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## **Spatial Structures of Tourism in Rāzna National Park and Planning for Sustainable Development**

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### **Abstract**

The goal of this research is to evaluate the role of tourism in sustainable regional development in one of the newest tourist destinations of Latvia – Rāzna National Park. The authors have focused on the identification and mapping of tourism spatial structures there in context of local social networking and nature protection aims. The concept of clusters has been chosen as the most appropriate theory for analyzing tourism spatial structures of particular *Natura 2000* site. As a result different spatial processes of tourism development were discovered. However the tourism cluster around Rāzna Lake remained undiscovered even with all the prerequisites because of poor communication between stakeholders. This research has not only confirmed different understanding of stakeholders about sustainability and tourism opportunities, but also has shown progress whilst being actively involved in elaborating of tourism development plan for the territory.

*Keywords: tourism in Natura 2000, spatial structures, social networking, cluster concept, sustainable tourism.*

### **Introduction**

Rāzna National Park was established in 2007 with the aim of preserving the Lake Rāzna and associated with it species diversity, landscapes, and cultural heritage, as well as for the sustainable development of nature-friendly agriculture, tourism, and ecological education.

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The total area of this specially protected nature territory and *Natura 2000* site is 532 km<sup>2</sup>.

(Law on Rāzna National Park 2006). Status of National Park, diverse resources and tourism potential are prerequisites for popularity of destination. However experience of mass tourism here is part of history when in soviet times a tourist camp at Lake Ežezers accommodated around 800 guests per day regularly.

Within boundaries of National Park around 8000 inhabitants are living today, but also 15 specially protected bird species and 14 specially protected habitats. Rāzna National Park as destination has total capacity of 578 beds for tourists. At the same time there are 21 destination management institutions responsible for promoting this destination or part of it.

Spatial structures of tourism cannot be described exclusively on the basis of physical parameters, even if their cornerstone is made up of them. Tourism is based on social relationships and the values created therein even if we are thinking about nature tourism.

German geographer Schamp (2000) argues that the social sciences have a great role to play in explaining the contemporary processes of economic geography today. Sustainable tourism development in *Natura 2000* area represents a partnership between all the stakeholders: local people, the entrepreneurs, government and visitors of particular area. According to Newsome, Dowling and Moore (2005) it is gaining acceptance because it makes good economic sense and can benefit all partners. Burns and Sofield (2001) maintain that the host community is an important element to consider in the concept of sustainability and that the sustainability of wildlife tourism is dependent, in part, on its support from the areas' residents. Ashley and Roe (1998) note that tendency with community involvement in wildlife tourism has increased due to its perceived local economic, social and conservation benefits. The development of nature based tourism offers local residents income generation, job opportunities and specific skill

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development. It is also a way in which they can gain benefits from wildlife that in the past may have only brought them costs or restrictions.

Social networking and importance of communication for stakeholder engagement in nature conservation has parallels with cluster concept, developed for local scale economy growth.

Porter (1990) defined a cluster as a group of companies, suppliers, service providers and institutions that are interrelated in a single sector, are in geographic proximity, and engage both in mutual competition and co-operation. Local residents have the same resources to create the tourism product and they will have similar target groups and business strategies – they will compete. Higher social control for wildlife conservation will increase in community at the same time because of concrete business interest. The European Commission's regional policies (2002) particularly emphasise the principle of clusters. It is defined as any concentration of interrelated companies in a single sector or in adjacent sectors in a small geographic space, thus leading to the emergence of a network which has a potential for joint innovation. The German researcher Kiese (2008) has pointed to the broad interpretations that are found in various sources as to the scope and structure of a cluster. According to Genosko (2006) clusters can be described through three elements – spatial proximity, networking and external accessibility. As Porter note (1990, 1998) growth-based cluster policies include spatial and economic conditions, the specific conditions of a cluster, as well as regional organisational capacity within the framework of the cluster. The specific requirements for a cluster emphasise an identification of the initial size and the level of development, the level of interaction among strategic companies, and the intensity at which new companies emerge (Porter 1990, 1998). As Malmberg et al.(1996) considered that the so-called cluster machines - major companies which turn on the cluster- are among the prerequisites. Within the framework of tourism destination that could be interpreted as the most popular tourist attraction, which works as a magnet attracting larger tourist flows. According to Schamp

