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TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES IN NATURE-BASED TOURISM AS A CHANCE FOR IMPROVING SUSTAINABILITY OF TOURISM DESTINATION

Abstract

The consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, such as social isolation and physical (social) distancing, have led many people to become more aware of the values of nature. Natural destinations provide tourists with the opportunity for easy social distancing and improvement of mental and physical health. At the same time, they provide an opportunity for various stakeholders in the destination to, through experiences in the natural environment, encourage the transformation of tourists towards values and behaviours aimed at preserving the environment. Therefore, this paper aims to present, based on a review of existing literature, transformative experiences in nature-based tourism as a means to improve the sustainability of a tourist destination and identify possible solutions for designing such experiences.

Keywords: *transformative experiences, nature-based tourism, sustainability, COVID-19*

JEL classification: *Z32, Q51*

ТРАНСФОРМАТИВНА ИСКУСТВА У ТУРИЗМУ ЗАСНОВАНОМ НА ПРИРОДИ КАО ШАНСА ЗА УНАПРЕЂЕЊЕ ОДРЖИВОСТИ ТУРИСТИЧКЕ ДЕСТИНАЦИЈЕ

Апстракт

Последице пандемије корона вируса, као што је изолација и физичко (социјално) дистанцирање, довели су до тога да многи људи постану свеснији вредности природе. Природне дестинације пружају могућност туристима за лако социјално удаљавање, побољшање менталног и физичког здравља. Истовремено, пружају могућност и различитим стејкхолдерима на дестинацији да, кроз искуства у природном окружењу, подстакну трансформацију туриста ка вредностима и понашањима усмереним ка очувању животне средине. Стога, циљ овог рада је да се на основу прегледа постојеће литературе, трансформативна искустава у туризму заснованом на природи представе као средство за унапређење одрживости туристичке дестинације, и идентификују могућа решења за дизајнирање таквих искустава.

Кључне речи: *трансформативна искуства, туризам заснован на природи, одрживост, COVID-19*

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Introduction

Tourism, as one of the fastest growing industries, intensively uses and consumes natural resources, which greatly affects the environment. Mass tourism as a product of such intensive tourism development can lead to environmental degradation but also endanger the survival of the entire tourism industry. The World Tourism Organization (2013) sees sustainability as a solution, i.e. it emphasizes that tourism will not have a future if it does not become sustainable. This points to the need for tourism transformation which, as Sheldon (2020) points out, can only happen if the values of all stakeholders in tourism are transformed. Alternative tourism such as "nature-based, adventure, rural or agricultural and heritage, religious, wellness and spa, educational or volunteer tourism" as Reisinger (2013) argues, has the capacity to encourage the transformation of tourists (p. 29).

The coronavirus pandemic and the current health situation, restriction of international travel, border closures, social distancing (Luković & Stojković, 2020), lockdowns, have led to people becoming more aware of the values of nature and the need to preserve those resources. Research has shown that people are increasingly interested in experiences involving immersion in nature and outdoor activities, including natural protected areas, adventure, eco-tourism, cultural and rural tourism (World Tourism Organization – WTO, 2020). Natural destinations provide an opportunity for tourists to escape lockdowns, improve mental health, and at the same time provide an opportunity for easy social distancing (Spenceley, 2021). In addition to activities that contribute to the personal development of tourists (Wolf et al., 2017), travel to protected areas and the natural environment may include activities that seek to develop tourists' awareness of global issues, environmental protection, promote intercultural understanding and learning (Lean, 2009). As Sheldon (2020) points out, experience in the natural environment "creates more self-awareness, more self-inquiry into the purpose of life, living by a higher set of values, and making greater contributions to others" (p. 2). That is, after such an experience, tourists begin to increasingly advocate for environmental protection and social empowerment in their community (Pung et al., 2020).

