

The 3rd International Conference on Economics and Social Sciences
Innovative models to revive the global economy
October 15-16, 2020
Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

**Local Communities and Eco-Tourism: Attitudes
of Residents towards Conservation and Eco-Tourism
in Yammouneh Nature Reserve of Lebanon**

Hamie Mohamad BAKER¹, Abdallah AWATEF²,
Oana-Diana CURTEANU³, Adrian-Bogdan CURTEANU^{4*}

DOI: 10.2478/9788395815072-038

Abstract

Scholars believe that tourism is an essential tool of income creation for communities living in rural areas. However, excluding the local community from the planning and management of tourism may lead to undesired results in rural destinations, and sometimes conflicts and backlashes may occur harming the natural heritage.

In Lebanon, rural tourism witnessed an increase of share within the tourism industry. However, it still encounters challenges when it comes to involving the local community in the tourism management process.

This research aims to analyse the locals' opinions and preferences, in order to determine strategies, attain the participation of local people, and assess their opinions and attitudes toward the eco-tourism in Yammouneh reserve.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Tourism, Yammouneh nature reserve, Lebanon.

JEL Classification: L83

1. Introduction

There has always been a strong bond among protected areas conservation, eco-tourism management and the integration of local residents. IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) defines a protected area as a geographical area that is controlled by legal or other effective means in order to preserve nature in the long term through ecosystem services combined with cultural values.

In many countries, protected areas will only be sustainable if local communities become a vital part of conservation efforts and receive economic benefits from

¹ Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, awatef_abdallah@hotmail.com.

² Lebanese International University, Lebanon, mohamad.hamieh01@liu.edu.lb.

³ Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, oanadianacrimariu@gmail.com.

⁴ Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, adrian.bogdan.curteanu@gmail.com.

* Corresponding author.

those efforts (MacKinnon 2001). Ecotourism is the safest way to provide economic benefits for local communities and to finance protected areas for conservation and management.

Hector Ceballos-Lascurain defines ecotourism as responsible journeys to natural areas to enjoy nature promoting conservation with low negative visitor impact and socio-economic benefits for population. This definition has been adopted by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) during the 1st World Conservation Congress (Ceballos-Lascurain & IUCN, 1996).

Involving the local community in ecotourism and protected areas management is crucial for developing a successful management plan, and it was recommended at the IVth World Parks Congress from Caracas - 1992 (Thomas, Middleton & IUCN, 2003).

Five levels of participation were defined by the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) in the Programme dedicated to Protected Areas by IUCN. While the first level is only informing locals about the management plan, other levels comprise consulting them, deciding together or working together. However, the highest level of participation is to support the community with information and experts to help them make informed decisions (WCPA & IUCN, 2003).

2. Problem Statement

Known for its unique Mediterranean climate, Lebanon remains one of the most attractive sites in the Middle East for its richness in biodiversity. With a very small surface area (10,452 km²), Lebanon boasts to have one of the highest densities of floral diversity in the Mediterranean basin. Seven Nature Reserves were officially established in order to protect endangered species and conserve their habitats covering nearly 5% of the overall area (MOE⁵ Lebanon). However, there are still challenges in achieving sustainable development of these nature reserves, as Yammouneh nature reserve is experiencing destroy of its ecological system by the locals who are not warned.

Ecotourism can be considered a strategy to support conservation, but also a revenue generator for the communities in which it is practiced. Its advantages are multiple, contributing both to economic development and to the conservation of the protected area by: generating income useful for the sustainable management of protected areas, job creation, but also the development of a sense of common ownership. However, if it is not carefully managed and planned to create a balance of its objectives (ecological, social, economic), it can cause damage to the environment (Jalani, 2012).

It is also known that community-based ecotourism (CBET) refers to responsible tourism in natural areas, conserving the environment and improving the wellbeing of locals. Community-based ecotourism can increase employment opportunities and empower the local community (sustainable development) (Ma, Yin, Zheng, & Hou, 2019).

⁵ Ministry of environment.

In the meantime, the ministry of tourism in Lebanon launched the Rural Tourism Strategy for Lebanon in 2014 with one of its main strategic objectives “Improved quality of visitor experience in rural areas of Lebanon” (Ministry of Tourism Lebanon, 2015). Still, involving the local community in the conservation and protection of rural destination remains one of the big challenges.

Since its establishment, Yammouneh reserve management has encountered problems mainly due its relation with the local community and their poor knowledge about the management decisions in the nature reserve. Moreover, locals still face problems starting new tourism projects due to their poor experience in the field and lack of support from experts. While tourism is quite good in the region, yet ecotourism remains unfamiliar in Yammouneh nature reserve. There is no state control over activities harming the environment, no public support for ecotourism endeavours, all in addition to insecurity and poor awareness.

Yammouneh natural reserve is located in Bekaa Valley in Lebanon at a height starting 1300m to 3088m above the sea level with highly particular characteristics.

The region is located in north Lebanon on the eastern slopes of the Mount Lebanon chain, below the highest peak of Lebanon “Qornet El Saouda” (3083 meters above mean sea level), and covers approximately 170 km². The study area is composed of two different regions: the Legal Reserve (LR) and the Conservation Region (CR) (Green Line Association, 2001).

