

Accessible tourism in the national parks of the Republic of Croatia

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"Economical, Agricultural and Legal Frameworks of Sustainable Development"

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Editors:

Nikola Curcic, Marko Caric, Svetlana Roljevic



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Novi Sad, 4-5 November, 2022

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ACCESSIBLE TOURISM IN THE NATIONAL PARKS OF THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

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ABSTRACT

Today's tourism is becoming increasingly socially responsible and accessible to all types of tourist demand, from younger generations, gray-haired tourists to vulnerable groups. All megatrends point to these facts. Social responsibility in the form of accessible tourism is of extreme importance for the development of certain tourist destinations and areas. Tourist offer needs to be adjusted to people with disabilities, who are part of the tourist demand. Accessible infrastructure, multidisciplinary approach to the guest and understanding of all stakeholders in tourism towards vulnerable groups are important factors in creating a specific tourist offer. Considering that tourist communication is based on direct access to the guest, it is necessary to use different methods and tools to approach people with disabilities. In terms of the necessary adaptation of tourism content for people with disabilities, the aim of the paper is to show the extent to which there are tools for easier interpretation of the content within the national parks in the Republic of Croatia. Empirical research is focused on the identification and analysis of the existence of: adapted websites for people with visual impairments, parking spaces for the disabled, lines for easier orientation, tactile digital sensors, adapted mobile applications, audio descriptions at locations, adapted sanitary facilities and other. The research instrument was an in-depth interview, and the research was conducted on a convenience sample consisting of directors of Croatian national parks. The contribution of the work is reflected in the presentation of the current state of equipment of the national parks for the needs of the development of accessible tourism.

Keywords: *accessible tourism, people with disabilities, national parks*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the latest Report of the Croatian Institute of Public Health (2021), almost 600,000 people with disabilities live in the Republic of Croatia, which is about 14.4% of the total population. In order to create an insight into the extent to which these segments are involved in tourism, an empirical study was conducted on a sample of six National Parks in the Republic of Croatia. In addition to the empirical work, the paper presents the terminology of accessible tourism, from its definition to current findings in the form of certain barriers. Possible solutions are given for the barriers.

2. ACCESSIBLE TOURISM

Studying the available scientific and professional terminology, numerous definitions of accessible tourism can be noted, which indicates that there is no generally accepted terminology for this term.

In the following Table 1, several definitions of accessible tourism are presented, which have in common the mention of the necessary mobility of tourism consumers in this form of tourism.

Author/s	Year/page	Definition
Darcy & Dickson	2009/p. 33	Accessible tourism is a form of tourism that enables people with different access requirements in terms of mobility, vision, hearing, and cognitive dimensions to function independently, equally and with dignity when using universally designed products, services, and environments in tourism. This definition includes people with permanent or temporary disabilities, the elderly, families with small children and those working in socially sustainable designed environments.
UNESCAP	2009	Accessible tourism is also known as "accessible tourism", "universal tourism", "inclusive tourism", "and in some countries such as Japan, "barrier-free tourism". Accessible tourism is tourism and travel that is accessible to all persons, including persons with disabilities, including persons with difficulties with movement, hearing, sight, psychosocial or intellectual disabilities, as well as elderly persons and persons with temporary disabilities.
Miller, Vandome & McBrewster	2010	Accessible tourism is constantly ensuring the availability of tourist destinations, products and services to all people, regardless of their physical limitations, disability or age. It includes tourist sites in public and private ownership. Accessibility improvements are not only beneficial for people with permanent physical disabilities, but also for parents with small children, the elderly, people with temporary injuries such as a broken leg, and their companions.
Nursanty, Anwar & Mohamadi	2013/p. 9	Accessible tourism is a form of tourism that involves a collaborative process between stakeholders that enables people with access requirements, including mobility, vision, hearing and cognitive dimensions of access, to function independently, fairly and with dignity through the delivery of universally designed tourism products, services and environments.
Komnes, Tanković & Kletečki	2018/p. 258	The term accessible tourism refers to destinations that develop a tourism offer that is accessible, i.e., accessible to all people, adapted to children, the elderly, the sick and persons with special needs, regardless of physical limitations, disability or age.
Catela	2020	Inclusive tourism is a segment of tourism accessible to everyone whose task is to create an environment in which all tourist destinations, products and services are accessible to everyone in order to enable mobile, visual, auditory and mental accessibility so that all users of tourism services can act independently, equally and with dignity on the tourism market.

