

CHAPTER FIVE

RAMSAR SITES IN SERBIA AS TOURIST DESTINATIONS: LEGAL PROTECTION AND SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT

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Introduction: questions, methodology and aim of the research

There are ten sites in the Republic of Serbia that are protected under the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat, also known as the Ramsar Convention (Batrićević, 2013: 43). These locations are natural habitats for numerous rare and endangered wildlife species and extremely vulnerable ecosystems. At the same time, they either already are or have great potential to become attractive tourist destinations and bring economic benefits to the state and local communities. Being aware of two opposite interests – economic (the interest of tourism development) and ecological (the interest of environmental protection) – the authors of this contribution attempt to answer three research questions.

The description of the tourist potential of each Ramsar site in Serbia is presented with the purpose of answering the first question: what makes Ramsar sites in Serbia attractive for tourism on the one hand and vulnerable in an environmental sense on the other? The analysis of legal Acts dedicated to the protection of the environment, natural values and cultural heritage and the organisation of tourism is aimed at answering the second research question: in what way does the current legislative framework protect Ramsar sites representing tourist destinations from negative anthropogenic impacts that appear as possible unwanted

consequences of tourism? After critical analysis of relevant legislative provisions, the authors also explore the ways to improve the existing state in this field and to answer the third research question: how can relevant legislative solutions and their practical implementation be improved in accordance with the principle of sustainable development and environmental protection?

The aforementioned questions indicate that the aim of this research is to contribute to the improvement of legal protection and sustainable management and use of the Ramsar sites in Serbia for tourist purposes in order to maintain the balance between economic and environmental interests in this field.

The methods applied in this research include the description of key characteristics of Ramsar sites in Serbia from an environmental and tourism standpoint, doctrinal or normative legal method, and policy-based as well as law-reform- and policy-reform-based research methods.

The description of environmental and tourist features of Ramsar sites is based on the analysis of reports and findings of relevant entities such as state organisations and institutes. The doctrinal or theoretical legal method has been applied in the analysis of the legislative framework relevant to the protection of Ramsar sites as tourist destinations. This normative method is used with the purpose of explaining the content of current selected legal sources in this particular area. With the aim of detecting flaws in current laws and policies, so that they can be corrected, the authors have also implemented policy-based research. This has encouraged the authors to make some suggestions for alterations of laws, policies and practice in this field. Therefore, law-reform- and policy-reform-based research methods have also been implemented.

Global importance and international protection of wetlands

Preserved nature and wetland habitats, with water as a priceless resource and rich biodiversity, represent great potential for the tourism of any region (Topalović, 2010: 199). At the same time, wetlands are fragile and sensitive ecosystems (Daryadel and Talaei, 2014: 2091) that are extremely susceptible to foreign influence. Therefore, potential negative environmental impacts of tourism, such as air, water and soil pollution, irrational exploitation of natural resources, deforestation, waste production, etc. (Maksin et al., 2011: 33), might threaten their survival and must be prevented.

Due to their fragility on the one hand and crucial role in the survival of biodiversity all over the world on the other, wetlands are protected by an intergovernmental treaty adopted in 1971, the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat, also known as the Ramsar Convention (Batrićević, 2013: 43). According to a report from October 2015, the Convention has 169 Contracting Parties (List of Wetlands of International Importance, 2015). The Convention contains guidelines on the wise and sustainable use of wetlands and a list of goals the Contracting Parties should endeavour to accomplish in their preservation, protection and improvement. It only impacts national legal systems indirectly by setting general guidelines and allowing national legislators to determine which activities against wetlands and their biodiversity will be considered illegal (Batrićević, 2013: 44; Batanjski et al., 2015).

The former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia ratified the Ramsar Convention in 1977. During the 1990s it split into five independent states, and all former Yugoslav Republics subsequently became Contracting Parties to the Convention. Serbia is one of these parties. At the moment, there are ten Ramsar sites in Serbia, covering 63,919 hectares in total: Ludaško Jezero, Obedska Bara, Carska Bara, Slano Kopovo, Labudovo Okno, Peštersko Polje, Vlasina, Gornje Podunavlje, Zasavica, and Koviljsko-Petrovaradinski Rit (Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Serbia, 2014: 270). All the Ramsar sites in Serbia are considered areas of extraordinary natural beauty and exceptional ecological value. Their landscapes, the fact that they are home to numerous rare species and their cultural heritage, make them remarkable from both the environmental and the touristic point of view.

