

# Ecotourism Development Perspective of Unrecognized Protected Areas: The Case of Regional park Mura-Drava

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# **7. Međunarodni znanstveni simpozij GOSPODARSTVO ISTOČNE HRVATSKE - VIZIJA I RAZVOJ**

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## **ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE OF UNRECOGNIZED PROTECTED AREAS: THE CASE OF REGIONAL PARK MURA-DRAVA**

### **PERSPEKTIVA RAZVOJA EKOTURIZMA NEDOVOLJNO POZNATIH ZAŠTIĆENIH PODRUČJA PRIRODE: PRIMJER REGIONALNOG PARKA MURA-DRAVA**

#### **ABSTRACT**

*The protected areas in the 21st century record continuous growth, since they can satisfy diverse desires, needs and expectations of contemporary and extremely fragmented tourist demand. However, individually speaking, visitations greatly depend on the category, resource attractiveness, additional offer and other authentic features of the protected area. In Croatia, an additional aggravating circumstance of certain protected areas from the aspect of international interest in visiting is the lack of recognition of the value of a particular category of protection. The consequence of that is incompatibility of such categories with the categories of International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Regional Park is one of the protected areas that, as such, has not categorized by the IUCN, so there is no recognisability, neither value as globally known and uniquely categorized National Parks.*

*The purpose of this paper is to point out the potentials of this protected area, which can be valorised and exploited for tourism purposes by strengthening the recognisability of Regional Parks on the wider international market. The goal of the paper is to investigate and identify the main activities of the regional tourist boards and public institutions operating in the area of the Mura-Drava Regional Park in the direction of promotion and strengthening of the international recognition of the protected area.*

*The theoretical part of the paper will provide an overview of current research in the field of ecotourism in protected areas, with a focus on the development potential and recognisability of protected areas by using standard scientific methods (method of analysis and synthesis, historical and descriptive method etc.). In the empirical part of the paper will be presented the results of the primary research conducted on a suitable sample of the regional tourist boards directors and the directors of regional Public institutions of protected areas operating in the area of the Mura-Drava Regional Park. Accordingly, the research will be conducted in the area of the five counties in*

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*Continental Croatia on which the Regional Park spreads. With the primary purpose of obtaining relevant data, the interview method will be used for the purposes of this paper. The findings will enable the definition of the main guidelines for improving the marketing activities of the Regional Park Mura-Drava as a destination, with the emphasis on strengthening the international recognition and image creation of Regional parks.*

**Keywords:** *ecotourism, protected areas, ecotourism supply, recognisability and visitation of protected areas, Regional Park Mura-Drava.*

## SAŽETAK

*Zaštićena područja prirode u 21. stoljeću bilježe kontinuirani rast posjećenosti, budući da mogu zadovoljiti raznolike želje, potrebe i očekivanja suvremene i izuzetno fragmentirane turističke potražnje. Međutim, pojedinačno gledano, posjećenost se uvelike razlikuje ovisno o kategoriji, atraktivnosti resursa, pratećoj ponudi i drugim autentičnim obilježjima zaštićenog područja. U Hrvatskoj, dodatna otežavajuća okolnost za pojedina zaštićena područja s aspekta međunarodnog interesa za posjećivanjem, predstavlja neprepoznavanje vrijednosti pojedine kategorije zaštite. Posljedica toga je neusklađenost takvih kategorija sa kategorijama Međunarodne unije za očuvanje prirode (IUCN). Regionalni park, jedno je od zaštićenih područja koje kao takvo nije kategorizirano prema IUCN-u, stoga ni nema prepoznatljivost, ali ni vrijednost kao globalno poznati i jedinstveno kategorizirani Nacionalni parkovi.*

*Svrha rada je ukazati na potencijale navedenog zaštićenog područja, koje je moguće valorizirati i iskoristiti u turističke svrhe jačanjem prepoznatljivosti regionalnih parkova na širem međunarodnom tržištu. Cilj izrade rada je istražiti i utvrditi glavne aktivnosti regionalnih turističkih zajednica i Javnih ustanova koje djeluju na prostoru Regionalnog parka Mura-Drava u smjeru promocije i jačanja međunarodne prepoznatljivosti predmetnog zaštićenog područja.*

