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THE QUEST FOR AUTHENTICITY: TOURISM EXPERIENCE IN A PROTECTED AREA OF NATURE*AUTHOR***Simon Kerma***Department of Cultural Tourism, Faculty of Tourism Studies – Turistica, University of Primorska, Obala 11a, SI-6320 Portorož, Slovenia**e-mail: simon.kerma@fts.upr.si*

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*ABSTRACT****The quest for authenticity: tourism experience in a protected area of nature***

Authenticity in tourism has now been for many years a particular challenge for professionals in tourism studies. The concept itself is rather vague, but also useful in analysing the supply of selected tourist destinations. The focus of the paper is on the analysis of the elements of authenticity in the selected protected area of nature in Slovenia. As a case study, we chose the Škocjanski zatok Nature reserve, an urban wetland in the immediate vicinity of Koper. The restored and renatured area acts as green oasis and successfully defies various pressures on this sensitive environment already twenty years after its formal establishment. After conducting a field research and interviews with key stakeholders, we find out that the understanding of authenticity is important in order to preserve the biodiversity of the Škocjanski zatok Nature reserve and, consequently, its uniqueness (in the context of tourism development). This should also be the main guideline, and challenge at the same time, for the management in creating an adequate tourist offer.

KEY WORDS

authenticity in tourism, protected areas of nature, Škocjanski zatok Nature reserve, Slovenia

1. Introduction

Nowadays, modern tourists or travellers, in their spare time, not only want to rest and "escape" from work, but also are in search of an experience where they can show their identity and let themselves be what they are. At the same time, they want to experience other people and landscapes as they are. Therefore, it is important that tourist destinations are as different and specific as possible, so that they stand out at least for some reason. The problem can arise from excessive deliberate differentiation, which as a rule leads to distortion of the tourism offer, which is beautified, multiplied or even imitated. The so-called staged authenticity emerges, as pointed out by MacCannell (1976). Authentic offer and experience, however, represent an important part of the tourism product, not only for the destination but also for tourists (Sedmak, 2010).

1.1 Authenticity in tourism

The quest for authenticity can be explained as seeking the genuine manifestations of the cultural traditions and heritage of unique and/or pristine cultural groups and peoples. The same even more applies to natural environments. The idea behind authenticity is that objects, artefacts and human cultures exist in original, unspoiled and objectively truthful versions. An authentic culture would be one that has not been altered by interactions with the processes of globalisation or tourism and, as such, would prove very difficult to ever locate (Hannam and Knox, 2010).

The search for authentic experiences is in line with the trends of contemporary (sustainably oriented) tourism and is becoming an increasingly important motive for tourism trips, while offering tremendous potential for designing tourism product marketing strategies (Knudsen et al., 2016). In looking for authenticity, some tourists focus on the product in terms of its uniqueness and originality, its workmanship, its cultural and historical integrity, its aesthetics, and/or its functions and use. Interestingly, academic expertise is also widely used to confer authenticity. A sense of place can also be used to confer a sense of authenticity – because something is sold in, an authenticated place gives added authenticity (Shenhav-Keller, 1993, cit. in Hannam and Knox, 2010).

Wang (1999) systematically analyzes authenticity in the context of tourism. To this end, he theoretically defines the following conceptual approaches: objectivist, constructivist and postmodern. The author defines the objectivist approach as the perception of authenticity in the "museum" sense, overlooking its complex and multifaceted aspects (Wang, 1999). The constructivist approach relativizes the absolute and static perception of original authenticity. Cohen (1998) argues that an individual's perception of authenticity depends on his or her knowledge, experience, and situation.

The postmodern approach, however, argues that authenticity cannot be defined, since the boundary between the original and its copy is often very vaguely defined (Wang, 1999). Therefore, postmodern tourists also do not pay particular attention to authenticity (Sedmak, 2010). Yet, tourism does not even convey pure authenticity (Zhou et al., 2018).

However, Wang (1999) suggested that existential authenticity is an alternative source in tourism, regardless of whether the toured objects are authentic. This concept is further classified into two different dimensions: intra-personal and inter-personal. According to Wang (ibid.), this demonstrates that existential authenticity can explain a greater variety of tourist experiences, and hence helps enhance the explanatory power of the authenticity-seeking model in tourism.

1.2 Protected areas in Slovenia

The fact is that Republic of Slovenia attaches relatively high importance to environmental protection. This is also reflected in the website of the Ministry of the Environment and Spatial Planning

(<https://www.gov.si/en/policies/environment-and-spatial-planning/ohranjanje-narave/>):

“Slovenia has an exceptionally rich nature with a very high level of biodiversity, both in terms of ecosystems and in terms of the plant and animal species in them. We have the highest proportion of Natura 2000 sites in the European Union, while 60% of our territory is forested. In Slovenia, we protect natural wealth, preserve the natural balance and the diversity of living organisms, and protect rare, valuable and famous natural phenomena, not only for us who live here today but also for our descendants.”