Ecological value and tourism potential of Ramsar sites in Serbia

The special Nature Reserve Ludaško Jezero comprises Lake Ludaš and its shores, east of Subotica city. This complex of wetland habitats contains open water surfaces, reedlands, marshlands, prairie, loess, sand, brown steppe land and salt-lands (Topalović, 2010: 200). Different types of soil under the influence of underground waters create a complex area of great biological diversity within a relatively small space. Ludaško Jezero is an important locality for the rest and feeding of migratory birds. It is also the habitat of rare species, such as the otter and wetland orchids, that are on the Red List of Endangered Species (UNDP, 2012: 4). The cultural and historical importance of the surroundings of Lake Ludaš are related to

cultural heritage. Archaeological localities at the eastern shore of the lake near Nosa contain artefacts from the Stone Age and represent valuable cultural heritage, along with old-fashioned ranches with preserved traditional architecture and reed roofs, the Cathedral and the Parochial House. Water pollution is one of the biggest problems nowadays (Batanjski, 2012: 117).

The special Nature Reserve Obedska Bara is the oldest protected area in Serbia. It has been under special protection since 1874 (Đorđević et al., 2013: 174.). It is located east of Šabac city. Today, it is the largest flooded area in Serbia and an authentic conglomerate of numerous fragile ecosystems: ponds, muds, wetlands, marshlands, salty terrains and ancient oak forests of exceptional biodiversity. This region is especially important for the Sava river since it contributes to the conservation and improvement of the river water's quality and recovery of its wildlife. It is the habitat of various fish, waterfowl and birds of prey, including storks and the white-tailed eagle. It is also the centre for reproduction for bats, wild cats, minks and European beavers. The area within the reserve has a rich cultural heritage, including the ruins of the middle age Kupinik Fortress, the remains of Obed Monastery, the Saint Luka Church and the ethno-village Kupinovo (Stojanović, 2003: 26). Unfortunately, the survival of the reserve is endangered by the disappearance of wetlands, inconvenient changes of water regime, intensive forestry, etc. (Stojanović et al., 2008: 112).

A landscape of outstanding features, Vlasina is situated in the south-eastern part of Serbia and comprises a large part of the Vlasina Plateau. Vlasinsko Lake is the largest and the highest dam lake in Serbia (Momčilović-Petronijević et al., 2009: 96–7). The vegetation of the area includes a large number of plant communities, including forests, which have recently been degraded significantly due to negative anthropogenic impact (Stojković and Nikolić, 2014: 17). Vlasina is the habitat of 125 bird species and 27 species of mammals, including the common vole, otter, wolf and deer. Vlasina's rich flora and fauna are considered essential drives for tourism development (Petrović et al., 2012: 198). The mountains around Vlasina are suitable for sports tourism offers (Milanović and Kovačević, 2003) and adjacent cultural monuments such as Palja Monastery, the churches in Božica and CrnaTrava, and the Tower in Klisura have potential for cultural tourism. The most important negative factors are water pollution by insufficiently treated sanitary and industrial waste water, and the pollution of underground water and soil due to inadequate use of agrochemicals (JP, "Direkcija za građevinsko zemljište i puteve opštine Surdulica", 2011: 14).

The special Nature Reserve Carska Bara is a complex ecosystem with rich and unique biodiversity, southwest from Zrenjanin city, in the alluvial zone between the Tisa and Begej rivers. This area contains numerous hydrological objects including rivers, fishponds and artificial canals. It is the natural habitat for more than 500 plant species (including white and yellow water lilies), as well as for nesting and resting for several rare bird species (including the white-tailed eagle, wild geese and ducks) (Mrkša and Milanović, 2007: 243). The most radical changes to this habitat's natural ecological features occurred in 1971, when a new artificial canal, modifying the course of the Begej river, was opened for sailing, altering the original characteristics of this area substantially. Carska Bara provides a rich tourist offer, including sports fishing, bird watching, photo safaris, sailing and visiting the Nature Museum, Kaštel Hunters' Palace, Tiganjica ethnic village, ethnic house and International Research and Educative Centre at Belo Blato village. The essential risk factor is poor water quality, which is the result of pollution caused by an uncontrolled spill of organic materials from fishponds. Various prohibited activities within the protected zones, as well as apple planting in Botoški Rit, are also considered to be the sources of degradation of rare meadow and salt-marsh ecosystems.