*U teorijskom dijelu rada pružit će se prikaz dosadašnjih istraživanja u području ekoturizma u zaštićenim područjima prirode, s naglaskom na potencijale razvoja i prepoznatljivost zaštićenih područja prirode, korištenjem standardnih znanstvenih metoda (metoda analize i sinteze, povijesna te deskriptivna metoda itd.). U empirijskom dijelu rada bit će prikazani rezultati primarnog istraživanja provedenog na prigodnom uzorku direktora županijskih turističkih zajednica i ravnatelja županijskih Javnih ustanova zaštićenih područja koje djeluju na prostoru Regionalnog parka Mura-Drava. Sukladno tome, istraživanje će se provesti na području pet županija Kontinentalne Hrvatske u kojima se prostire Regionalni park. S primarnim ciljem dobivanja relevantnih podataka, za potrebe ovoga rada koristiti će se metoda intervjua.*

*Dobivene spoznaje omogućiti će definiranje glavnih smjernica za unapređivanje marketinških aktivnosti Regionalnog parka Mura-Drava kao destinacije, s naglaskom na jačanje međunarodne prepoznatljivosti i stvaranja imidža regionalnih parkova.*

**Gljučne riječi:** *ekoturizam, zaštićena područja prirode, ekoturistička ponuda, prepoznatljivost i posjećenost zaštićenih područja prirode, Regionalni park Mura-Drava.*

## 1. Introduction

Ecotourism, as a specific form of tourism, represents a new movement with the main aim of protecting tourism destinations in their natural environment. It has emerged as an alternative to mass tourism. Its emergence is the result of contemporary trends, which imply a growing ecological awareness of consumers. Ecotourism is important for preserving natural and cultural heritage and tradition of the region in which it develops, preserves the environment, but also contributes to the

well-being of the local community. The essence of the overall concept is its three dimensions. Ecotourism is nature-based, educational and sustainably managed. Besides that, an additional dimension of ecotourism is that it provides personalized tourist experience. Although in the Strategy of Croatian Tourism by 2020 ecotourism is mentioned as a one of the key tourism product, there is still no significant progress of ecotourism development in Croatia. As in the rest of the world, ecotourism development was related to protected areas. Croatia is one of the countries with a wealth of natural resources and protected areas. Therefore, the possibilities for further ecotourism development are great. One of such unused potential is the Regional Park Mura-Drava.

Tourists interested in a natural setting are looking for a holiday full of adventure and surprises. They do not want fully planned holiday. Ecotourists' motives relate to travel motives such as escape from noise and pollution, escape from the monotony of everyday life, physical rest, discovering other regions and cultures, as well as discovering oneself. Thus, the perspective of ecotourism development is reflected in the preferences of ecotourists. Ecotourism activities may vary from "hard" to "soft" activities, according to which ecotourists also differentiate. Which group of ecotourists (hard or soft) will prevail in a particular natural area, mostly will depend on the characteristics and category of the protected area. Hard ecotourists are characterized by a small number of highly motivated and physical readiness participants, which takes long and specialized journeys and accommodation in primitive settings with their main goal of closer contact with nature and assist in its preservation. Soft ecotourists do not differ much from mainstream tourists and they are mostly interested in education and interpretation, sightseeing, new areas, relax and walks in nature, etc. All these activities are suitable to take place in protected areas and their additional attractiveness are manifested in the fact that they are a cultural artefact. Tourism in such areas is a process in which visitors connect experience and become acquainted with natural and cultural heritage and, as such, effect on the policy and the future of protected areas.