Protected areas are one of nature protection measures. The Nature Conservation Act defines the following types of protected areas in Slovenia (ZON, 2004):

- Large-scale protected areas (national park, regional park, landscape/nature park),
- Small-scale protected areas (natural monument, strict nature reserve, nature reserve).

In Slovenia there are currently (status from June 2019): 1 national park, 3 regional parks, 46 landscape/nature parks, 1 strict nature reserve, 56 nature reserves and 1164 natural monuments. There are 270.184 ha of the officially protected areas in Slovenia, which is 13.33% of total area of the country (ARSO, 2019).

In our research, we analyzed the elements of authenticity in the selected nature reserve.

2. A case study: Škocjanski zatok Nature reserve

Škocjanski zatok Nature Reserve (ŠZNR) is the largest brackish wetland in Slovenia, covering 122.7 ha (Figure 1). With its surroundings areas is an ecosystem of unique habitats from wet meadows, shallows and mudflats, tidal areas, shores and a brackish marsh to reed beds and freshwater marsh, which provide high diversity of plant and animal species (<http://www.skocjanski-zatok.org/en/reserve/>).

The creation of the Škocjanski zatok lagoon is closely connected with the urban and spatial development of Koper and its surroundings. In the 1950s, Koper began to expand into the areas of the Škocjan bay and Samedela bonifika. The fate of the Škocjan bay was sealed by a project adopted in 1957, which proposed that the bay between Koper and the Rižana outlet is closed off in order to enable the draining of the 230-hectare sea shallows on the doorstep of Koper. In the direction towards Ankaran, a 900-metre-long embankment was constructed, and later used as the location of the new Port of Koper. As Koper began to lose its pristine character of an island town, the Škocjan bay was steadily closing in, turning slowly into a lagoon (zatok). The lagoon of today's Škocjanski zatok remains the very last witness, proving that Koper originally used to be an island (<http://www.skocjanski-zatok.org/en/reserve/>).

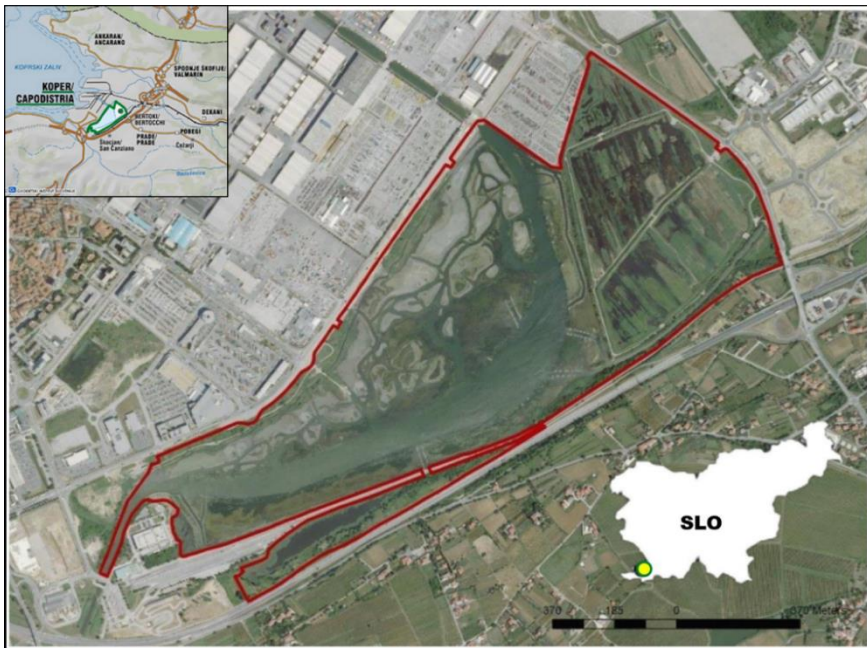


Figure 1: Protected area of Škocjanski zatok Nature reserve and its location in Slovenia, nearby town of Koper. (Source: DOPPS, 2015).

Due to anthropogenic activities in the 1970s and 1980s, the Škocjanski zatok shrank from 230 to 80 hectares. The area suffered almost a complete destruction of more than a half of its territory and severe degradation of the remaining habitats, Škocjanski zatok was on the edge of survival in 1993. The mobilisation of the civil initiative in the 1990s, inspired from the ornithologists and supported by 7000 local inhabitants who signed the petition, resulted in the establishment of the protected area. The former wetland had consequently restored and renatured, and slightly expanded to modern Škocjanski zatok Nature reserve. In 2006 and 2007 the restoration of the lagoon takes place and after many years' life returned to Škocjan lagoon which is now thrilling with rich marine and brackish flora and fauna. The reserve is commonly known as "the green heart of the town of Koper" (DOPPS, 2014).

