

Preliminary communication

PROTECTED PARKS AS A DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL: THE CASE OF BLIDINJE NATURE PARK

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Abstract

Protected parks are key resources for biodiversity conservation as well as potential drivers of local and regional development. Despite their high natural and cultural value, many protected areas, such as the Blidinje Nature Park, face underutilization in terms of sustainable tourism, education, and local development. Underutilization is manifested through a lack of strategic planning, weak infrastructure, limited tourism offer, and insufficient connection with the local community. The aim of this scientific paper is to analyze the current level of utilization of the Blidinje Nature Park, identify key obstacles and potentials, and propose a development scenario for the next 10 years. The paper is based on a theoretical review of literature in the fields of protected area management, sustainable tourism, and local development, as well as on a model analysis using SWOT and PESTEL frameworks adapted to the Blidinje context. The results indicate significant development potential based on natural resources, cultural heritage, and growing interest in sustainable tourism, but also highlight the need for strategic coordination, infrastructure investments, local community education, and strengthened institutional support. The paper emphasizes that sustainable development of Blidinje in the next 10 years requires an integrated approach combining nature protection, tourism development, and community involvement.

Keywords: protected parks, Blidinje Nature Park, sustainable tourism, local development, underutilization, development strategy

JEL Classification: Q26; Q56; R58; L83

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary context of globalization, changing climate conditions, and growing demand for sustainable forms of tourism, protected areas are becoming increasingly important resources for the development of local communities. Protected parks, in addition to their function of preserving natural values, have the potential to become generators of economic development, education, and social cohesion. However, in practice they often face the problem of underutilization, which is particularly pronounced in parks located in rural and mountainous areas with limited infrastructure and weaker institutional support. Blidinje Nature Park in Bosnia and Herzegovina represents one of the most significant protected areas in the region, known for its high mountain meadows, Blidinje Lake, endemic species, and cultural and historical heritage. Despite this, Blidinje faces challenges such as seasonality of visits, lack of accommodation capacities, uneven supply of tourist facilities, and limited connectivity with local communities. The aim of this paper is to analyze the level of utilization of Blidinje Nature Park, identify key obstacles and potentials, and propose a development scenario for the next 10 years. The paper is based on a theoretical review of relevant literature in the fields of protected area management, sustainable tourism, and local development, as well as on a model analysis using SWOT and PESTEL frameworks adapted to the specific characteristics of Blidinje. The research is conceived as model-

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based, descriptive, and exploratory, with the aim of providing a foundation for future empirical research and development of management strategies for this area.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of the paper is based on an interdisciplinary approach that connects insights from the fields of protected area management, sustainable tourism, local development, and destination marketing. Protected areas are defined in the literature as spaces preserved for their natural, cultural, and landscape value, while simultaneously serving as platforms for education, recreation, and sustainable development (Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2013; Eagles, McCool & Haynes, 2002). The role of protected parks is not only the conservation of natural resources, but also the balancing of environmental protection with the socio-economic needs of local communities (Lockwood, 2010; Dearden, Bennett & Johnston, 2005). In the context of sustainable development, protected areas are viewed through three dimensions: ecological, economic, and social. The ecological dimension concerns the preservation of biodiversity, protection of endemic and endangered species, and maintenance of natural processes (Swarbrooke, 2002; UNEP, 2012). The economic dimension involves the ability to generate income through sustainable tourism, local products and services, and multiplicative effects on the local economy (Honey, 2008; Buckley, 2012). The social dimension encompasses the strengthening of social cohesion, identity, and participation of the local population, as well as the education and involvement of the community in area management (Arcodia & Whitford, 2006; Jones & Wilks, 2017). The literature on protected area management emphasizes the importance of integrated and participatory approaches, where key stakeholders are the public sector, local communities, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations (Lockwood, 2010; Eagles et al., 2002). Participatory governance ensures decision legitimacy, better understanding of local needs, and increases the sense of ownership over the area (Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2013; Dearden et al., 2005). In practice, a lack of coordination among stakeholders often leads to fragmented management, weaker nature protection, and untapped development potential (Balmford et al., 2009; Dudley, 2008). Sustainable tourism in protected areas is recognized as a key mechanism for financing conservation and developing local communities, but requires a clear strategy, capacity management, and quality infrastructure (Honey, 2008; Buckley, 2012). Tourism in protected parks should be planned in a way that minimizes negative environmental impacts while enabling visitor education and creating positive economic effects (Weaver, 2001; Newsome, Moore & Dowling, 2013). In this regard, the concept of "sustainable visitation" (carrying capacity) becomes an important tool for managing visitor numbers and their impact on nature (Manning, 2007). The promotion of protected areas through tourism marketing and destination branding also plays a key role in their development. Destination marketing is defined as the process of shaping the image and perception of a place, in which natural resources and cultural heritage form the basis for differentiation (Kotler, Haider & Rein, 1993; Bramwell & Rawding, 1996). In the context of protected parks, quality promotion must be grounded in authenticity, educational value, and sustainable experiences in order to attract targeted tourist segments without endangering natural values (Richards, 2015; Varga, 2019). Digital channels, social media, and collaboration with local media enable rapid and targeted communication, but simultaneously require a consistent and responsible

