

Peri-Urban National Parks as Green Spaces for Recreation: A Case Study of Nature Park Shumen Plateau

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ABSTRACT

Little is known regarding the significance for local people of peri-urban national parks as recreational areas. The main goal of the present article is to evaluate the social impact and importance of peri-urban parks for visitors as a green space for outdoor recreation. For this investigation on-site, face-to-face interviews were conducted. The main reason for visiting NP are: “to be near to nature” (64.71%), “to practice sport” (58.09%) and “relaxing” (43.38%). Spending time in NP is considered by most interviewed people to be of crucial importance both for physical (96.32%) and for mental (83.82%) health. It should be noted that high frequency of park visits was reported only by young, employed and well-educated people. Data collected shows that park management plan should encourage low-income groups (unemployed and elderly) to use outdoor recreation as a part of preventive healthcare. The access for older adults, people with disabilities and children to the park should be facilitated. Services like access to clean water, toilets and seating places must be improved. The data from the authors’ survey could be useful for the peri-urban national parks development as green spaces for promoting health among all demographic groups of local inhabitants.

KEYWORDS

Human Health, Outdoor Recreation, Peri-Urban National Park, Questionnaire Survey, Urban Areas

INTRODUCTION

In modern industrialized world, notably in countries of the European Union, the majority of population lives in urban areas (Kabisch & Haase, 2013). The typical urban scenes can negatively impact human health (McCracken, Allen, & Gow, 2016). These effects can be compensated by exposure to natural environment. From this point of view Thompson (2011) treats the natural environment as a resource which is important for the overall wellbeing of humans.

In the last decades the outdoor recreation has become very popular worldwide (Tzoulas & James, 2010; Koppen, Sang, & Tveit, 2014). The positive impact of green spaces not only on the physical, but also on the mental health of the urban population is well investigated (Pikora, Giles-Corti, Bull, Jamrozik, & Donovan, 2003; Crawford et al., 2008; Nutsford, Pearson, & Kingham, 2013; McCracken

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et al., 2016). As pointed by McCracken et al., (2016), so called 'Stress Recovery Theory' stated that via intensive contact to nature some symptoms of stress and anxiety can be mitigated.

Green spaces are different in their types, physical locations and suitability/accessibility for outdoor recreation. Characteristics as wildlife habitat diversity, mix of vegetation types, age and health of trees, landscape beauty are preferred in the decision to use these lands for outdoor recreation (Ghimire et al., 2017). In the larger settlements, the outdoor recreation activities are provided in urban green spaces (Tzoulas & James, 2010; Cord, Roeßiger, & Schwarz, 2012; McCracken et al., 2016; Monz, D'Antonio, Lawson, Barber, & Newmane, 2016). Such formal urban green spaces like city parks, gardens and so on cannot be sufficient to meet the citizen needs for contact to nature, especially in the densely inhabited regions (Rupprecht, Byrne, Ueda, & Lod, 2015).

In the last years, the protected sites, the natural parks and the national parks gain importance as destinations for recreational activities (Kim, Lee, & Klenosky, 2003; Monz et al., 2016; Karanikola, Panagopoulos, & Tampakis, 2017). For citizens visits to suburban parks provide an opportunity to live in a closer contact with nature (Cord et al., 2012). In social aspect, the proximity of green space which is suitable for recreation is especially significant for individuals living predominantly in near cities and for people with low incomes (Mitchell & Popham, 2008; van den Berg, Maas, Verheij, & Groenewegen, 2010; Boman, Fredman, Lundmark, & Ericsson, 2015; Plane & Klodawsky, 2013). The protected sites and parks are attractive to visitors because of their protected status, which apparently ensures their naturalness and cleanness (Ferreira & Harmse, 2014; Karanikola et al., 2017).

As noted above, peri-urban parks are of great importance for visitors as "green" spaces. However, most scientific researches on parks' significance involve a very small proportion of the local people. On the other hand, the existing studies on national parks as peri-urban areas mainly involve following items: illegal wood and fodder extraction (Shova & Hubacek, 2011), illegal hunting activities and economic collapse of adjacent communal areas (Gandiwa, Heitkoenig, Lokhorst, Prins, & Leeuwis 2013; Niedzialkowski, Blicharska, Mikusinski, & Jedrzejewska, 2014), the negative impact of recreational activities on wildlife (Sterl, Brandenburg, & Arnberger, 2008). Only a few studies have addressed on recreational activities of the inhabitants of nearby urban areas: how factors related to distance affect peri-urban national park use (Rossi, 2015), which recreational activities created conflict between visitors (Rossi, Pickering, & Byrne, 2012) and visitors' tolerance to motorized recreational activities (Rossi, 2015). In our opinion, there is a gap in the knowledge regarding the significance of suburban national parks for local visitors' outdoor activity.

The main goal of the present study is to evaluate the social impact and importance of peri-urban parks for visitors as a green space for outdoor recreation: visitation pattern (how often and how long) and statement of respondents about the significance of park as a place of recreation. For our investigation we had selected Nature Park Shumen Plateau, Northeast Bulgaria (NP) as a particular case of peri-urban national park. The Nature Park is situated in the proximity of a well industrialized town and the access of people to protected territory is unrestricted.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Studied Area

Nature Park Shumen Plateau is located next to Shumen city, Northeast Bulgaria. It was declared as a protected area since 1980. The average altitude is 427 m a.s.l. with the highest point in the area of Tarnov tabia at 502 m a.s.l. The park is also a source of more than 300 species of medicinal plants (Zahariev, 2014). This area is an intensively visited place, used for outdoor sport and recreation – there are separated hiking trails, bicycle routes, sites for rock climbing, hiking shelters, opportunities for paragliding and plenty of places to picnic.

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