This wetland is especially important in terms of biodiversity since it hosts a rich fauna and flora and many endangered and vulnerable animal and plant species. To this end it was designated as a Slovenian nature reserve, open to the public and ecologically important area and a Natura 2000 site upon Bird's and Habitat Directives. Management of the NRŠZ is in the hands of the non-governmental organisation DOPPS-Bird Life Slovenia (the Bird Watching and Study Association of Slovenia). The Škocjanski zatok is a good example of cooperation between the representatives of civil society and the members of DOPSS who have prevented Škocjanski zatok from completely drying out and being covered with buildings. After 1993 the area was protected and in 1998 it was permanently protected. Since 1999, the ŠZNR has been carefully managed by DOPSS (<https://www.naravniparkislovenije.si/en/nature-parks/skocjanski-zatok-nature-reserve>).

The restored nature reserve nowadays contributes to better quality of life of the local population and has become a new destination of quickly developing nature-based tourism (attracting responsible visitors and helping to extend the region's tourist season). Different target groups have the possibility to fulfil their tasks, such as elementary and secondary school programs and universities.

2.1 Methodology

There is no doubt that ŠZNR is a unique, though anthropogenic renatured area. This preliminary research identifies the elements of authenticity and its importance for the protected area. We were interested in how these elements have been (or could be) integrated in the design of an authentic offer for the visitors. The ŠZNR authentication elements were analysed in three steps. We first visited the area in question, where we analysed the various elements of authenticity through fieldwork and participatory observation, and verified how the management considered the factors of sustainable development in this biodiversity rich and sensitive environment.

We continued our qualitative research by conducting four semi-structured interviews, taking place in spring 2018. We interviewed the following stakeholders:

- The representative of the ŠZNR, biologist and education coordinator (live conversation),
- The representative of the Slovenian Ministry of the Environment and Spatial Planning – sector of the area of the Adriatic rivers and the sea (via e-mail),
- A member of the municipality council and representative of the local community Bertoki (live conversation), and
- A Deputy Head of the Koper Tourism Organisation (via e-mail).

We were able to compare the information obtained from the interviews. Following the interpretation, we made some findings and suggestions for further research.

3. Results and discussion

In addition to the aforementioned stakeholders, we wanted to include representatives of various travel agencies in the survey, but found a great lack of interest in participating in this research. We contacted four local travel agencies, but none was willing to cooperate. Taking into account all the stakeholders in the field of tourism, they responded only at the Koper Tourist Information Center, and gave their view on the problem of including the ŠZNR in the tourist offer of the municipality and region.

Questions or the main guidelines from the interview, and the parallel responses of the respondents are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Comparison of the interviews’ results with selected stakeholders.

Stakeholders Questions / Guidelines	<i>Biologist, education coordinator in ŠZNR</i>	Representative of the Slovenian Ministry of the Environment and Spatial Planning	<i>Member of the municipality council and representative of local community Bertoki</i>	<i>Deputy head of the Koper Tourism Organisation</i>
The importance of the authenticity aspect of the ŠZNR ...	The coexistence of man with nature; limiting visits to large groups; education and training for the correct	Of utmost importance; facilitating the exploration of fauna and flora in natural habitat. Proper water management.	Authenticity from the point of view of a "destroyed" environment returned to its original state. The importance of authenticity	Important for nature (flora and fauna); the historic formation of the reserve.

	interpretation of the flow.		from the perspective of tourists, due to urbanization and interference with the natural environment.	
Can we think about ŠZNR as tourist product?	Great potential and sense of integration of the reserve into a wider tourist offer (e.g. participation in fairs and other events).	Limited in scope, only as nature tourism, not mass tourism.	Tourism is not considered to be of primary importance. Considering the limitations of nature and nature reserve with carrying capacity of space, number of visitors, management...	An important part of the tourist offer, mainly because of the location of the reserve.
Is the ŠZNR properly integrated in the tourist offer?	Collaboration of the center with the surroundings; personalized interpretation of guides; Complementing cooperation with local providers: farms, wineries, olive oil producers.	ŠZNR is reasonably integrated into the tourist offer. In the future, it needs to lay down some criteria that would serve as a basis for the harmless exploitation of this potential.	In terms of ecology, this is an example of the restoration and renaturation of the green areas. From the point of view of economy, it strikes a balance between the uses of space (economic activities, sustainable development).	ŠZNR is successfully integrated into the tourist offer of Koper. Possible opportunity to promote Koper, Slovenian Istria and Slovenia.
Objective (cold) authenticity	Integration of projects into the environment, adherence to the pillars of sustainable development, minimal interference with nature. The center coincides with the environment.	Appropriate research center architecture. Long-standing changes to the area indicate environmental change and inauthenticity.	Separation and integration of different environmental structures (industrial zone and, on the other hand, the memories of the population before urbanization and the separation of Bertoki village from the sea).	Natural materials, minimal environmental impact, center architecture (reeds).
Subjective (warm) authenticity	Tidiness of the reserve and the consequent increase in visit -	Creating to educate and raise awareness of the local area and the	A local community that feels the integrity of the	Successful coexistence of nature and man. You can learn

