

Environmental Landscapes in the “Albanian Alps” in Kosovo in the Development of Local Tourism

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ABSTRACT

The positioning of the Albanian Alps region as part of the Balkan Alps and the landscape values it carries are some of the main elements that have influenced the formulation of strategic orientations. At the same time, the region of the Albanian Alps will differ from the rest across the border in terms of themes, types of tourism, offer, activities, cultural heritage, history, etc. Regardless of the quality of the physical connections, this territory with its dynamics plays an important role in the region, transforming into a “connecting bridge” between Kosovo and Montenegro. In this area, tourism is focused on the creation of independent accommodations with sleeping and breakfast, where visitors will have the opportunity to be in contact with the residents, with the lifestyle of the community and with the local cuisine. The typical accommodation offer in this area consists of private and semi-private accommodation in which the owner provides services, including the preparation of local food. The most attractive whole is made up of forests, grasslands, meadows, rivers and ravines, steep hills and lakes that complete the features of the landscape and provide a pleasant experience of this nature with high attractive tourist values. Also, the high mountain and rocky massifs offer the possibility of mountaineering.

Keywords: Albanian Alps, landscapes, tourism, etc.

INTRODUCTION

In almost the entire area of Bješke i Rugova you can come across miracles, which are hidden under the mountain wildness of the flora. There are the magnificent lakes that are found at an altitude of 1860 m in Leqinat Kuqishta, the two waterfalls in Reka e Allaga, the flora and fauna spread throughout the region, the beauty of the views that you can observe from the various mountains, etc. Nowadays, this mountainous region has started to become very attractive for tourists and more and more Kosovo residents and foreigners are visiting it, not only for walks, but also for recreational/sports activities. This region has now been named a tourist destination by the WTTC in 2013 and visitors come specifically to visit these beauties that this mountain region offers and to spend time in a green

environment. With the great assets it has, the mountain region of Rugova offers many opportunities for recreational and sports activities where many nature lovers, mountain enthusiasts and sportsmen spend their time enjoying the fresh air, the living nature and the pleasure of the picturesque views.. There are many activities that take place in this mountainous region by the local population, as well as by the many visitors who visit this beautiful mountainous region throughout the year. The activities of rock climbing, mountain hiking, conquering mountain peaks up to 2530 m, exploring caves, Via Ferrata, day excursions and weekend vacations, camping, ski mountaineering, snowshoeing, free skiing, etc. are quite attractive. All these activities are carried out thanks to the wild and virgin nature, as well as the suitability of the area, altitude, water resources, variety of flora and fauna.

Environmental protection and tourism development

There is almost no human development that does not cause environmental impact, to varying degrees. This is the reason why more and more importance has already been given to the environmental aspects of the development and overall sustainability of the proposed investments. Based on the environmental principle of “prevention” according to which any planned intervention must prove in advance that it will not have negative consequences on the environment, all countries with contemporary environmental legislation carry out what is called an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for each concrete intervention or investment. Likewise, policies, plans, and programs can have environmental impacts. If they are not drawn up on sound principles and environmental grounds, plans or strategies can end up causing long-term and strategic environmental damage (VSM 2016-26). Strategic Environmental Assessment is a key instrument for the integration of environmental issues and principles of sustainable development in strategic planning and decision-making. VSM is subject to the drafting of all plans and programs for agriculture, forests, fisheries, energy, industry, mining industry, transport, waste management, water management, telecommunications, tourism, national and local urban and rural territory planning plans, including and landscape protection, land use, which decide on the approval of projects. Strategic Environmental Assessment can be understood as “a systematic process which predicts and evaluates possible environmental effects during the design of a plan or program, with the aim of addressing these effects in an appropriate way from the earliest stages of decision-making”. Residents of rural areas tend to have stronger ties to each other, identifying with the environment and developing a sense of belonging to it. This is reflected in various aspects of day to day, implemented in social, cultural terms, political, religious and economic. Agriculture and animal husbandry are the most common activities in these areas. This is because the landscape is mostly natural. The situation offers an opportunity for livestock, cultivation and harvesting processes to participate in the highest percentage of work. This paper emphasizes the need to protect the diversity of genes, species and all natural terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, and this, in particular, through measures for the

protection of environmental quality, restoration, planning and conservation of critical habitats for species and a sustainable use of plants and animals exploited by the population. According to UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), the main goal and objective of development is: “Not to develop things, but to develop people” (Ekolevizija Group, 2011). With the great assets it has, the mountain region of Rugova offers many opportunities for recreational and sports activities where many nature lovers, mountain enthusiasts and sportsmen spend their time enjoying the fresh air, the living nature and the pleasure of the picturesque views. There are many activities that take place in this mountainous region by the local population, as well as by the many visitors who visit this beautiful mountainous region throughout the year. The activities of rock climbing, mountain hiking, conquering mountain peaks up to 2400 m, exploring caves, “Via Ferrata”, daily excursions and weekend holidays, camping, various adventures, ski mountaineering, snowshoeing, skiing are quite attractive. free, etc. All these activities are carried out thanks to the wild and unspoiled nature, as well as the adaptability of the area, altitude, water resources, variety of flora and fauna. In this area, tourism is focused on creating independent bed and breakfast accommodations, where visitors will have the opportunity to be in contact with the residents, the lifestyle and the local cuisine. The typical accommodation offer in this area consists of private and semi-private accommodation in which the owner provides services, including the preparation of local food. Economic development of industry, agriculture depends heavily on the storage and use of water for agricultural activities (Dreshaj et. al. 2021). Recreational opportunities related to this form of accommodation focus on access to hiking trails leading to “Maja Hajla”, which marks the border between Kosovo and Montenegro.