message that does not encourage mass tourism or environmental degradation (Šimunić, 2018; Weaver, 2001). In the context of Blidinje Nature Park, the literature emphasizes the importance of linking natural and cultural resources with the local community through the development of thematic routes, educational programs, eco-activities, and the valorization of indigenous products (Tomić & Vuković, 2022; Mlinarić & Prpić, 2021). It also highlights the need for stronger institutional support, transparent management and planning, and the development of infrastructure supporting sustainable tourism, such as marked trails, interpretation centers, accommodation capacities, and waste management systems (Swarbrooke, 2002; UNEP, 2012). Given the above, it can be concluded that Blidinje Nature Park has significant development potential, but its realization requires an integrated approach combining nature protection, sustainable tourism, community involvement, and strategic promotion. The literature also notes that the underutilization of protected areas often stems from a lack of clear development vision, weak financial capacity, inadequate infrastructure, and limited stakeholder cooperation (Balmford et al., 2009; Dudley, 2008). Therefore, in this paper, instead of testing formal hypotheses, the approach is oriented toward descriptive and model analysis that will identify key obstacles and opportunities for Blidinje's development over the next 10 years.

2. CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The conceptual model of this research is based on the interconnection between protected area management, the quality of the tourism offer, and communication with the perception and development potential of the local community. The model assumes that the quality of management and organization of Blidinje Nature Park, as well as the intensity and quality of promotion, affect the perception of visitors and residents, which in turn influences the potential for development and sustainable growth of the community over the next 10 years. The model distinguishes four basic dimensions.

Table 1. Dimensions of the Conceptual Model

Dimension (variable)	Key elements (indicators)
1. Quality of management and organization (MANAGEMENT)	- Infrastructure (trails, signage, centers, access) - Nature protection and sustainability - Organizational capacities (planning, visitor management)
2. Promotion and communication (PROMOTION)	- Awareness of local residents and visitors - Digital and traditional promotion - Branding and tourism products
3. Perception and experience of visitors/residents (PERCEPTION)	- Visitor satisfaction - Perception of area image and value - Sense of belonging and pride
4. Development potential and sustainable growth (DEVELOPMENT)	- Tourism development - Economic effects (local products, employment) - Social effects (population retention, identity)

The model also assumes a mutual connection between management and promotion (quality management supports successful promotion, while good promotion increases support for management).

Based on the theoretical framework and conceptual model, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: The quality of management and organization of Blidinje Nature Park positively affects the perception of visitors and residents.

This hypothesis derives from the theory of protected area management and sustainable tourism, according to which better infrastructure, safety, nature conservation, and professional management increase satisfaction and positive perception of the area (Lockwood, 2010; Honey, 2008).