The special Slano Kopovo Nature Reserve is one of the last preserved salt marshes in Serbia with rare habitats under the risk of disappearing (Bjeljac et al., 2012: 163). It is one of the former meanders of the Tisa river that emerged after the draining of marshes and building of embankments in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The increased evaporation and withdrawal of water from the lowest areas led to the accumulation of a thick salt layer. With more than 200 bird species, Slano Kopovo is one of the most important bird habitats and stopover points in Serbia. It is also home to birds that are typical not for the Pannonian Plain but for the Pontic-Caspian steppe zone and sea shores (UNDP, 2012: 11). The most important and legally protected plants are glasswort, annual seablite and the Pannonian seablite. The most important mammals are the European ground squirrel, steppe mouse and weasel (Brankov and Žujović, 2008: 94). The remains of the Romanic Arača Cathedral, a former Benedictine Monastery dating from the thirteenth century, are the most remarkable cultural heritage at this location (Bjeljac et al., 2014: 114; Ivkov, 2000: 59). In spite of its natural and cultural heritage, the tourist potential of Slano Kopovo is not fully developed. Bird watching and educative tourism seem to be its most promising offers, whereas hunting tourism should be replaced with ecotourism (Brankov and Žujović, 2008: 97).

The special Labudovo Okno Nature Reserve emerged due to slowing of the Danube flow after the dam was constructed at the Đerdap hydro-power plant. On alluvial plains, subterranean waters formed permanent ponds in the sand hollows. The area includes permanent flowing river habitats, river shallows, alluvial forests and freshwater swamps containing around 900 plant species, some of which are relics and rarities (Bakić et al., 2011: 211). This region is a main wintering and nesting site and migratory stopover site for numerous rare and endangered bird species. Flooded areas are spawning places for fish inhabiting this part of the Danube. Archaeological sites and the remains of the Smederevo and Ram Fortresses around Labudovo Okno, the Roman castrum, etc., represent attractive cultural and historical monuments (Boškov et al., 2015: 6) and potential for cultural tourism. Negative factors are plenty of garbage floating along the Danube river, illegal hunting and fishing.

Peštersko Polje is situated in the south-west of Serbia, on the Pešter highland, at 1150 m above sea level. This is the largest karst and peat field in Serbia and the highest in the Balkans. It is the habitat of some extremely endangered species including the peat nesting birds Montagu's harrier and corncrake. This is also a feeding ground for the white stork during the nesting and migration seasons. Aquatic vegetation is tied closely to channels and water-courses, the most significant of which is the fossil bed of the Boroštica river. A preserved traditional way of life represents the best potential for ecotourism development. The main threats are commercial exploitation of peat and removal of surface water for flood control and water supply purposes (Stojnić, 2013: 13).

Gornje Podunavlje is an important biodiversity centre, comprising herbaceous, bush and forest plant communities and over a thousand plant species, including some of the most endangered ones. Its dry-land woodlands of oak, ash and poplar represent nesting places for white-tailed eagles and other birds. This region stands on the migratory routes of many bird species and is one of the last nesting and flocking sites for the black stork, mallard duck, greylag goose, herons, gulls, kingfisher and other species. Out of 55 fish species, 16 are on the IUCN Red List. It is also the largest habitat of the European red deer in Serbia and home to wild boar. When it comes to the tourist offer, this area is well known for its hunting reserves Kozara and Apatinski Rit (Stojanović, 2003: 27). The most disturbing factors are melioration and the hydro-technical works regulating the amount of water in the marshes, which had a negative impact on the water regime in the upper Danube region.