METHODOLOGY

With the research work, we aim to achieve the understanding and clarification of the efficient development of the landscapes of this area as well as the cultural values as a result of the landscapes of the area. So the collection of data and facts (research and qualitative analysis, research based on primary data, effectiveness of communication,

observation method and secondary data. Through the use of this method, it is intended to emphasize the importance of environmental protection and the development of cultural tourism in the socio-economic development of the local community. The method of direct observations in the field was used to get to know the landscapes of the area of Rugova in the preservation of the environment and the development of tourism.

The environment is an important factor in the development of tourism in the western Albanian Alps

The natural resources of Rugova Mountains determine their recreational and economic functioning, the ecology of natural structures can be taken as a sound basis for the qualitative and quantitative expansion of activities that are a function of tourism and for the maintenance and progress of this natural environment. Only through tourism and thanks to it can the necessary means for protection be realized (Veselaj 2010). Forms of sustainable tourism and eco-tourism represent the ideal framework for the development of tourism in general. Eco-tourism and agro-tourism in particular, includes all types of tourism and offers opportunities for generating income throughout the year, with minimal impact on the environment. However, although there is potential, everything is in its infancy (MMPH, 2013). The values of cultural heritage in the Rugova region in promoting the development of tourism in Kosovo (Kuqi, 2018). In the territory of the “Rugova Mountains” National Park, protection regimes are established according to zones: The first area – includes parts of the territory of the National Park “Rugova Mountains” with exceptional natural features, with rare, endangered species of plants and animals and types of settlements in conditions of wild nature. This area enjoys the character of strict protection. The second zone – active management – includes the parts of the territory of the National Park “Rugova Mountains” that are characterized by ecosystems, landscape values and other natural values where ecotourism, traditional agriculture and activities that are not in conflict with the goals of protection. The third zone – of sustainable use includes the parts of the territory of the National Park “Rugova Mountains” where it can be done: construction, reconstruction, protection of traditional objects and recreation, tourism and the needs of the residents in the territory

of the National Park as well as the use of pastures and economic use of natural resources according to the Law on Nature Protection as well as in harmony with the relevant laws and the Spatial Plan of the National Park. The area of influence – includes the space of 50 meters from the border of the National Park “Rugova Mountains” that serves to prevent harmful effects in the National Park. Environmental assessments are procedures that ensure that environmental implications are considered before decisions are made. The environmental impact assessment identifies, describes and evaluates in the appropriate way, for each individual case, the direct and indirect effects of the project based on the following factors: (a) Man, plant and animal life (b) soil, water, air, climate and landscape; (c) material goods and cultural heritage (d) (Official Press 2013). Apart from its natural beauty, Rugova is also known for its fantastic landscapes and clean air. Each of the 13 villages of that area has its own beauty, but at its heart is the village of Kuqishte, on whose hill is the Great Lake with an impressive view in all seasons of the year. Surrounded by high mountains and rocks, this lake amazes with its beauty and you can enter it to cool off in times of high temperatures like this period. This mountain lake lies at an altitude of 1859 meters above sea level and is located in the mountainous border area of Rugova Mountains, not far from the border with Montenegro. The lake is one of those destinations which will undoubtedly make you forget the beaches. With a little good will and a lot of love for nature, you can easily visit this destination. The trail is easy to find and along the way, signs will guide you through the route you should follow. In addition to them, along the entire path you will be amazed by the countless beauties of the Rugova mountains, which from there, can be seen as if you had it in the palm of your hand. You can also taste various mountain fruits and refresh yourself at the natural water source, immediately after which you will encounter the picturesque view of the Lake. Its crystal water will make you its own and you will hardly resist without trying swimming in the cold water. You can enjoy the magic of absolute tranquility from above, contemplating beauties that are not encountered in the everyday life of noisy and highly populated cities. The greetings and greetings of the residents of the area will make your journey even more beautiful. What is more important is that in Kosovo the climate is very favourable for tourists

because four seasons are adjusted in accordance with official calendar and in rare cases the climate happens to be different, for instance, the winter season is snowy each year (Kuqi, 2018). The most requested and most present in restaurants in the Rugova region is boiled “Maza e zie” which is also the most frequently used dish in this area and from “Djathi i zie” distinguishes only why it lacks cheese. It is on the table, even at the ordinary table, but its presence, even at the guest table, is considered a feast (Lajçi et al., 2021). The pandemic has mostly affected the tourism sector in Kosovo (Kuqi et al., 2021). In 1985, Rugova Canyon was declared a protected monument of natural heritage due to its geological, hydrological, speleological and botanical values, as well as its impressive landscape (AMMK 2021). The canyon begins to narrow about three kilometers from Peja and continues to narrow for the next six kilometers, thus creating a large valley into which the river Bistrica e Peja flows. It narrows again in

a spillway along the western road of the region that connects Kosovo with Montenegro. This photo (Fig. 1) was taken in the Spring session.