## **2. Ecotourism in Protected areas**

Protected areas have a long history and some historians claim that certain areas of India have been protected due to their natural resources more than two millennia ago. In Europe, some areas were protected as hunting grounds for rich and powerful, almost a thousand years ago. During the renaissance, they became available for public use, e.g. they were no longer owned by kings and other national rulers (Eagles, McCool, Haynes, 2002). Nowadays, there is a need to spend time in protected areas and thus, the first forms of tourism in protected areas are being developed. The first National park in the world, Yellowstone in the USA, was founded in 1872, while in Europe were founded in the early 20th century. As previously mentioned, the beginning of ecotourism development is linked to the establishment of the first national parks. They played a major role in achieving the main goals, although the concept of ecotourism has not yet been used (Čorak and Mikačić, 2006).

Protected areas represent fundamental nature conservation strategy at the national and international levels. In many cases, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Public Institutions for the Management of Protected Areas were limited traditional rights and access to the area. Today, such areas are not only used to preserve biodiversity, but also for the protection of landscapes and cultural goods (Mackelworth and Jovanović, 2011). Considering that during the twentieth century a large number of protected areas were declared, whose criteria and approach to management were not equal in all countries, the International Conference on the Protection of Fauna and Flora (International Conference on the Protection of Flora and Fauna) decided to standardize categories of protected areas. They introduce four category of protected areas, e.g. national parks, strict nature reserves, flora and fauna reserves, and hunting and fishing bans. Meanwhile, there are changes in the

categories and the last one happened in 2008, when the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) adopted new definitions of seven categories of protected areas.<sup>2</sup>

In the last few decades, there has been an increasing interest in sustainable and eco-tourism, which has been encouraged by the concerns over the effects of tourism on the environment. Further, activities closely related to the experience of nature are becoming more and more popular. In such circumstances, the number of people involved in outdoor activities are growing, especially those related to hiking, biking and water activities such as kayaking and diving. Considering the difference between 'soft' and 'hard' activities, the ecotourism market has adjusted to the requirements of an individual group of ecotourist in order to satisfy their wishes and needs. Protected areas, as the main destination of the ecotourist, besides providing these activities, special attention should be paid to sustainable development and the preservation of their own values (Eagles, McCool, Haynes, 2002).

Tourism in protected areas generates revenue and thus contributes to the local, regional and national economy. It also provides direct interaction between visitors and the local population, which leads to both, positive and negative outcomes (Leung et al., 2014). With the tourism development in protected areas, benefits and costs arise. Management's responsibility is to maximize the benefits and at the same time to minimize costs. Protected areas have been established to preserve some types of biophysical processes or conditions such as wildlife populations, habitat, natural landscape or cultural heritage, together with enabling tourists to visit them in order to understand and respect the value of such area. The interest of tourists in such areas encourages the development of tourism, and some of the benefits that tourism brings to such areas are (Eagles, McCool, Haynes, 2002):

- economic benefits (e.g. new jobs for the locals, increased income, new businesses, boosting local production, improving living standards, increasing revenue for protected areas local communities, etc.),
- environmental benefits (e.g. protection of ecological processes and water, biodiversity, cultural heritage, education and interpretation of protected areas, etc.) and
- social benefits (e.g. encourages infrastructure development, environmental education for visitors and local population, improves intercultural communication, encourages the development of culture, crafts and art, increases the level of local population education and encourages them to learn the language and culture of tourists, but also to evaluate their culture and environment).

On the other hand, tourism in protected areas brings certain negative consequences and risks. Negative effects arise from tourist visits, but they can be reduced or managed in order to minimize them. It is important to identify all the negativity that tourism brings and subsequently monitor them to determine the current state, changes over time, and the significance and success of reducing such effects (Eagles, McCool, Haynes, 2002). Different tourist activities cause different biophysical influences in protected areas (e.g. the construction of roads, accommodation, airports, hiking trails, camps, swimming pools and other infrastructures for tourism purposes have inevitable environmental impacts which involves mineral and energy consumption, habitat depletion, water use and esthetical impacts on the environment (Spenceley, 2003).