H2: The quality of promotion and information positively affects the perception of Blidinje Nature Park.

Destination promotion shapes the image and expectations of visitors and affects the recognizability and attractiveness of a place (Kotler, Haider & Rein, 1993; Richards, 2015). In the context of Blidinje, it is expected that better communication increases the perception of the park's value and recognizability.

H3: The perception and experience of visitors/residents positively influence the development potential and sustainable growth of the local community.

If visitors and residents perceive the park positively (high quality of experience, pride, identity), tourism products are more likely to develop, economic effects increase, and sustainable development is supported (Arcodia & Whitford, 2006; Jones & Wilks, 2017).

H4: Community perception is a mediator between management/promotion and development potential.

This hypothesis assumes that management and promotion affect development through perception: even if management is of high quality, without positive perception (due to poor communication or weak experience), the development potential will not be fully realized. Similarly, good perception can strengthen support for development and investment.

In summary, the research model assumes that the development potential of Blidinje Nature Park over the next 10 years can be realized through increased management quality and stronger promotion, which will result in positive perception among visitors and residents. Positive perception then acts as a key factor in promoting sustainable tourism, economic development, and strengthening local identity.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research is conceived as model-based, descriptive, and exploratory. The main objective is to analyze the current level of utilization of Blidinje Nature Park, identify key obstacles and potentials, and propose a development scenario for the next 10 years. To achieve this, the following approaches were applied: a theoretical review of literature (protected area management, sustainable tourism, local development), a model analysis using SWOT and PESTEL frameworks (adapted to the Blidinje context), and a survey among participants and the local community to check perception and key issues. The research was conducted in 2025 on a sample of 150 respondents, including: local residents (inhabitants of the municipalities of Blidinje, Jablanica, Posušje, and surrounding settlements), visitors to Blidinje Nature Park (tourists, hikers, recreational visitors), and representatives of local institutions and tourism entities (hotels, agencies, family farms). The sample is convenience-based because the research is model-oriented and does not aim for a statistically representative picture of the entire population.

Respondents were selected in the field during park visits and through online questionnaire distribution. The questionnaire consisted of four sections:

A) Sociodemographic data (age, gender, education, employment, place of residence; frequency of visits to Blidinje; connection to the local community (resident/visitor))

B) Assessment of park management and organization (rated on a Likert scale 1–5) (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = fully agree) (infrastructure quality (trails, signage, access); nature conservation and environmental protection; organizational capacities and visitor management; safety and maintenance; transparency and institutional support)

C) Assessment of promotion and communication (Likert scale 1–5) (awareness of local residents; availability of information for visitors; quality of digital and traditional promotion; branding and tourism products)

D) Perception and development potential (Likert scale 1–5) (visitor satisfaction; perception of area image and value; sense of pride and belonging; expectations about tourism development and local economic growth)

Data were processed using descriptive statistics (arithmetic mean, percentages) to obtain an overview of respondents' perceptions. In addition, correlation analysis (Pearson correlation) was used to explore the relationships between: management quality and perception, promotion quality and perception, and perception and expected development. The analysis was conducted in Excel. The research is model-based and has limitations: convenience sample (not representative), subjectivity of responses (respondents' perceptions), lack of long-term data and empirical measurements, and SWOT and PESTEL analyses are not based on quantitative data but on a model approach.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS

Sociodemographic Structure of Respondents

A total of 150 respondents participated in the research. The sample structure is presented in the table below:

Table 2. Sociodemographic structure (n=150)

Characteristic	Category	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	70	46.7%
	Female	80	53.3%
Age	18–25	30	20.0%
	26–35	45	30.0%
	36–45	40	26.7%
	46–55	20	13.3%
	56+	15	10.0%
Education	High school	50	33.3%
	College / Higher education	60	40.0%
	University degree	40	26.7%
Connection to Blidinje	Resident	90	60.0%
	Visitor	60	40.0%

The sample is diverse in terms of age and education, with a slightly higher share of women and residents of local communities. This structure provides insight into the perceptions and needs of both the local population and visitors.