Zasavica is situated in the northwestern part of Mačva but, administratively, a large part of it belongs to Vojvodina. In 1997 this area

was placed under protection as a Special Nature Reserve. It includes the Zasavica river with its channelled and natural stream and artificial canals (Dolinaj et al., 2009: 94). The Reserve provides habitat for numerous endangered species of fish, birds and mammals, including the otter and European beaver, which was reintroduced in 2004 (Stojanović, 2003: 27; Dolinaj et al., 2009: 95). There are some rural tourism development initiatives and it is estimated that the Reserve could benefit from the complementary existence of rural and ecotourism, particularly if it involved the local community in the tourist offer (Dolinaj et al., 2009: 98). Other types of tourism are well developed. Zasavica is positioned among numerous settlements, which could create problems related to its functioning. Nearby settlements still do not have a modern sewage system and the water and soil get polluted additionally due to the unprofessional use of chemical additives, especially during agricultural activities (Dolinaj et al., 2009: 97).

Koviljsko-Petrovaradinski Rit is a Special Nature Reserve that is 20 km long and extends along the banks of the alluvial plains of the Danube river, south-east of Novi Sad. It contains diverse and preserved original marshland water and land features such as islands, river-islands, backwaters, meanders and oxbow lakes. It is the habitat of unique marshland plant communities and the home of rare and threatened animal species such as the white-tailed eagle, wildcat, and otter (Panjković and Stanišić, 2010: 112). Its surroundings contain important historical monuments, and attract cultural heritage and hunting tourism (Stojanović, 2003: 27). The largest negative factors are changes in the regime of surface and groundwater; the destruction, degradation and fragmentation of the habitat; and uncontrolled and illegal hunting (Panjković and Stanišić, 2010: 103).

The aforementioned characteristics of Ramsar sites in Serbia make them suitable for ecotourism, as a subtype of sustainable tourism which must be performed with full respect for ecological and ethical values, local ways of life, ethno-urban rules, obligations regarding the conservation of natural and cultural values, sustainable use of unrenovable environmental values, the wish to provide a great tourist experience, and the principle of avoiding any kind of social, cultural or economic degradation (Butler, 1999: 12; Mowfort and Munt, 2008: 4). This type of tourism should be nature-based, environmentally conscious and managed sustainably (Blamey, 2001: 6), and based upon: (1) minimal impact of tourist activities, (2) minimal influence on and maximum respect for indigenous peoples' culture and lifestyle, (3) positive experiences for visitors and hosts, (4) financial benefits for the conservation of visited areas, (5)

financial benefits for local people and (6) raising sensitivity to the host's political, environmental and social climate (Doley, 2013–2014: 45–6).

If conducted in accordance with the principles of sustainable tourism, tourist activities in Ramsar sites in Serbia could actually contribute to environmental improvement, conservation of natural and cultural heritage, increased social welfare and the economic prosperity of local communities (Maksin et al., 2011: 30). Since ecotourism comprises visiting locations protected by environmental law (Fennel, 1999: 24–5), adequate national and international legislative frameworks are the basis for its development. It cannot be accomplished without the participation and consensus of all relevant actors, significant involvement of authorities on all administrative levels and monitoring of tourism's impact on the surroundings, accompanied by the application of necessary preventive and corrective measures (Maksin et al., 2011: 30).

Legal protection of Ramsar sites in Serbia

The implementation of the provisions of the Ramsar Convention through national legislation represents an international obligation for all of its parties. In the case of Serbia, the provisions pertinent to the protection of wetlands can be found in laws dedicated to environmental issues: the Law on Environment Protection (2011) and the Law on Nature Protection (2010). Since the majority of Ramsar sites in Serbia represent or have the potential to become tourist destinations, the Law on Tourism (2012) is also relevant. As wetlands are complex ecosystems, their wise use requires other laws to be applied, such as the Law on Air Protection (2013), the Law on Water (2010) and the Law on Forests (2012).

Law on Environmental Protection

The Law on Environment Protection provides legal protection for all components of the environment, including soil, air, water, natural habitats, flora and fauna (Paragraph 1). Its system of environmental protection dwells upon the following principles: the protection and conservation of natural balance, sustainable management of environmental values, prevention of all forms of nature damaging and reparation of environmental damage (Paragraph 2). This law defines and classifies “protected natural goods” as preserved parts of “nature of exceptional values and characteristics” of permanent ecological, scientific, cultural, educational, medical, recreational, tourist or other significance, due to which they are placed under a special protection regime as goods of

general interest (Paragraph 3). More detailed provisions arranging the status, types, levels of protection, accessibility, exploitation of, and other issues relevant to, protected natural goods are contained in the Law on Nature Protection. They will be analysed within the section dedicated to that legal document. Here it should be mentioned that all Ramsar sites in the Republic of Serbia have the status of protected natural goods and fall under the protection regime prescribed by the Law on Nature Protection.