*Table 1: Defining accessible tourism
 (Source: authors)*

From the above definitions, it can be established that accessible tourism is a form of tourism that implies respect for the needs of all tourists, regardless of the degree of mobility and cognitive abilities, in a dignified and just manner.

According to the Act on the Croatian Register of Persons with Disabilities (*Zakon o hrvatskom registru o osobama s invaliditetom*) (NN 64/01) (Official Gazette 64/01), persons with disabilities are persons who have a "permanent limitation, reduction or loss of the ability to perform some physical activity or mental function appropriate for their age, resulting from health impairment" (<https://www.zakon.hr/z/1293/Zakon-o-Hrvatskom-registru-o-osobama-s-invaliditetom>, 03/02/2022). On the basis of the Spatial Planning and Construction Act (Official Gazette 50/12), the Ordinance on Ensuring the Accessibility of buildings for Persons with Disabilities and Reduced Mobility (Official Gazette 78/2013) was adopted. Within the Ordinance (Official Gazette 78/2013), a person with a disability is defined as "a person with permanent or temporary physical, mental, intellectual and/or sensory impairments, which, in interaction with various obstacles in space, may prevent their participation in society on an equal basis" (https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2013_06_78_1615.html, 03/02/2022). People who require special access include people with disabilities, the elderly, people with chronic health problems, people with acute illnesses, and parents with small children (Catela, 2020). Given that according to estimates there are more than two billion people with disabilities, together with their spouses, caregivers, and children at the global level, it is important to make tourism more accessible for everyone. This untapped market faces a number of challenges every day such as: "uneducated professional staff qualified to provide information and advice on accessibility issues, inaccessible booking services and related websites that aggregate services accessible to people with disabilities, lack of accessible airports and transfer facilities and services, unavailability of adapted and accessible hotel rooms, restaurants, shops, toilets and public places, inaccessible streets and transport services, and the lack of available information about facilities, services, equipment rental and tourist attractions suitable for people with disabilities" (<https://www.litto.agency/news-from-tourism-and-guides-for-renters/accessible-tourism-as-a-generator-of-added-value>, 02.03.2022). Further discussion on barriers, challenges and possible solutions is presented in the following chapter.

3. CURRENT KNOWLEDGE ON ACCESSIBLE TOURISM

Accessible tourism is viewed as tourism that creates added value, while people with disabilities are viewed as loyal customers (Nursanty, Anwar, & Mohamadi, 2013). In order for a certain destination to gain loyal customers, it is necessary to see what the preferences of these segments are and how they decide to travel. The research of Stilling Blichfeldt and Nicolaisen (2015) was conducted with the purpose of determining the impact on decision-making on tourism travel among people with disabilities. The research shows that various associations for people with disabilities have a key role in determining whether and how an individual will take on the role of a tourist; that people with disabilities decide to travel in order to be freed from the role of "objects of care", in order to more successfully overcome doubt in themselves and built self-confidence, and that the very process of making a decision about a trip is more complex for them than for other tourists, although this complexity decreases with more frequent travelling and gained experience. As mentioned earlier, there are certain barriers to the development of accessible tourism. In their paper, Stumbo and Pegg (2005) provide an overview of certain barriers in the provision of tourism services to persons with disabilities and propose many solutions for removing barriers in terms of: information and marketing resources, attitudes of staff/workers in tourism, transportation, accommodation, and attractions. As concerns attractions, the authors mention architectural and ecological barriers. For the aforementioned they offer several solutions, but they focus the most attention on the availability of as much information as possible by tourist workers, websites, brochures and the like. Furthermore, based on the conclusion of the Asia-Pacific Conference on Tourism (2000), for persons with disabilities it is stated that for the development of barrier-free tourism it is necessary to do the following: better acquaint stakeholders in tourism with issues of accessibility, based on this,