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(2000) networks among businesspeople become a “socioeconomic system” – one which demands common values, behaviours and intentions, one which emerges from related structures, neighbourly relations, and other forms of co-operation and collectivism. This is an important issue linking this network of co-operation to the collective learning process about tourism and nature management in sustainable way. The emphasis here is on the idea that an important factor for sustainable regional development is a special level of quality in co-operation among the senior officials of different companies and organisations in the relevant area. Of particular importance are informal contacts that are based on mutual trust, as well as relations among individuals. When this kind of a contact network is established, the exchange of regionally necessary information occurs more quickly, and the innovation potential of companies is based on social relationships. Because of collective learning processes they enhance faster opportunities for local innovations (Brunotte, Gebhardt, Meurer et al. 2002). The concept of clusters and benefits for nature conservation from local social networking can serve as the background for the hypothesis the authors have set: encouraging of positive creative milieu of stakeholders is one of the key factors for sustainable development of Rāzna National Park.

## **Methods**

The authors used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. First there was field research, followed by semi-structured interviews. Seminars about sustainable tourism planning and nature tourism product marketing were organised for stakeholders. Three sequential focus group interviews followed and one familiarization field excursion within the boundaries of Rāzna National Park were organised and held. The methodology was based on recommendations about qualitative research in the field of tourism that were widely described by the Australian researcher Jennings (2005) and the British researcher Thomas (2004). A

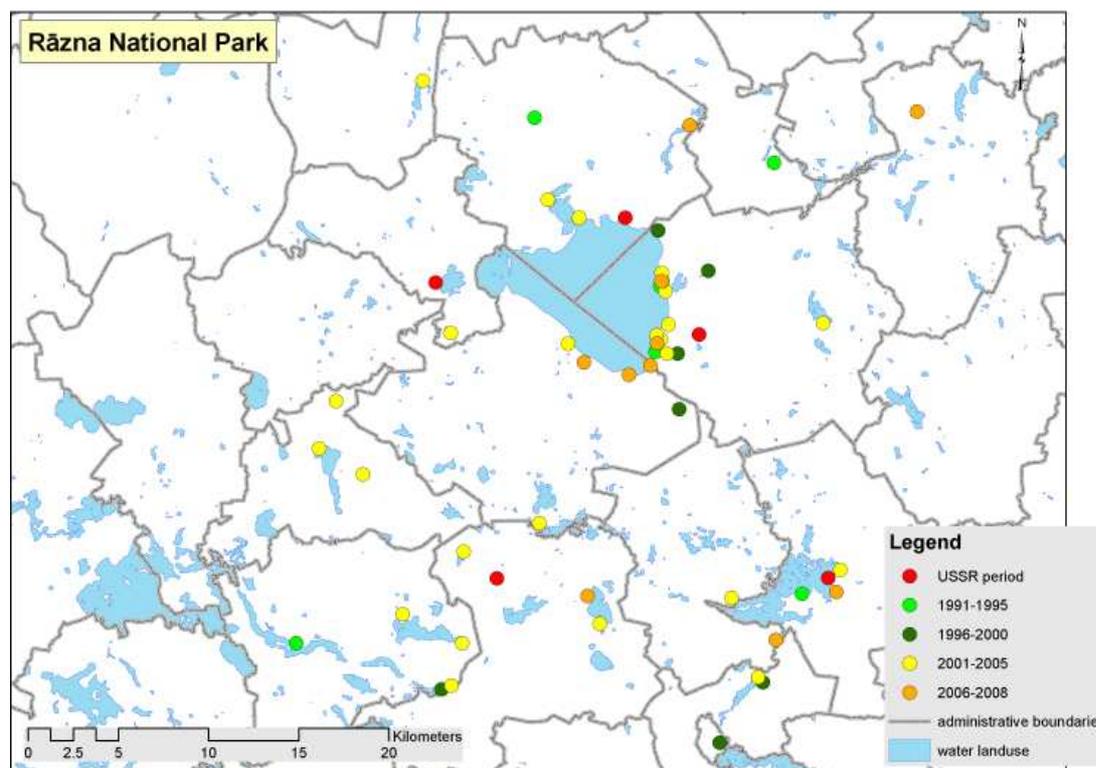
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total of 56 stakeholders participated in some of the research parts and altogether 134 visitors were surveyed. Cartographic methods were used to define the cluster. Perceptual regionalisation was based on the work of Gunn and Worms [cited in Smith 1995]. The region's compactness index and connectivity index were calculated [cited in Smith 1995]. The dynamics of the establishment of new companies were used as an indicator to describe the structure of the cluster (Kiese 2008). The data were supplemented with qualitative information from the development plans and strategies of tourism organisations in the region. Reicheld's (2003) Net Promoter Scores as a simple but remarkably effective method for measuring visitors' loyalty were used. That was adapted to the tourism destination according to the Ritson (2006) given example of Australian destinations. However use of this method for evaluation of destinations was criticised by authors in some cases because of subjective weather conditions impact to the respondents given result.