The Law on Environment Protection claims that natural goods are supposed to be protected by state bodies, companies, scientific institutions, expert organisations, non-governmental organisations and individuals (Paragraph 4). This suggests that tourism operators and agencies have to apply necessary protective measures. The application of protective measures is mandatory in all cases when these entities conduct activities that might alter the features of the visited location (Paragraph 5). The Law also calls upon all relevant entities to keep raising ecological awareness constantly (Paragraph 6), which suggests that tourism operators and agencies that organise visits to Ramsar sites are expected to inform their employees and clients about the importance and vulnerability of wetlands, as well as to introduce them to the key principles of their sustainable use.

The Law emphasises that the use of natural resources must be performed in compliance with its principles (Paragraph 11). Sites with the status of protected natural goods, such as Ramsar sites, can be visited and used only in a way that guarantees their permanent conservation and improvement. Activities that might harm the capacity of the environment; natural balance; and biodiversity, hydrographic, geomorphological, geological; and cultural values, or in any other manner degrade the qualities and characteristics of natural goods, are prohibited at protected sites (Paragraph 17).

Law on Nature Protection

The purpose of the Law on Nature Protection is to protect and upgrade biological, geological and landscape diversity, to provide for their sustainable use and prevent promptly all human activities that might cause negative impacts on nature (Paragraph 2). According to this Law's key principle, "the principle of nature protection", natural resources can be used "only to the level and in the ways that do not threaten the diversity and organisation of natural ecosystems and processes" (Paragraph 5). It defines the term "protected natural goods" and provides a set of preventive measures necessary for their conservation. One of these measures is the

general requirement to utilise all natural goods, but particularly the protected ones, in a sustainable way (Paragraph 7).

The use of natural goods has to be performed in accordance with “special and urbanistic plans, documents containing plans and projects, bases and programmes of management and use of natural resources”. This indicates that tourist activities at these locations also have to be “in compliance with the measures and requirements necessary for nature protection” (Paragraph 8). Paragraph 9 of the Law implies that tourism operators and agencies performing activities that might affect nature have to create special business plans and projects, and submit them to the Institute for Nature Conservation of Serbia in order to acquire its assessment and consent. Special documents called “Conditions for Nature Protection” are then created on the basis of the assessment made by the Institute. After that, the Ministry of Agriculture and Environmental Protection estimates whether the submitted projects and plans are acceptable or not. If the analyses show that the submitted plans and programmes might cause a significant impact on the conservation of the protected area, they shall not be approved (Paragraph 10).

If the use of natural resources jeopardises the survival of wildlife, habitats or natural ecosystems, the Ministry is authorised to limit or prohibit those activities either temporarily or permanently (Paragraph 11). If any ecological damage is sustained as a consequence of tourist activities conducted within protected natural goods, the tour operator is obliged to provide appropriate compensation (Paragraph 13).

According to Paragraph 28 of the Law on Nature Protection, protected areas of general interest (such as Ramsar sites) include all locations that have remarkable geological, biological, ecosystem or landscapes diversity, or that are considered important as habitats of birds or other migratory species that are significant from the standpoint of international legal documents. These protected areas can also be connected with the protected areas across the borders with neighbour states. In these cases, the managing plan and protective measures of these trans-boundary protected areas are defined in intergovernmental treaties and with the consent of the Ministry of Agriculture and Environmental Protection.

Eight out of ten Ramsar sites in Serbia (all the above mentioned except Peštersko Polje and Vlasina), have the status of Special Nature Reserves (SNR) because of their great importance for the preservation of biodiversity (Đermati et al., 2008). The procedure for obtaining protected SNR status has been initiated for the Peštersko Polje too. The public debate took place in July 2015.

The term “Special Nature Reserve” is defined in Paragraph 29 of the Law on Nature Protection as an area with unaltered or insignificantly modified nature, which is considered especially important due to its uniqueness and rarity. Special Nature Reserves cover the habitats of endangered wild species. These areas either do not include human settlements or contain a relatively scarce number of them in which people live in accordance with nature and with the intention of preserving existing natural characteristics and genetic fund, maintaining the ecological balance, keeping up with natural processes, conducting scientific research and education including occasional and strictly controlled visits, and conserving the traditional lifestyle.