develop policies that are barrier-free, train employees in tourism, and develop promotional activities. According to research in Tehran conducted by Mahmoudzadeh and Kourdi Sarjaz (2018), three main obstacles to the development of accessible tourism in the environment can be highlighted: transportation, sights and accommodation. Within the category of sights, most respondents believe that the roads to certain sights are not accessible, that there is a lack of parking spaces, a lack of picnic tables, a lack of accessible benches and, among other things, a lack of the presence of educated employees. What is evident from the study conducted by Williams, Rattray and Grimes in 2007 is that the needs of people with disabilities are not met, i.e. that there is a low level of accessibility and little specific internet information necessary for an adequate stay in an accommodation facility. Chikuta (2015) also writes about the insufficient level of development of accessible tourism, stating that tourism and catering in Zimbabwe has not recognized the importance of this tourism segment. According to Jević and Jević (2015), it is necessary to ensure the following elements of accessibility: transport infrastructure (streets, squares, stations, access to means of transport), public facilities, information and communications, services and products. Also, the authors state the importance of the functionality of all elements if significant economic results are to be achieved, but in practice this has not yet been sufficiently recognized. The physical environment, employees in tourism, forms of communication are not sufficiently accessible to people with disabilities. According to WHO, Schmutz (2018) states that if the success of accessibility initiatives is to be achieved, external constraints, competing priorities, availability of technology and knowledge, and cultural differences should be taken into account. Figure 1 presents how the same author explains the process of providing information via websites from the tourist service provider to the user (person with disabilities). The image shows the necessity of educating tourism service providers about the needs of people with disabilities in order to provide them with adequate service using certain technological tools, that is, to provide valid and timely information.

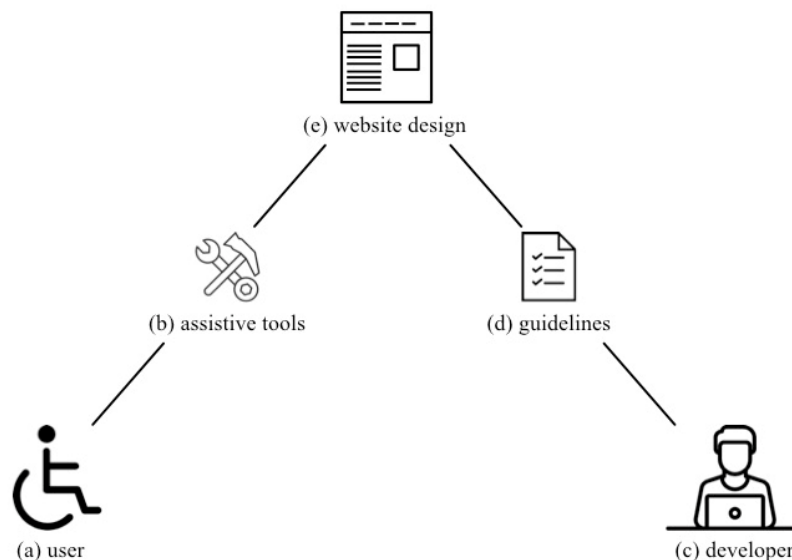


Figure 1: The process of informing people with disabilities (Schmutz, 2018 according to Chisholm and Henry, 2005)

The English Accessible Tourism Guide for destination managers (Winning more visitors) shows a large use of websites (83%) for information by people with disabilities, while a small number of them (39%) easily access the requested information. This indicates that the websites of destinations are not yet at a satisfactory level of providing information, but they are the most sought-after source of information.

In Croatia, a Handbook was adopted based on the Tourism4all project (2020:2), which, among other things, aims to improve the inclusion of vulnerable groups and their easier access to tourism services. Within the manual, the goal of accessible tourism is stated as "creating an inclusive tourism product, taking care that every guest at the chosen tourist destination feels welcome and that the staff treats them professionally and without discrimination". Furthermore, the most common issues of accessibility that tourist operators encounter are listed, namely: architectural barriers, inaccessibility of websites and unsuitability of menus. For each group of vulnerable persons, it is explained how to behave and what equipment and technical tools to use when approaching the guest.