Many protected areas in Croatia are suitable for tourism and recreational activities. Nevertheless, some of them still do not use enough their tourist potentials, while others are facing with the problems that tourism brings. Ecotourism in the protected areas of Croatia is at very beginning, because of the lack of accommodation and other facilities that meet the world-accepted criteria imposed by ecotourism. Besides protected areas, ecotourism facilities are provided by subjects that deal with some of the service-related forms of tourism (rural, mountain, sport, etc.) In addition, there

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<sup>2</sup>State Institute for Nature Protection: IUCN Categories of Protected Areas, available at: [www.dzpp.hr/zasticena-podrucja/kategorije-zasticenih-podrucja/iucn-kategorije-zasticenih-podrucja-251.html](http://www.dzpp.hr/zasticena-podrucja/kategorije-zasticenih-podrucja/iucn-kategorije-zasticenih-podrucja-251.html) (22.2.2018.)



is a problem of low profitability of ecotourism, ignorance and lack of understanding of the usefulness of such a form of tourism (Svržnjak et al., 2014).

Unlike national parks, in nature parks there were certain forms of economic activity and housing construction before the proclamation. Therefore, tourism does not necessarily have to be excluded from the nature park, but it should be reduced to a framework within they will not destroy the main phenomenon of which protection is sought. National Parks and Nature Parks are affecting some of the general issues, e.g. non-existence of spatial plans of protected areas, poor environmental awareness of local government representatives, conflicts with the local population, excessive tourism flow, dangers of pollution, difficult financing, etc.<sup>3</sup>

Regional parks, as tourist destinations, shapes a regional identity in a modern way. They enable tourists to explore the variety of plants and animals and encourage active holidays with nature conservation. Since the regional park, as a category of protected areas, is not included in the IUCN categorization, their positioning and promotion on the European and global tourism markets is faced with numerous obstacles. Recognisability of protected areas is of great importance for ecotourists and other visitors. In Croatia, there are two regional parks and no one have significant tourist flow.

### 3. Ecotourism on the area of the Regional Park Mura-Drava

According to the Nature protection act (article 14, paragraph 2, NN 70/2005) “Regional Park is a naturally spacious or partly cultivated area of land and/or sea of a great biodiversity and/or geodiversity with valuable ecological features and landscape values that are characteristic for the area in which it is located”. In the Regional Park economic and other activities is allowed that do not endanger its essential characteristics and role.<sup>4</sup> On 10th February 2011, the Government of the Republic of Croatia adopted the Decree on proclamation of the Regional Park Mura-Drava, the first regional park in the Republic of Croatia. With this Decree, the whole stream of the Mura and Drava River was protected.<sup>5</sup> The Mura and Drava River represent areas of exceptional natural values at regional, national and European levels. In addition to the territory of the Republic of Croatia (five counties: Međimurje, Varaždin, Koprivnica-Križevci, Virovitica-Podravina and Osijek-Baranja), the area of Regional Park extends through two neighbour countries (Republic of Slovenia and the Republic of Hungary). Within the Republic of Croatia lies the central part of this river system.<sup>6</sup>

The importance of the area of the Mura and Drava River is reflected in the fact that their flows are among the last transverse streams of lowland rivers in Central Europe and they are characterized by a high level of biodiversity. Particularly important are wetlands, which are among the most endangered in Europe and they are also protected in the Republic of Croatia (e.g. floody forests, wet lawns, dead wings, abandoned basins and meanders, shrines and steep shores of seagrass).<sup>7</sup> Prior to the proclamation of the Regional Park, there have already been a number of protected areas in its present territory. Between 1961 and 2001 some minor parts were protected (e.g. Significant Landscape of the Mura River, Castle Garden of Križovljan-Grad, White Peat Tree, Great Pažut, Oak

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<sup>3</sup> Protected Areas in Croatia - Shapes and Problems, available at: [www.geografija.hr/hrvatska/zasticena-podrucja-u-hrvatskoj-oblici-i-problemi/](http://www.geografija.hr/hrvatska/zasticena-podrucja-u-hrvatskoj-oblici-i-problemi/) (22.2.2018.)

