means. Therefore the tourist infrastructure is incomplete and the level of services is insufficient. For example, the visiting centre has just started to be constructed which with a view to its directing and distributing function is an important condition for organizing ecotourism. The existing four study trails are not enough but because of the financial problem the creation of further study trails is to be left. Besides these a view change would be also needed on the part of the HNP which would assess the tourism as the most important means for developing the environmental consciousness instead of the prohibitive and limiting authority attitude.

Much more difficult to meet the other condition which has to be based on the cooperation – which is insufficient at present – between the HNP and the surrounding settlements and between the settlements. The HNP should undertake the initiative role in making contacts with the settlement. It should inform the local councils of its development ideas and the possibilities in them, i.e. they should implement tourist attraction together in the Zone D.

The results of the questionnaire survey demonstrate well that the affected 19 settlements which can take part in receiving the tourism towards the HNP – except for Hortobágy village – have not prepared for this task yet. Not only the development stage of the basic infrastructure and the number of the programme offers, and its quality are uneven but in many cases the lack of the presence and cooperation of the human resources with environmental consciousness.

The development of the region can be given a new stimulus by the supports becoming available as a consequence of our European Union accession of 1 May 2004. From this point of view the importance of the cooperation becomes more valuable as the Union supports works on the basis of the regional view. Therefore the settlements in the Hortobágy region have to cooperate; with submitting joint tenders, joint development and unified marketing proposal it can establish the basis for creating marketable tourist programme packs.

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