The beauty of this mountainous region is the Rugova Gorge, which starts only 2 km away from the city center, with a length of 12 km and here it then begins to open. The Lumbardhi River, which is formed by the springs, found in different parts of Rugova, with a length of 56 km and with great rapidity of water, divides this Gorge into two parts, giving it greatness with colossal and majestic rocks, which reach a height of up to 2000 m above sea level, the waters that originate from the rocks creating waterfalls, caves, etc (Fig. 2).

To reach the Lakes, you must first go by car to “Guri i Kuq”. You can park the car there and from there the path to the Lake begins. The path is easy to find and the walk takes about 1 hour and 30 minutes. You should be prepared for standard mountain hiking (standard clothing and jacket, scarf-hat and sunscreen) and take food



Figure 1. Entrance to Rugove – Albanian Alps



Figure 2. Lake in the summer season

with you. The activity is suitable for all nature lovers, lovers of easy walks, but also for those who want to spend a weekend in nature (Fig. 3). The hiking trail will pass by two popular lakes in the area. The Red Stone Massif is an attractive mountain and has a favorable position, because from that part you can see significant parts of the Nemuna Mountains, including the northern face of Rugova. The Rugova Valley is the third region of Rugova Mountains, otherwise known as the Albanian Alps. In 2013, it was declared a National Park by the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo. Rugova is a suitable region for mountaineering, skiing, skiing, rock climbing, parachuting, and family picnics.

Autumn is an inspiring season, it is the season where nature falls asleep and gives us beautiful colors to see and enjoy this special time of the year. And to enjoy the autumn nature more, there

is no way not to visit Rugova Mountains, where you can experience unforgettable experiences in the fresh air against the fascinating nature immersed in autumn colors.

As soon as you enter the Rugova Gorge and up to the heights of 1,500 meters above sea level, in Kuçishtë, Bogë and Guri i Kuq are accompanied by stunning views from the snow (Fig. 4), then dozens of bars and restaurants, which lie by the Bistrica river, while in Kuçishtë, Boga and Guri i Kuq hotels and motels, mostly of alpine type, are erected on the lawns on the slopes of the Siptar Alps mountains. It should be noted that the beauties that fascinate you are the mountains that lie in the north and northeast of Lumbardh of Peja, such as: Zhlepi with the peak of Rusolia (2380 m), Hajla, Shtedimi, Mountain of Ciga with the peak of Hasan, Mountain of Beg with the peak of Vjelak, Peklena, etc.



Fig. 3. The fall session



Fig. 4. The winter session

RESULTS FROM THE INFORMATION GATHERING QUESTIONNAIRE

The environmental landscapes in the “Albanian Alps” in Kosovo in the development of local tourism, carried out with the respondents, during the month of June 2022. The responses of the respondents to the questions are mainly focused on the environmental landscapes in the development of tourism in the Albanian Alps. We have selected only the answers that were of most interest to the object of treatment in the paper. The responses of the respondents make us understand that environmental landscapes are an important factor in the development of local tourism. In this questionnaire, 155 respondents were surveyed who gave their opinion on various issues such as: the number of tourists, employment opportunities through business development in the Rugova region, the economic development of the area, the importance of the landscapes, cultural information centers, promotion of culture and environmental tourism potentials (Table 1).

CONCLUSIONS

Rugova or the Albanian Alps are rich with an impressive nature (landscape), including a diverse relief: from mountains covered with snow in winter to green fields and hills that are attractive to the human eye, in four seasons of the year. The region of the Western Albanian Alps (Rugova) is being considered as a place of opportunities for attracting tourists and investors, being awarded the “Balkan Peaks” award by the World Travel and Tourism Council. This is a priority for Rugova as well as for the promotion of its natural resources. So, this region offers many

opportunities and natural beauty for recreational and sports activities, which requires foreign investments in this very important field for the development of tourism in the country. The beautiful natural landscapes make Rugova an attractive center for tourists and make it the center of tourism development in the country. This country should be invested by the local government as well as the central government for the benefit of the citizens and the country.

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Table 1. Research conducted in the Rugova Region

No.	Question	Excellent	Very good	Sufficiente	Poorly
1	Do you think that because of the plays, the number has increased? Tourists from year to year in the region of Rugova?	86	66	3	0
2	Do you think that tourism will help the economic development of the area?	98	45	12	0
3	Do you prefer to stay in enjoying the natural beauty?	90	47	17	1
4	Do you want to have foreign investments for the development of tourism in this area?	120	35	0	0
5	What do you think about the promotion of plays?	143	7	5	0
6	How satisfied are you with the information centers for this area?	77	65	8	5

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