The Law on Nature Protection enumerates the activities that may not be performed within Special Nature Reserves. The ban refers to the activities that might harm the features due to which the SNR obtained the legal status of protected natural goods, such as: picking or destroying plants, disturbing, catching and killing animals, introducing new biological species, melioration, and various forms of economic or other exploitation.

The Law allows visits to Special Nature Reserves, but only for the purpose of education and provided that the visitor has attained special permission issued by the manager of that protected area. More specific measures of protection that are supposed to be implemented in each SNR are enumerated in a document by which that exact location is officially given the status of a protected area.

Vlasina is the only Ramsar site in Serbia that has the legal status of Landscape of Outstanding Features. According to Paragraph 33 of the Law on Nature Protection, the category “Landscape of Outstanding Features” represents an area of remarkable appearance with significant natural, biological, ecological, aesthetic, cultural and historical values, which has been evolving over a longer period of time as the result of interaction between nature and natural potentials on one side and traditional lifestyle of the local population on the other. Landscapes of outstanding features can be either natural or cultural.

Performing the activities by which primary natural values and artificially created goods within the area of Landscapes of Outstanding Features or the character of the landscape might be damaged is forbidden by the Law. Protective measures, the manner in which economic and traditional activities are conducted and the use of natural and artificially created values within the landscapes are determined precisely in the Act by which one area is officially proclaimed as a Landscape of Outstanding Features.

Law on Tourism

The Serbian Law on Tourism contains general principles that are applied to all kinds of tourism, including tourism in protected areas and ecotourism. The principle of sustainable development represents the most comprehensive one (Paragraph 2) since it implies that tourism has to be developed in accordance with ecological, cultural and historical development and with full respect for cultural heritage and natural goods (Paragraph 7).

Tourism operators and agencies that provide arrangements comprising ecotourism or other tourist activities within protected areas such as Ramsar sites have to fulfil two sets of legal requirements: fundamental principles set by environmental laws and standards set by the Law on Tourism. Tourism operators and agencies have to follow a special programme called “Programme for Tourist Product Development” (Paragraph 11). In view of the characteristics and potential for tourism offers at Ramsar sites in Serbia, this paragraph seems to be of particular importance for sustainable development of tourism in these areas.

The Law on Tourism also prescribes that tourist activities may be conducted only if they do not violate the provisions of the Law on Tourism and environmental laws (Paragraph 64). Although it might seem just of declarative character, this provision represents an additional guarantee and a “reminder” that the interests of tourism (no matter how profitable) must not be considered more important than the interests of environmental protection.

The importance of an ecological and sustainable approach to tourism development is confirmed and recognised officially by Paragraph 27, proclaiming that special financial resources shall be provided within the Budget of the Republic of Serbia with the purpose of affording projects dedicated to the protection of nature, environment, natural resources and cultural heritage of a tourist destination.

Conclusion: current issues and suggestions for improvement

The analysis of positive legal sources of the conservation and sustainable use of resources in Serbia, as well as of the organisation of tourism, suggests that the current legislative framework does provide an acceptable level of environmental protection for Ramsar sites. However, their comparison to international and European standards suggests that some improvements and alterations should be adopted. The same applies

to policies and practice regulating the issue of the sustainable management of tourism and use of natural goods.

After the analysis of current legislation, strategic documents and the aforementioned reports, the authors of this contribution suggest the following steps to be fulfilled in order to achieve full and comprehensive legal protection and guarantee sustainable use of protected wetlands for the purposes of tourism.

The first step is the adoption of a National Water Protection Strategy and an effective monitoring system to supervise its implementation. According to the European Commission (EC), the Republic of Serbia has made significant progress in harmonising its environmental legislation with the EU *acquis*. But, the latest Progress Report suggests that numerous improvements need to be made. Some of them are relevant to the protection of wetlands, especially in terms of water pollution prevention. It is emphasised that “strategic investment planning for water pollution abatement continues to be hampered by the lack of a National Water Protection Strategy”, and “there has been no further expansion of the monitoring network meanwhile” in this field (EC, 2014: 58).