## **Results**

There is a very pronounced geographical proximity of tourism service providers in surrounding of Lake Rāzna. Larger concentration of tourism service providers is also near Lake Ežezers (Fig.1). That display the succession of tourism traditions from the soviet period and the same places renewed are mostly involved in present tourism industry. There is correlation with new enterprise emerging and availability of European Union funds since year 2000 (Special Action Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development) and 2004 again.

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**Figure 1.** *The dynamics of the establishment of new tourism enterprises in Rāzna National Park.*

Almost one third of all the tourism entrepreneurs are very close to each other and near to the Rāzna Lake. At the same time there is no real cooperation among them. The advantage of nearness of other tourism branch competitive forces is seen neutral, but not on the cooperation basis. Entrepreneurs disclaim, that they have chosen their business location, because other tourism entrepreneurs were there before and they profited from tourists. In many cases the nearest neighbours were not informed about other offers in details and sometimes even blamed them. This was totally changed due to the destination familiarization trip for stakeholders themselves. Knowledge transfer and better communication were among benefits derived from that event.

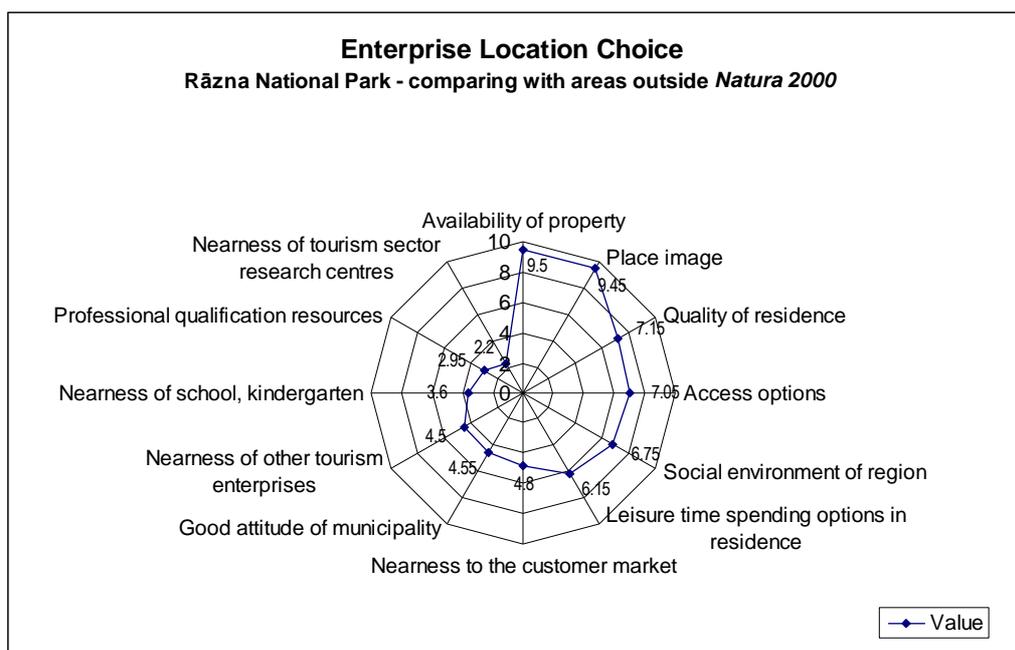
At the same time the usage of nature resources for developing creative tourism products is very low. Basic tourism products in the park are too uniform in type and there is potential to create a new products based on nature resources (Tab.1). Water is the main resource involved and from marketing perspective entrepreneurs are able to use all the strengths of the place, at the same time melting more with nature conservation concept.