	families and the elderly. Connecting the local population.	wider surrounding area.	environment with natural elements as a balance between natural and anthropogenic.	about the history of the area and its diversity (binoculars, observatories).
Identified potentials for better valorisation of authenticity	Better communication with travel agencies - lectures for travel guides, informants and workers at travel agencies.	Additional education and fieldwork, contact with nature. Limited marketing mode. Expanding of the marketing by assessing the potential impact of new activities.	Improving the ecological and aesthetic state of the environment. Easier accessibility.	Integration into tourism products, networking with other providers in the destination, in accordance with the mission of the ŠZNR.
Which visitors / tourists recognize authenticity as an important element of heritage?	Representatives of other protected areas, school groups, professionals, students in the field of biology and environmental protection.	Local population, to a lesser extent also tourists.	For professionals, studying the diversity of natural systems and processes is an important area, an example of good practice.	Visitors interested in nature and cultural heritage, experts (ornithologists, biologists), study and school field trips, older and younger, and those who are more educated.

Source: The interviews with the selected stakeholders, spring 2018.

All stakeholders emphasize the authenticity aspect of ŠZNR as important, notably through a key element of the natural environment that needs to be nurtured and managed. Managers and providers express the great potential of integration of ŠZNR in the further development of tourist offer. The representatives of the public administration and the local community consider that the scope for tourism is limited due to the pursuit of sustainable development. All four stakeholders are of the opinion that ŠZNR is properly integrated into the wider tourist offer, while emphasizing the need to focus attention on certain criteria that would protect this renatured area. The representative of the tourist board also sees an opportunity to promote the town of Koper through ŠZNR.

Representatives of ŠZNR, the public sector and local tourism are of the opinion that the architecture of the centre in the nature reserve coincides with the environment in which it is located. The public sector representative emphasizes the integration of different environmental (semi-urban) and industrial structures and, on the other hand, the conservation of the natural area.

The warm authenticity of the interviewees is noticed in the awareness of the local population, which is reflected in the increase of the visit and the interest in self-education in relation to this environment. The representative of local tourism community emphasizes the successful coexistence of man and nature, as well as learning about the diversity of the area.

The ŠZNR representative sees the potential for better valorisation in improving communication and in cooperation with travel agencies, education of tour guides and tourism professionals. Representatives of the local community, the public sector and the municipality tourism board are of the same opinion.

Representatives of the local community and ŠZNR see potential tourists or visitors especially in employees from other protected areas and experts in the field of biology and environmental protection. A public sector representative adds the importance of authentication by locals, and to a lesser extent by tourists, but only as long as they do not endanger the area with mass visitation. A representative of the tourism industry also points out that the importance of authenticity can be attributed to segments of the older and more educated population.



*Figure 2: Panoramic view over the freshwater part of the ŠZNR.
Photo: Kerma, 2016.*

4. Conclusion

Through a more detailed analysis of the interviews, we find that all stakeholders included in the analysis, indicate the importance of authenticity as an extremely significant factor. Stakeholders emphasize the factor of authenticity from different perspectives, but they fundamentally point out the importance of authenticity in order to preserve the biodiversity of the Škocjanski zatok Nature reserve and, consequently, its uniqueness.

The potential of the marketing aspect of the ŠZNR (for tourism) is most emphasized by a representative of the Koper tourist organization. Other stakeholders are certainly aware of this aspect of the area under study, but tourism is still a secondary activity of the nature reserve for them, and solely for the benefit of nature conservation.

The key task of tourism introduced into the Škocjanski zatok Nature Reserve can be recognized in spreading awareness about the importance of nature conservation. Activities in this area, which would attract an adequate number of visitors and at the same time provide financial security for the management of the ŠZNR, would consequently ensure a better quality of life in the local community and indirectly raise awareness of the importance of protecting the natural and cultural heritage.

The carefully realized action plan, taking into account the views of all stakeholders, could become an example for planning such activities in other protected areas across Slovenia, and above all, the favorable impacts of such activities most certainly reflect in the local/regional environment, both on the coast and in the hinterland. With the right interpretation, the authenticity of the Škocjanski zatok can evoke a mixture of pleasant emotions in the visitor. On the one hand it acts as a walk into the past, on the other hand it gives insight into the future, while reminding her or him of the current state and the role of the individual and society in maintaining a quality environment.

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