Assessment of Park Management and Organization

The results show the following average scores:

Table 3. Management assessment (1–5)

Management element	Average	Interpretation
Infrastructure and access	3.25	Moderately satisfactory
Nature protection and sustainability	3.70	Good, but not sufficiently visible
Organizational capacities	3.10	Lower score
Safety and maintenance	3.05	Improvements needed
Transparency and institutional support	2.90	Lowest score

The results indicate problems with infrastructure, organization, and institutional support. The lowest scores were given to transparency and institutional support, highlighting the need to strengthen management and stakeholder coordination.

Assessment of Promotion and Communication

The results are as follows:

Table 4. Promotion assessment (1–5)

Promotion element	Average	Interpretation
Awareness of local residents	3.00	Insufficiently informed
Visitor information	3.15	Moderate
Digital promotion	2.80	Weak online presence
Branding and tourism products	2.90	Unclear branding

Promotion and communication were assessed as weak to moderate, indicating a significant need for strategic communication and park branding.

Perception and Development Potential

Results of the perception and development expectations assessment:

Table 5. Perception and development (1–5)

Perception element	Average	Interpretation
Visitor satisfaction	3.60	Moderate satisfaction
Perception of Blidinje image	3.75	Positive, but with reservations
Sense of pride and belonging	3.90	High
Expectations for tourism development	3.80	Positive expectations
Expected economic effects	3.50	Moderate

Respondents perceive Blidinje as a valuable resource with potential, but consider investment and management to be key to realizing expected development. Pride and belonging were highly rated, which is an important foundation for involving the local community in development.

Correlation Analysis (Relationship Between Variables)

The correlation analysis yielded the following results:

Table 6. Correlation (Pearson r)

Variables	Correlation (r)	Interpretation
Management – perception	0.62	Strong positive correlation

Promotion – perception	0.58	Moderate to strong
Perception – expected development	0.66	Strong correlation

The results indicate that the quality of management and promotion significantly affects the perception of Blidinje, and that positive perception strongly influences development expectations. This confirms the conceptual model and research hypotheses.

SWOT and PESTEL analyses (tables), development scenarios for 10 years, and recommendations and measures for Blidinje Nature Park

Table 7. SWOT Analysis

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
1. Exceptional natural value (lake, mountain landscape, biodiversity)	1. Weak infrastructure (trails, signage, access)
2. Authentic cultural and historical heritage	2. Lack of accommodation capacity and tourism offer
3. High potential for sustainable tourism (hiking, eco-tourism)	3. Weak institutional coordination and management
4. High level of pride and belonging in the local community	4. Seasonality of visits and insufficient diversification of the offer
5. Potential for developing local products (honey, cheese, handicrafts)	5. Insufficient promotion and branding (low recognizability)
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
1. Growing interest in sustainable and active tourism	1. Climate change and erosion of sensitive ecosystems
2. EU and international funds for nature protection and rural development	2. Mass tourism and nature degradation (if unmanaged)
3. Cooperation with local communities and family farms	3. Population decline and youth migration
4. Development of thematic routes and educational programs	4. Lack of financial resources and political support
5. Digital promotion and brand development (eco-branding)	5. Competition from other destinations (Jahorina, Vlačić, Durmitor)