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**Table 1. Eventual tourism product niches using nature resources in the Rāzna National Park.**

Lakes	Rivers	Forest	Meadows	Landscape	Wildlife	Geology etc..
Boot ride Angling Water sports Sunbath Beach Active relaxation Picnicking Traditional bath	Canoying Angling Traditional bath  <b>NICHE</b>	Nature trails (on progress)  <b>NICHE</b>	Horse ride Carriage ride <b>NICHE</b>	5 bicycle route  View from Mākoņkalns hill <b>NICHE</b>	<b>NICHE</b>	<b>NICHE</b>

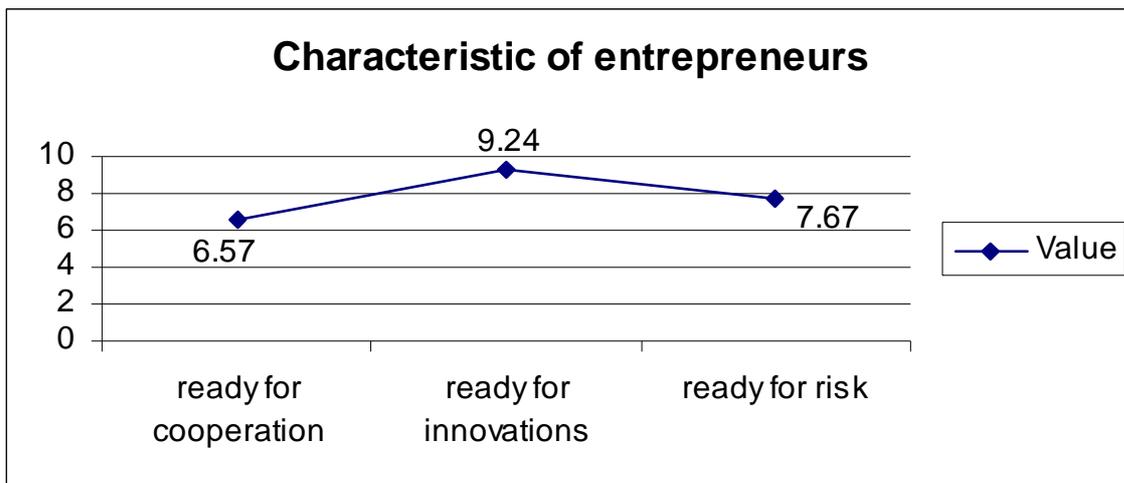
There is high score of local residents among all the tourism entrepreneurs leaning towards social sustainability with locals involved. Tourism service providers are mostly situated near the water sources or main roads. On the other hand the most important factor recognised by interviewed entrepreneurs to establish a new company is availability of property. Tourism is seen by locals as one of the activities, that could be realised in any of the National Park's places. Comparing the factors for location choice here with other areas outside *Natura 2000* (Klepers, Rozīte 2008 a, b; c) clear connection of using more „soft factors” in *Natura 2000* area were proved.