<sup>4</sup> Nature of Međimurje: Regional park Mura - Drava, available at: [www.medjimurska-priroda.info/zastita/regionalni-park-mura-drava/](http://www.medjimurska-priroda.info/zastita/regionalni-park-mura-drava/) (22.2.2018.)

<sup>5</sup> Public Institution for the Management of Protected Areas of Nature in the Koprivnica - Križevci County: Regional Park MURA - DRAVA, available at: [www.zastita-prirode-kckzz.hr/zasticena-podrucja/regionalni-park-mura-drava](http://www.zastita-prirode-kckzz.hr/zasticena-podrucja/regionalni-park-mura-drava) (22.2.2018.)

<sup>6</sup> Nature of Međimurje: Regional park Mura - Drava, available at: [www.medjimurska-priroda.info/zastita/regionalni-park-mura-drava/](http://www.medjimurska-priroda.info/zastita/regionalni-park-mura-drava/) (22.2.2018.)

<sup>7</sup> State Institute for Nature Protection: Professional background for designation of the Mura - Drava area in the Republic of Croatia regional park, available at: [www.kckzz.hr/user\\_content/documents/Tekst\\_strucne\\_podloge.pdf](http://www.kckzz.hr/user_content/documents/Tekst_strucne_podloge.pdf) (22.2.2018.)



Tree in Repaš, Čambina, Noskovačka Dubrava, Križnica, Jelkuš, Širinski Otok, Swampland Vir, Podpanj, etc.), which are shown in Table 1. (Feletar, 2013).

**Table 1** Individual Protected Areas in the Regional Park Mura-Drava

Area of Regional Park	Type of protection	County	Surface (10.000 m <sup>2</sup> )	Year of proclamation
1. Significant Landscape of the Mura River	Significant landscape	Međimurje	15.000	2001.
2. Castle Garden of Križovljan-Grad	Monument to park architecture	Varaždin	32	1961.
3. Drava Forest near Varaždin	Park-Forest	Varaždin	87	2001.
4. White Peat Tree near Varaždin	Nature Monument	Varaždin	2	2001.
5. Oak Tree in Repaš	Nature Monument	Koprivnica-Križevci	0,1	1997.
6. A group of trees in Noskovačka Dubrava	Nature Monument	Virovitica-Podravina	1	1969.
7. Great Pažut	Special zoo reserve	Koprivnica-Križevci	1.000	1998.
8. Čambina	Significant landscape	Koprivnica-Križevci	50	1999.
9. Križnica	Significant landscape	Virovitica-Podravina	50	2001.
10. Jelkuš	Significant landscape	Virovitica-Podravina	250	2001.
11. Širinski otok	Significant landscape	Virovitica-Podravina	186	2001.
12. Swampland Vir	Significant landscape	Virovitica-Podravina	2	2001.
13. Podpanj	Special reserve	Osijek-Baranja	85	1998.

Source: Feletar, D. (2013.): *Geografsko-demografske značajke Regionalnog parka Mura-Drava*, Vol. 12., No. 24., pp. 8.

Apart from the biological and geological features, Regional Park Mura-Drava is unique due to its demographic characteristics, i.e. due to the mood of man and nature. This symbiosis has created valuable monumental and folk heritage and a specific humanized landscape. Scattered small villages, hamlets and very often-lonely households - finches (western part) and majuri or salaš (eastern part) characterizes the area of the Regional Park Mura-Drava (Feletar, 2013). Numerous archaeological finds prove the settlements of space since prehistoric times and cultural goods testify of human presence and activity in space. Tangible (e.g. churches, chapels, monasteries, houses, castles, summerhouses, factories, mills, quarries, paintings, instruments, flags, clothing, footwear, etc.) and intangible heritage (e.g. spiritual creativity, music, speaks, customs, traditional dishes, crafts, etc.)

are of the general historical, artistic, scientific and anthropological value of this part of Croatia.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, in addition to preserved nature and biodiversity, culture is a great potential for tourism development of this area.