If we think about experiences in nature-based tourism, as suggested by Higham and Carr (2002), as extremely effective means of influencing the behaviour of visitors towards the environment, we can say that the new situation represents an ideal opportunity for tourism to act, through experiences in the natural environment, as a transformative force on tourists. The aim of this paper is to draw attention to the concept of transformative experiences in nature-based tourism, as a means to improve the sustainability of tourist destinations, and to identify the impacts that transformative experiences in nature-based tourism can have on tourists, community, and the natural environment.

The paper consists of three parts. The first part is dedicated to clarifying transformative tourism experiences, while the second part focuses on transformative experiences in the context of nature-based tourism. In the third part, ways for designing transformative experiences in nature-based tourism will be identified.

1. Transformative tourism experiences

Transformation can be explained as an improvement in personal growth and a developmental change that has broad social implications (Wolf et al., 2017). Wade (1998) sees transformation as "a dynamic, uniquely individualized process of expanding consciousness whereby individuals become critically aware of old and new self-views and choose to integrate these views into a new self-definition" (p. 713). Travel has been identified as an agent of change because it contains most of the conditions necessary for individual as well as social transformation to occur (Wolf et al., 2017).

As Kottler (1998) points out, tourist experiences have transformative potential because they provide an opportunity for tourists to detach themselves from their comfort zone. The assumption made by Firat and Venkatesh (1995) is that tourists strive for transformative experiences because everyday life mostly excludes magic, mystery, and passion. Kirillova et al. (2017) define transformative experiences as "those special extraordinary events that do not only trigger highly emotional responses but also lead to self-exploration, serve as a vehicle for profound intra-personal changes, and are conductive to optimal human functioning" (p. 498).

Kottler (2002) described the process in which the transformative potential of the tourist experience is realized as a process that takes place in an environment unknown to tourists, in which they gain a new perspective on life and work, and which consequently leads to changes in their previous beliefs. As a result of such a transformative tourism experience, tourists become agents of change (Soulard et al., 2021), that is, changes resulting from participation in transformative experiences tourists bring with them when returning to their living environment (Kottler, 2002). Teoh et al. (2021) suggest that tourism experiences produce ideas, which can potentially change one's perspective and previous assumptions, which creates a transformative process. If a person recognizes these ideas and applies them in his/her daily life, he/she experiences transformation.

As Teoh et al. (2021) emphasize transformative tourism experiences have strong personal and social implications and are of great importance to the individual, society, and tourism (Sheldon, 2020). Participation in transformative experiences can bring various changes to tourists, intangible (e.g., changes in attitudes or beliefs) or tangible (e.g., acquisition of new skills) (Fu et al., 2015). On the other hand, they can bring significant social changes, such as changing the way of thinking about others, gaining tolerance towards others, trust, friendship, altruism, intercultural understanding (Becker, 2018).

According to Roberson (2002), transformation occurs accidentally. According to this author, reading about a destination before or after a trip, as well as gaining new perspectives on other cultures, can initiate the transformation of tourists. This was also supported by Sheldon (2020), who points out that transformation is not the primary motive for tourists to travel, but that it happens due to spontaneous triggering moments. He explains the transformative moment as mostly "emotionally intensive, sensorially impressive and cognitively stimulating", with the capacity to encourage tourists to leave their safe zone, reconsider their inner values and start "deeper awakening to a new way of being in the world" (p. 4). On the other hand, a review of the literature conducted by Melo et al. (2021) revealed some of the prerequisites for personal transformation. These authors state that the journey must be independently organized and motivated by a desire

for transformation and learning. Also, the importance of drowning in the local culture was emphasized, as well as the new environment, which is in contradiction with the usual living environment of tourists. Well-known companions, repeated activities, and the inability to access the way of life of the local population were identified as factors that prevent the transformation of tourists (Pung & Del Chiappa, 2020).

Howard (2012) points out that interactions with people and nature are essential for developing transformative experiences. Similarly, Agapito et al. (2014) explain that tourism experiences that rely heavily on nature have the capacity to trigger transformation in tourists. Sheldon (2020) agrees with this, describing locations in nature as extremely "fertile places for transformation to occur" (p. 5).