4. ANALYSIS OF ACCESSIBLE TOURISM IN THE NATIONAL PARKS OF THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

The Republic of Croatia has a total of eight National Parks that are geographically spread throughout Croatia. Whether it is the mountains, the coast or the maritime part of Croatia, National Parks attract tourists every day because of their attractiveness and location. According to the latest data from the Croatian Tourist Board (https://www.htz.hr/sites/default/files/2021-06/HTZ%20TUB%20HR_%202020_0.pdf, 07.07.2022), in 2019 the National Parks together received a total of 3,876,152 visitors, while in 2020 that number was 71.9% lower due to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Nature Protection Act (Official Gazette 30/1994), a national park is defined as "a spacious, largely unchanged area of exceptional and multiple natural values, which includes one or more preserved or slightly altered eco-systems." A national park serves scientific, cultural, educational, and recreational purposes. In a national park, activities which do not endanger the originality of nature are allowed. Economic use of natural resources is prohibited in a national park. Tourist and recreational activities must be in the role of visiting and sightseeing, which is allowed to everyone under the same conditions" (https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/1994_04_30_521.html, 07.07.2022). It is evident from the definition that tourist activities within the National Parks are intended for everyone under the same conditions, therefore, for the purposes of this work, research was conducted with the aim of determining to what extent the activities are adapted to people with disabilities.

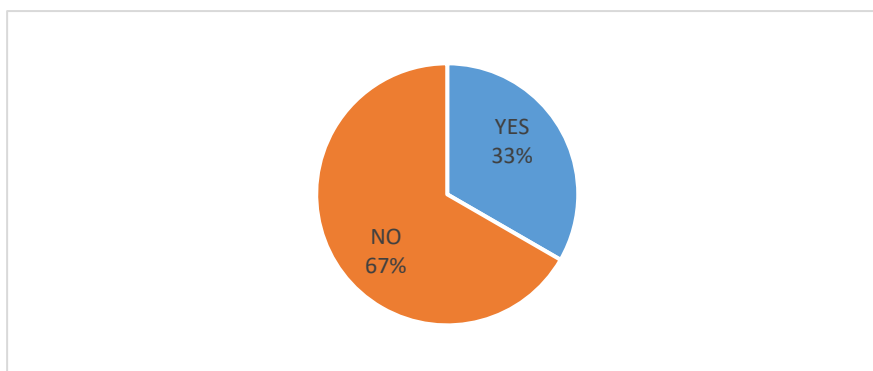
4.1. Methodological framework

To create an insight into the representation of tools for easier interpretation of tourism content within the National Parks in the Republic of Croatia, research was conducted in the period from March 15 to June 24, 2022. The research tool was an in-depth interview with directors of eight National Parks. A total of six directors participated in the in-depth interview, who were able to present the real state of accessible tourism in the mentioned area through eight questions. The research results are presented with the help of descriptive analysis.

4.2. Research results

The first question sought to find out more about statistical monitoring of visitors with disabilities, whether it exists (Graph 1), what is the share of that segment and why such monitoring is important for respondents.

Graph following on the next page



*Graph 1: Analysis of introduced statistical monitoring in NP
 (Source: authors)*