In a wider area including the outermost part of the Park, a small number of agricultural households are engaged in supplementary economic activities. Only a small percentage of them deals with the production of agricultural products and handicrafts and provides tourism services (e.g. accommodation, guidance, trips, tours, etc.). The Regional Park Mura-Drava has an exceptionally high tourism resource base, but their use is inadequate or at a very low level. The main objective of ecotourism is to preserve resources that attracted tourists, most often respected by small entrepreneurs and family farms that have recognized the importance of natural, cultural and traditional values. In addition, agricultural area occupy one third of the Park, so there is an increasing number of ecological-producing farms that contribute to the ecotourism supply. Consumers recognize the quality of ecologically produced products and are willing to pay them higher prices. An additional strength of this area is that it provides a large number of domestic and traditional dishes, as food is one of the most important developmental components of tourism. In the area of the Park, there is a trend of production of branded agricultural products, e.g. Međimurje potatoes, Varaždin greens and Slavonian kulen.<sup>9</sup> Although it has been established that there are potential for tourism development, on the area of the Regional Park Mura-Drava has not developed a significant number of new eco-tourism destinations. The initial assumption of the paper is that the Park is not sufficiently recognized by the tourism demand (especially foreign) due to the lower promotion of this area. Therefore, in addition to the theoretical part of the paper, empirical research has been conducted in order to determine planned and undertaken measures and activities of the County Tourism Boards in cooperation with other stakeholders. The obtained results will be useful for defining the main guidelines for improving the marketing activities of the Mura-Drava Regional Park as a destination, with emphasis on strengthening international recognition and creating the image of regional parks.

#### 4. Methodology

The subject of research is to establish the potential for tourism development and recognition of Regional Parks as protected areas. In order to highlight the importance of the Regional Park Mura-Drava as ecotourism destinations, an empirical research was conducted. The purpose of the paper is to point out the importance of strengthening the recognition of regional parks on the wider international market with the aim of better valorisation and usage of the potential for tourism development. The main aim of the work is to establish the perspective of ecotourism development based on the development potential perception of the respondents, with the special attention on the marketing activities and tools used in the function of strengthening the international recognition of Park. The research was conducted on a suitable sample of nine respondents by using a method of semi-structured interviews. The research area includes five counties, e.g. Međimurje, Varaždin, Koprivnica-Križevci, Virovitica-Podravina and Osijek-Baranja. The research included four of total five directors of County Tourist Boards and five directors of County Public institutions of protected area that operate in the area of the Regional Park Mura-Drava. From all of targeted respondents, only the Koprivnica Križevci Tourist Board did not want to participate in the research. The semi-structured interview consisted of nine questions. First, it was necessary to examine which forms of tourism favoured and what activities the respondents are taking to improve tourism in the Park.

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<sup>8</sup> State Institute for Nature Protection: Professional background for designation of the Mura - Drava area in the Republic of Croatia regional park, available at: [www.kckzz.hr/user\\_content/documents/Tekst\\_strucne\\_podloge.pdf](http://www.kckzz.hr/user_content/documents/Tekst_strucne_podloge.pdf) (22.2.2018.)

<sup>9</sup> State Institute for Nature Protection: Professional background for designation of the Mura - Drava area in the Republic of Croatia regional park, available at: [www.kckzz.hr/user\\_content/documents/Tekst\\_strucne\\_podloge.pdf](http://www.kckzz.hr/user_content/documents/Tekst_strucne_podloge.pdf) (22.2.2018.)

Further set of questions examines the elements that, according to the opinion of the respondents, are of the particular importance for ecotourism development in the Park. In addition, the following questions examine which promotional tools are the most prominent and which are the most desirable tourism markets and target groups. Finally, the goal was to examine the limitations of ecotourism development, as well as the priority of some activities in the tourism industry of the Regional Park Mura-Drava.