The second step is the improvement of the institutional framework for managing of Natura 2000 sites. In the EC Report it is highlighted that the “institutional framework for designating and managing future Natura 2000 sites needs to be upgraded and resourced adequately ” (EC, 2014: 59). This is important because Ramsar sites in Serbia are likely to be included in the Natura 2000 list, since they are already included in the Emerald Network.

The third step comprises the adoption of various practical measures that should upgrade the management of natural goods by making it more sustainable and eco-friendly. Apart from legislative steps, improvements should also be made on a practical level regarding the adequate system of management of protected natural goods (Đurđić and Filipović, 2005: 246; Topalović, 2010: 199), which has to be environmentally sensitive and ecologically oriented (Fennel, 1999: 24–5). The organisation of tourist activities should guarantee their wise use, encouraging their protection from negative anthropogenic factors and keeping a balance between economic and ecological interests, which is a challenge for tourist policies’ creators (Bošković and Milenković, 2012: 484). In particular, the balance must be established among tourist and accommodation capacities, sports and cultural activities, increase of accessibility and improvement of infrastructure, economic and social development of local communities and conservation of their environment and cultural uniqueness, and sustainable use of natural and cultural heritage (Maksin et al., 2011: 31).

Since Ramsar sites in Serbia have great potential for ecotourism, special consideration should be given to its sustainable development. The measures that could be applied include: forming special entities comprised of environment protection experts that should participate in all decision-making processes affecting ecotourism; assessing ecotourism potential for each Ramsar site; sorting these sites according to their suitability for ecotourism-related investment; choosing the most appropriate management plan for each of the sites; assessing the vulnerability of waterfowl in each site and estimating the risk that tourist activities would pose to their habitat, population, nesting, feeding, etc.; and establishing special ecotourism boards comprised of representatives of local populations. The last of these is particularly important, since ecotourism is supposed to bring financial benefits to the local population (Stojanović, 2003: 27). The strategy of sustainable tourism development at Ramsar sites should be a more restrictive one in order to protect these sensitive areas from the destruction caused by the negative impacts of tourism (Maksin et al., 2011: 31).

The fourth step towards improvement is a more wise distribution of financial resources, in a manner that encourages the green economy and sustainable exploitation of natural goods, and that supports regional development and allows local communities to benefit from tourism. Neither legislative reform on a national level nor organisational improvement can be effective without financial support and regional development (Topalović, 2010: 196), especially when it comes to investing in ecotourism. Therefore, adequate resources as support from the state Budget, such as credits, grants or subventions, need to be provided for those individuals or legal persons (such as tour operators, objects for accommodation, etc.) that decide to invest in projects related to tourism in protected areas (here Ramsar sites), including “regular” tourism and ecotourism. In that context, it is worth mentioning that some provisions of the current Serbian Law on Environment Protection are about to be changed in order to provide better financial enhancement for economic activities that could be described as “green” – namely, Paragraph 21 of the Draft Law on Alterations and Amendments of the Law on Nature Protection (2015), “Green Fund of the Republic of Serbia”, a state body within the Ministry of Agriculture and Environmental Protection and under its supervision. This body is in charge of activities related to financing the protection, conservation, sustainable use and improvement of the environment.

The Draft Law prescribes that the resources of the Green Fund should be used in particular for activities such as: protection and conservation of

biodiversity, treatment of sick or injured specimens of wild fauna, maintenance of natural habitats, enhancement of sustainable use of protected areas, financing national contributions in accordance with ratified conventions and protocols, and development of public–private partnership in the sphere of environment protection. These provisions confirm that there will be a legal possibility for the distribution of financial resources for touristic projects and investments in Ramsar sites in Serbia with the purpose of assuring their profitable yet ecologically acceptable, sustainable and wise use in accordance with national environmental legislation, ratified international conventions and EU acquis.

Finally, it is important to mention that the implementation of preventive and corrective legal measures plays an important role in the sustainable development of tourism in vulnerable ecosystems such as wetlands. However, the improvement of legal provisions intended to protect these areas from negative anthropogenic impact is only the beginning. In that context, the fifth step that should be taken in order to provide for protection and sustainable use of Ramsar sites as tourist destinations seems to be the most complex one. It consists of the application of relevant legal provisions on a daily basis through adequate monitoring of tourist activities, regular inspection and control, reporting of illegal activities, and the prompt reaction of relevant state bodies as necessary in order to accomplish the full protection of sites.

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