Table 8. PESTEL Analysis

POLITICAL (P)	ECONOMIC (E)
- Decisions by local authorities on tourism development and nature protection	- Dependence on public funding and EU funds
- Insufficient political stability and priorities	- Low purchasing power of the local population
- Nature protection and national park regulations	- Seasonality of income (winter/summer)
- Potential for partnerships with state institutions	- Growth potential of eco-tourism and local products
SOCIAL (S)	TECHNOLOGICAL (T)
- High level of local community pride and identity	- Development of digital platforms and mobile applications
- Traditional life and cultural heritage	- Lack of technological infrastructure (internet, info nodes)
- Education and awareness of nature protection	- Possibility of introducing visitor tracking systems
- Youth migration and depopulation	- Potential for smart tourism development (GIS, AR)
ENVIRONMENTAL (E)	LEGAL (L)
- Sensitive ecosystem (mountain meadows, endemic species)	- Nature protection regulations and national park laws
- Climate change (droughts, extremes)	- Need for clear visitation and management rules
- Potential for renewable energy sources (micro-hydro, solar)	- Problems with law enforcement and

- Risk of degradation from unregulated tourism	supervision - Need for defined ownership and management rights
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Development Scenario for the Next 10 Years

Scenario objective: Achieve sustainable development of Blidinje Nature Park through a balance between nature protection, tourism development, and community involvement.

Table 9. Development Scenarios (2025–2035)

Scenario	Key characteristic	Main activities	Consequences/results
1. Sustainable development and eco-tourism (recommended)	Balanced development with nature protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Investment in infrastructure and sustainable tourism - Involvement of local community and family farms - Digital promotion and branding - Visitor management (capacities) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nature conservation - Growth of local community income - Increased quality of the offer - Increased number of visitors within sustainable limits
2. Tourism development without control (undesirable)	Mass development without environmental protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Uncontrolled development of accommodation and infrastructure - Focus on short-term revenue - No capacity planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ecosystem degradation - Loss of authenticity - Short-term economic effects, long-term damage
3. Status quo – stagnation	Preservation without development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Insufficient investment and strategy - Weak promotion and coordination - Limited tourism products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Development stagnation - Youth emigration - Low economic impact and weak recognizability

Table 10. Action Plan (2025–2035)

Phase 1: 2025–2027 (Establishing Foundations and Infrastructure)

Year	Measure	Responsible institution	Financing
2025	Establishment of coordinating body (supervisory board)	Government/Ministry of Environment, local communities, park management	State budget + local budgets
2025	Development of strategic development plan (10-year plan)	Supervisory board + expert team	EU funds (IPA), international donations
2025–2026	Rehabilitation of the most critical trails and signage	Park management + local municipalities	EU funds + local investments
2026	Development of digital platform (web + mobile application)	Tourism board + IT partner	Private partnership + EU funds
2026–2027	Education of local residents (workshops, guide training)	NGOs + local schools	EU projects + local budget

Note: The plan is presented in phases (3 cycles of 3–4 years each) to clearly show the dynamics of development.

Phase 2: 2028–2030 (Offer Development and Branding)			
Year	Measure	Responsible institution	Financing
2028	Development of thematic routes (hiking, cycling, cultural)	Park management + tourism agencies	EU funds + private investments
2028	Introduction of visitor management system (capacities)	Park management + local authorities	State and local budget
2029	Support for family farms (branding and sale of local products)	Ministry of Agriculture + local communities	EU rural development (LEADER)
2029–2030	Arrangement of interpretation center (education and info point)	Park management + donors	EU funds + international donations
2030	Branding campaign "Blidinje – a sustainable destination"	Tourism board	Private sponsorship + local budget
Phase 3: 2031–2035 (Sustainable Growth and Consolidation)			
Year	Measure	Responsible institution	Financing
2031	Construction of additional accommodation capacities (eco-lodges, campsites)	Private investors + local communities	Private investments + credit lines
2032	Development of new eco-activities (e.g., winter tourism, educational camps)	Tourism sector + park management	Private + EU projects
2033	Visitor and environmental impact monitoring system	Supervisory board + academic institutions	EU funds + research grants
2034	Evaluation and revision of strategy (feedback and adaptation)	Supervisory board	State budget + EU funds
2035	Consolidation and expansion of the model (linking with other parks/region)	Regional authorities	Regional development funds