2. Transformative experiences in nature-based tourism

Urbanization, income increase, flexible working hours, and the need to improve subjective well-being are some of the factors that have led to an increase in tourist demand for experiences based on nature and sustainability (Elmahdy et al., 2017). Puhakka and Siikamaki (2012) observed that tourists visiting untouched and attractive natural areas perceive the environment primarily as a key component that contributes to the quality of their holiday experience. Authors Wolf et al. (2017) systematized the literature and found that experiences in nature-based tourism bring ecological, psycho-physiological, and social benefits to tourists.

The research conducted by Ruhanen (2019) found that tourists visiting ecotourism sites are primarily driven by the experience in the natural environment, and identified personal benefits, such as adventure, physical activity, learning, and enjoyment, as the main motives for traveling to natural areas. Ross (2010) confirms that experiences involving responsible and sustainable practices guided by values of respect for ecosystems and hosts have great potential for transforming tourists. This has also been observed in various studies that suggest that experiences in nature have positive health outcomes (Shin et al., 2010), lead to a reduction in the risk of heart attack (Wolf et al., 2017), and a reduction in stress (Hansmann et al., 2007), mental and social well-being, as well as a range of positive emotions, such as contentment, joy, and happiness (Ballew & Omoto, 2018). Thus, nature is perceived as a space that enables the spiritual growth and psychological regeneration of people (Heintzman, 2009). Experiences in nature-based tourism have also been found to have positive social outcomes, such as creating community cohesion and strengthening family networks (Hewlett & Edwards, 2013).

The authors Poria et al. (2009) and Poudel and Nyaupane (2013) found that interaction with the natural environment provides tourists with a pleasant experience, brings joy, and encourages curiosity and a desire to learn. As a result, they point out, there is an increase in understanding, compassion, and respect for nature by tourists, and in the long run, increased environmental awareness leads to changes in ecosystem conservation behaviour (Ballantyne et al., 2011) and travel intentions (Chen et al., 2011). More specifically, these tourists are beginning to search intensively for a sustainable tourism offer and to advocate for the growth of a tourism industry that will not jeopardize its own future (WTO & WYSE Travel Confederation, 2008). Also, Walter (2016) points out that after returning home, these tourists begin to engage in environmental initiatives,

such as planting trees, take part in political activism for environmental protection, and begin teaching children about the need to preserve the environment, thus contributing to the community.

More recently, various authors (e.g., Lu et al., 2017; Smith & Melissen, 2018) have begun to view experiences as a means of gaining a competitive advantage. Chandralal and Valenzuela (2013) point out that it is not easy for a tourist destination to convince tourists to visit it again. Various studies (e.g., Zhang et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2020) have identified that experiences are a major driver of revisiting in nature-based tourism. Transformative experiences bind tourists to the place where they experienced such experience, increase the number of word-of-mouth recommendations and revisits (Jepson & Sharpley, 2015). Authors Miller et al. (2019) by systematizing the results of various studies (e.g., Pinkus et al., 2016; Snyman, 2017; Jorgenson et al., 2019) conducted in parks and protected areas found that providing quality experiences to visitors lead to the economic sustainability of these areas – through the growth in the number of repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth, which leads to the creation of additional jobs for the local population, thus reducing poverty and providing support to the local economy. Increasing tourist support to the parks and philanthropic donations to environmental organizations have been identified as some of the results of the change in tourists induced by the transformative experiences in nature.

3. Designing transformative experiences in nature-based tourism

To provide transformative nature-based tourism experiences, and to ensure the longevity of responsible behaviour, i.e. the adoption of such behaviour in everyday life, various solutions have been offered in the literature. Butcher (2002) focused on the promotion and presentation of nature-based tourism experiences. He emphasizes the need to present sustainable behaviour and sustainable tourism as "doing tourism differently" or "saving the world". Wolf et al. (2017) believe that marketing should highlight the benefits that a transformative experience in nature-based tourism can bring to tourists, such as physical and psychological well-being, the ability to build self-confidence, the opportunity to create community spirit, and a sense of purpose. Steg et al. (2014) point out that a nature-based tourist experience should be shaped as a status improvement because if it is shaped solely as a hedonistic experience, it will not produce the desired effect. Therefore, Villarino and Font (2015) and Hanna et al. (2017) emphasize the necessity of placing tourists at the centre of the experience and communicating those aspects of the destination that lead to the creation of transformative nature-based tourist experiences.