**Figure 2. Enterprise location choice.**

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The desire to co-operate is not very high among tourism entrepreneurs. That is linked rather with individual character of rural people and Latvian mentality often solving problems in isolation. For the leading generation (average age of entrepreneurs – 48) another resistance comes from the forced collectivisation in soviet kolkhoz (collective farm) system. They are ready for new ideas and full of initiative for innovations (Fig. 3). Precaution on risks was observed at the same time.



**Figure 3.** Entrepreneurs readiness for cooperation, innovation and assuming risks.

Evaluating all the other factors important for tourism development in the Rāzna National Park qualitative roads and basic infrastructure were mentioned.

Tourist survey confirmed that they see Rāzna National Park as a homogeny destination. Importance of administrative boundaries whilst travelling however is very low (4,2 points of 10). *Net Promoter Score* measured for this destination was at +44, which is high score for beginning (to compare with most popular National Park in Latvia – Gauja, which has +65). Promoters especially highlight the biggest Lake Rāzna, prominent landscape, nature wilderness, strong cultural traditions and good attitude from hospitality people. Detractors advise on bad condition of roads and poor quality tourism services.

High *Net Promoter Score* index is evidence for strong destination potential and all the mentioned values are as the key for sustainability offering them for a long period.

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## Discussion

Results proved that organised community with good networking can be effective not only on offering destination for tourists but also for nature conservation purposes. From the theoretical point of view entrepreneurs understand that they need to offer a more diverse and sustainable product. Developing of such a product is taking more time and asking specific knowledge. Besides it comes in strong competition with all the other *Natura 2000* territories, where the same strategies are used therefore larger budget for advertising is necessary. National characteristics and mentality can strongly influence the implementation of cluster concept, which could work in other countries, but not so properly in this case. Another question, which has not been answered yet is as follows: **“How to evaluate which sustainability is the priority – social or natural?”** There were several cases, where cultural traditions of doing something are ancient and important for locals, at the same time they are hard to promote, because they are not really nature sustainable. Tourism planning in name of nature conservation on local level often causes some smaller losses in nature confronting it. Can it be worth doing that in the name of much bigger benefits for nature later on?

## Conclusions

Opinion expressed by tourism entrepreneurs on the importance of life quality criteria and other *soft* factors when choosing location of own enterprise proves the different character in *Natura 2000* areas and outside them, proving that entrepreneurs are evaluating more emotional factors and other benefits not only from business perspective.

Conservation of nature environment in the local level sometimes confront with the desire of entrepreneurs to operate only following economic development principles. Without targeted educational support and good communication they often identify some restrictions as a barrier for business. At the same time usage of nature potential as strength of particular area and best option for tourism marketing strategies are very low.

The research confirmed the theoretical claim, that despite comparatively dense competition, a cluster creates opportunities which serve as a magnet for new business initiatives, even if the entrepreneurs did not recognise that. However cluster theory does not work properly because

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locals (that could be even generalised for much broader region) are not enthusiastic to cooperate.

Creative milieu in which businesses operate – interrelationships and co-operation – are an important prerequisite for the development of tourism in the region. This could be as one of the key factors for sustainability, because of collective learning process, social responsibility and involving of locals. However, it is too early to evaluate the importance of that for the nature conservation, both because this co-operation is fairly recent and because there is a lack of data about this co-operation in relation to the economic benefits – how good results they will have from selling of newly developed nature products.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank all the stakeholders involved in the research process, especially the administration of the Rāzna National Park. Appreciation to other colleagues, which are working together on elaborating of tourism development plan for the Rāzna National Park: Valters Pranks, Baiba Strazdiņa, Aiga Petkēvica, Daiga Brakmane from Latvian Fund for Nature and Anita Līduma from Latvian University.

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