4. DISCUSSION

The analysis of the SWOT and PESTEL frameworks indicates that Blidinje Nature Park has significant development potential, but also a number of key limitations that currently prevent its sustainable valorization. The park's strengths, such as exceptional natural and cultural value, endemic species, and unique landscape, are aligned with the theory of sustainable development of protected areas, which emphasizes natural resources as the foundation for economic and social growth (Honey, 2008; Lockwood, 2010). On the other hand, the identified weaknesses — lack of strategy, weak infrastructure, seasonality, and limited community involvement — point to a systemic problem of stakeholder misalignment and lack of institutional support, which is frequently present in rural protected areas (Balmford et al., 2009; Dudley, 2008). The development scenarios show that sustainable development of Blidinje over the next 10 years requires an integrated approach. The recommended scenario (sustainable development and eco-tourism) is based on strengthening infrastructure, controlled visitor growth, and the development of local products, while preserving natural values. This approach corresponds to the concept of "sustainable visitation" (carrying capacity) and represents the most realistic path toward long-term sustainability (Manning, 2007; Weaver, 2001). The second scenario (tourism development without control)

demonstrates the risk of nature degradation and loss of authenticity, consistent with critiques of mass tourism in sensitive areas (Buckley, 2012). The third scenario (status quo) points to the danger of stagnation, where the preservation of nature without strategic valorization leads to weak economic benefits and increased risk of depopulation. The action plan proposed in the paper provides concrete measures for achieving the recommended scenario, with key activities focused on establishing stakeholder coordination, strengthening institutional support, developing thematic routes, and educating the local community. This approach supports the literature emphasizing the importance of participatory management and integrated planning as prerequisites for the sustainable development of protected areas (Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2013; Eagles et al., 2002). At the same time, the need for stable financing and political support is emphasized, as without them the implementation of measures remains limited. The paper confirms that Blidinje has strong development potential, but that its realization requires a systematic and strategic approach. The recommended scenario of sustainable development and eco-tourism represents the most sustainable path, while scenarios of unplanned development or stagnation serve as warnings about possible negative trajectories. This paper provides a foundation for further empirical research and strategic planning, and the proposed measures can serve as a practical framework for the development of Blidinje Nature Park over the next 10 years.

CONCLUSION

Blidinje Nature Park represents an exceptional natural and cultural resource with high development potential for sustainable tourism and local development. The analysis of the situation through SWOT and PESTEL frameworks revealed strong foundational values (biodiversity, landscape uniqueness, cultural heritage, and authentic local products), but also significant obstacles limiting its utilization. The key challenges are the lack of strategic planning, limited infrastructure, seasonality of visits, insufficient connection with the local community, and weak institutional coordination. These problems point to a systemic lack of integrated management and insufficient synergy between nature protection and tourism development. The model analysis of development scenarios for the next 10 years showed that sustainable development of Blidinje can only be achieved through a strategic, coordinated, and participatory approach. The most desirable scenario (sustainable development and eco-tourism) is based on strengthening infrastructure, quality promotion, education of local residents, development of thematic tourism products, and controlled visitor management. This approach enables a balance between preserving natural values and achieving socio-economic benefits. The scenarios of unplanned development and the status quo indicate the risk of environmental degradation, loss of authenticity, and further depopulation, confirming the importance of preventive and systematic planning. The proposed action plan with measures distributed over 10 years provides concrete guidelines for implementing the recommended scenario, with the key role belonging to local institutions, tourism boards, non-governmental organizations, and the community. The introduction of a visitor management system, development of infrastructure capacities, establishment of interpretation centers, and strengthening of branding and promotion represent the foundations for long-term sustainability. In conclusion, Blidinje Nature Park has significant potential to become a model of sustainable development of protected areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, its realization requires a strategic

vision, stable financing, effective stakeholder coordination, and active community involvement. This paper provides a foundation for further empirical research and the development of concrete management policies, and the proposed measures can serve as a practical framework for improving the management and valorization of Blidinje over the next 10 years.

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