## **5. Results of research and discussion**

In determining the most targeted forms of tourism at the Mura-Drava Regional Park, all respondents generally emphasized ecotourism, adventure tourism and cycle tourism. Further, the promotion of nature and environment protection, projects focused on the protection of certain plant and animal species, protection and strengthening of autochthonous products and the limitations and recovery of pollution are the most significant activities undertaken by all respondents in the area of the Park. In addition, Međimurje Tourism Board emphasize that projects of protection and strengthening of autochthonous products are of significant importance since they are interested in the enogastronomic tourism development. As the most important elements for the eco-tourism development, all respondents state that are excellent biodiversity and landscape features, followed by cultural and historical values, gastronomy and enology.

Further, according to promotion, the most prominent promotion is through websites, social networks (Facebook and YouTube at most) and own printed materials. For example, specialized journals are least used as a promotional tool. School children and ecotourists on domestic and regional tourism markets are the major targeted groups of tourists.

Most respondents believe that the Regional Park Mura-Drava can be viewed as a unique destination, regardless of spatial differences. In addition to previous, they emphasize that the cooperation between the counties is satisfactory, which represent current possibilities of the commonly recognizable tourism products development.

Besides, cross-counties cooperation, respondents point out that cross-border cooperation is inevitable for the further development of ecotourism in the Park and it is important that local and regional governments encourage the local population to engage actively in tourism.

The major limiting elements of tourism development in the Park are the lack of interest of business entities for tourism, insufficient demand for regional parks and the lack of interest and insufficient knowledge of the local population.

From the aspect of the priority for further tourism development and the better position of ecotourism in the Regional Park Mura-Drava, it is identified that the priority are stronger promotion of the attraction and authentic supply on the targeted tourism markets and professional training of the local population for ecotourism. In addition, there has been identified and other important factors for intensive ecotourism development, such as improving the infrastructure and accessibility of the Park, encouraging the private and non-profit sector and the local population in ecotourism development of the Park, development of large thematic complexes using EU funds, etc.

Further research should investigate in more detail, the possibilities of creation and promotion of the commonly recognizable tourism products in order to improve current situation of the recognisability of the regional parks on the wider international market. Further, it is necessary to investigate interests of the local population and other relevant stakeholders in the context of participation in creating ecotourism supply and recognizable tourism products in the regional parks.

## **6. Conclusion**

Protected areas have a long history and provide a fundamental nature conservation strategy at the national and international level. Such areas are used to preserve biodiversity, landscape conservation

and cultural goods. With increased interest for sustainable and ecotourism, protected areas become the main destination for tourists and visitors, which primary goal is to protect and experience nature. Although tourism in the protected areas brings a number of positive effects (e.g. generating revenue, interaction of tourists with local population, etc.), there are also negative impacts and risks. Thus, it is important to identify all the negativities that tourism brings to protected areas. In the Republic of Croatia, there are a large number of protected areas intended for tourist and recreational activities. Nowadays, some of them do not make enough use of their tourist potentials, and the Regional Park Mura-Drava can be considered as such. Since the establishment, in the Park area has not developed a significant number of new tourism destinations. The conducted empirical research has provided the results that can be used for creation of the main guidelines for improving the marketing activities of the Mura-Drava Regional Park as a destination.

The data obtained shows that the most important activities that are undertaken both from directors of County Tourism Board and County Public Institution of Nature Protection are the promotion of nature protection, the protection of certain plant and animal species and the limitations and remediation of pollution. The results of the research confirm that for further better recognisability of the Park and ecotourism development as a whole, creation and promotion of the commonly recognizable tourism products, encouragement of the local population to engage actively in tourism as well as cross-border co-operation are needed. The lack of interest of business entities for tourism, the inadequate demand of regional parks and the lack of knowledge of the local population are the most limiting elements of ecotourism development of the Park. In addition, the priority for further ecotourism development is the stronger promotion of attractions and authentic supply by public organizations on targeted tourist markets and professional training of local population for ecotourism.

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