Poudel and Nyaupane (2013) suggest that the interpretation of the environment, for example by a tour guide, can help tourists to transform. That is, these authors argue that guided experiences lead to positive changes in the behaviour and attitudes of tourists and represent a very effective means of reducing negative environmental impacts. Sheldon (2020) points out that guided experiences can include ecotherapy, i.e. treatments to improve the spiritual, mental, or physical condition. As an example, he cites forest-bathing or guided tours in forests and nature parks that aim to provide healing and transformative

experiences. The author finds another example in Hawaii, where locals' knowledge of the healing power of the natural world is used as part of the design of a transformative tourism experience (for example, tourists can gain knowledge of Hawaiian practices of traditional preparation and use of native herbs to achieve spiritual and emotional balance). Liu et al. (2016) suggest involving tourists in the process of experiencing co-creation, which will enable them to be directly involved in choreographing their activities. These authors believe that tourists in nature-based tourism should not only be treated as reactive agents but also as collaborators in creating experiences that will increase their satisfaction and lead to the creation of unforgettable experiences.

Memorability of the experience in nature-based tourism has been the subject of research in the literature. Ballantyne et al. (2011) exploring visitor changes in four different wildlife locations in Australia, found that although changes in visitor attitudes toward the environment were initially observed, additional research found that they did not continue four months after the experience. On the other hand, Hughes et al. (2011) in their study measured changes in tourists' knowledge gained through experience in nature-based tourism, three months after the experience. The authors found that those tourists who received support after visiting the Australian turtle rookery, in the form of weekly updates via email, family activities, and quizzes, a website specifically designed to support visitors, maintained or even increased their knowledge in the observed period, while tourists who did not have such incentives, as expected, recorded a lower result. Also, Ardoin et al. (2015) propose the creation of communities through social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, which, as they explain, will encourage the exchange of experiences among members and thus extend the durability of the experience.

Conclusion

A recent Air Travel Sustainability survey and a survey conducted by Boooking. com found that nearly 60% of respondents think more about sustainability and the environment than before COVID-19 (Spenceley, 2021). Wang & Lyu (2019) point out that awakening tourists are more likely to respect the ecosystem and behave responsibly towards the environment. It has been identified that more aware and responsible tourists and stakeholders will contribute to the renewal and restoration of tourist destinations thus shaping a different future for tourism (Sheldon, 2020). As explained in this paper, such change needs to be encouraged but also maintained. As Hanić and Mitić (2020) point out, human impact on the environment increases the risk of contagious diseases in humans. As a way of recovery after COVID-19, but also reducing the risk of future epidemics, these authors point out that our impact on the environment must be reduced, which will minimize the risk of infectious diseases at the source, that is in nature.

A review of the literature has shown that nature-based tourism has a great potential to lead to the individual transformation of tourists towards values and behaviours that incorporate responsibility towards the environment. Consequently, this change will have significant implications for the sustainability of the tourist destination itself. That is, as Sheldon (2020) pointed out, "transformed tourists live by a higher set of values, are more aware and sensitive to their impact on the destination, and moderate their behaviour accordingly, they can transform destinations while transforming themselves" (p. 10).

   Providing experiences that have the capacity to encourage the transformation of tourists should be the task of all stakeholders in the destination. Some of the suggestions on how to initiate transformation in nature-based tourism and maintain the values and changes in tourist behaviour that have arisen as a result of the transformative experience are given in this paper. As mentioned, the benefits of tourist transformation are multiple and continue even after tourists leave the destination, which means that the transformation of tourists through nature-based tourism has benefits even outside the tourist destination that initiated these changes.

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