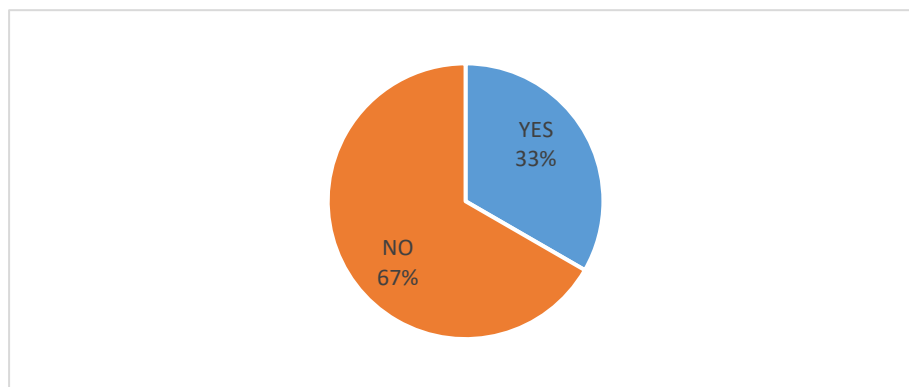
From Graph 1, it is evident that there is usually not conducted statistical monitoring of visitors with disabilities, but through the answers of the directors, it is known that they are moving towards introducing it. Furthermore, 33% of the respondents who said that they have introduced statistical monitoring state that the share is small. One of the reasons why it is important to introduce such monitoring is "because of the input for making plans for the development of reception infrastructure". The next question followed up on the first one with the intention of finding out whether a drop in arrivals of the mentioned segment was noticed during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the respondents answered both YES and NO. Furthermore, through the in-depth interview, it was found out which assistive technology, i.e. aids is represented within the National Park to facilitate access to tourist attractions for visitors with disabilities. An overview of the aids can be seen in Table 2.

DISABILITY AIDS	N	%
Sanitary facilities	4	67
Wheelchair ramp	2	33
Custom websites	2	33
Tactile exhibits	1	17
Tactile lines	1	17
Tactile map	1	17
Elevator	1	17
Information in Braille	1	17
Interpretation boards	1	17
No aids available	1	17

*Table 2: Disability aids represented in NP
 (Source: authors)*

As can be seen from Table 2, the presence of sanitary facilities for people with disabilities is the most common disability aid, while other aids are represented to a lesser extent. The following question was aimed at finding out more about the organization of websites, i.e., in what way are the websites adapted to the mentioned segment. It can be seen that two respondents (33%) have an edited website, where one of the respondents explained that on the page it is possible to "change the contrast/color of the background and text, increase the letters to the required level and reduce the resolution in order to increase the size of the displayed content". Another respondent stated that the website was adapted for blind and partially sighted people. The respondents expressed their opinion equally on the issue of organizing special tours for the mentioned segment, while the respondents who declared that they have special tours

state that this is possible with prior notice only. Others who stated that they do not have organized tours, state that this is due to the inaccessible terrain. The next question inquired into the education of employees in the segment and the way in which education is carried out. It can be seen from Graph 2 that 67% of the respondents state that there is no education for employees. The other 33% state that education takes place as part of regular education and through attending sign language courses that were realized in cooperation with the Association of Tourist Guides.



*Graph 2: Analysis of the education of employees in the NP on the way to approach the segment
(Source: authors)*

All respondents agreed that there is room for improvement in their services because they are currently not fully adapted to the segment, while not a single respondent answered respondent could envisage room for such services in the future. The benefits of adapting the content to the segment that the interviewees highlighted were: "equality for all groups", "personal satisfaction of tourists", "education", "creation of a new tourism product", "modern and accessible destination" and "contribution to the community".

5. CONCLUSION

The conducted research shows that accessible tourism in the national parks has not yet been established and is only in the process of adapting its contents to people with disabilities. Given that there is almost no statistical monitoring of the mentioned segment in NP, it is difficult to imagine the actual number of people who would require certain assistive technology for an easier interpretation of tourism content. According to the description of the aids represented, it is evident that there is still plenty of room for improving the interpretation of tourism content for this segment, which the respondents are aware of. Given that the population with disabilities is informed predominantly (83%) using web sources, it is disappointing that a small number of respondents have edited websites. This results in poor information of the segment and at the same time in them not deciding to visit the national park. When a population with disabilities decides to travel, it should primarily send a request for organizing a tourist tour, while individual NPs do not even have the option of customizing a tour for that segment. The problem continues in the form of staff education, where it is evident that the staff is almost not at all educated to access the segment. Although the respondents are aware of the fact that there must be progress, none of the respondents indicated where room for such improvement could be found. From previous knowledge and this research, it can be concluded that today's tourism is not ready for this segment. Starting with the education of tourism workers, an adequate foundation could be created for the formation of better-quality tourist content and experiences that are accessible to everyone. Future research directed at studying the necessary education might be recommended.

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