Yammouneh is an area between Asia and Africa in the Eastern Mediterranean. The fresh water that can be found here is very important both for animals and for plants (fish, birds, reptiles, junipers, cedars). There are also therapeutic plants with high potential and important for economic development. Here one can also find goldfish, considered extinct in this environment, but which was recently found in small ponds. There are also many ancient sites in the reservation (the Roman temple and a sacred lake). One can still visit a large water cave west of the temple that fills the lake every spring.

The objectives related to this natural reserve are to preserve its ecosystem, protect the natural resources and rehabilitate endangered species. Thus, this reserve is important for its ecological, cultural and tourism value.

3. Research Questions/Aims of the research

The study was conducted from May till October 2017 using an oral survey by randomly sampling 108 residents, of whom 52 were permanent residents and 56 were seasonal residents (seasonal residents stay in the region mostly in summer and holidays).

The survey measured the residents’ knowledge about conservation issues in the Yammouneh natural reserve and the attitudes of residents towards ecotourism in the reserve and any possible tourism venture. Additionally, interviews with local community leaders were conducted to obtain information about community history and to pilot-test and review the survey instrument.

The questionnaire comprised 30 questions covering the following sections: demographic questions, questions about socio-economic conditions, questions

about knowledge regarding conservation and management issues in the natural reserve and questions about ecotourism in the reserve and possible tourism ventures nearby.

4. Research Methods

Survey data were analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) with level of significance set at $p < 0.05$.

Cross-tabulation data using Chi-Square tests controlled for selected variables were used to determine the degree of dependence between independent variables and attitudes towards ecotourism in the reserve. Independent variables included socio-demographic questions, knowledge questions, participation questions.

5. Findings

Table 1. attitudes of permanent vs seasonal residences toward conservation and ecotourism in Yammouneh nature reserve.

Attitudes of Residents towards conservation and ecotourism	Seasonal Residents					Permanent Residents					P
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
The reserve is important in the conservation of species and the surrounding ecosystem.	28	28	0	0	0	32	14	4	2	0	0.013
the reserve should be maintained and the conservation laws should be enforced	32	24	0	0	0	30	20	2	0	0	0.319
Tourism is important for the region	32	22	0	2	0	28	21	3	0	0	0.161
Ecotourism is important for the region	22	30	2	0	0	22	28	0	0	0	0.383
Do you encourage tourists to visit Yammouneh	30	24	0	0	2	32	20	0	0	0	0.319
Yammouneh region is ready for tourism investment	18	20	8	8	2	26	16	2	4	4	0.118
Ready to participate in awareness programs about ecotourism and wildlife conservation.	10	32	12	0	0	18	30	4	0	0	0.043
Ready to participate in decision making about the ecotourism management in the reserve.	10	26	14	4	2	26	20	6	0	0	0.002

Source: Authors' own contribution

Table 1 reveals that around 94% of the residents within the study believe that Yammouneh nature reserve is important in the conservation of species and surrounding ecosystem and only 2% of them (they are permanent residents) do not agree with this statement. Thus, this is a good start for any management plan regarding conservation of the reserve.

As for the second statement, around 98% consider that “the reserve should be maintained and conservation laws should be enforced” and 2% (they are permanent residents) were neutral regarding this statement. Accordingly, the residents will respect the laws and abide the rules and regulations enforcement in the reserve.

Regarding tourism and ecotourism, 95% stated that tourism is important for the region and 98% considered the same for ecotourism. Moreover, 98% would encourage tourists to visit the reserve and the surrounding region while only 2% strongly would not (they are seasonal residents).

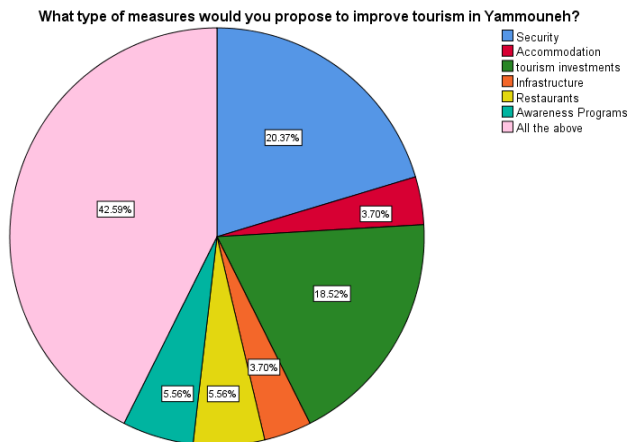


Figure 1. Measures to improve tourism in Yammouneh from residents’ perspective
 Source: Authors' own contribution

Concerning tourism investment, 74% of the residents think that Yammouneh region is ready for tourism investment, with 52.5% of them being permanent residents. However, 16.6% of the total residents did not agree that tourism investment is possible. Also, 42.59% consider that Yammouneh needs security measures, more investments in lodging, tourism, and restaurants businesses in addition to awareness programs to improve tourism as shown in figure 1.

Table 2. Ability to involve in ecotourism venture frequencies - SPSS output

		Would you like to be involved in ecotourism venture in the future?		Total
		No	Yes	
Are you permanent resident?	Seasonal R	18	36	54
	Permanent R	10	42	52
Total		28	78	106

Source: Authors' own contribution

While 66.7% of the residents have not been involved in a tourism venture before, table 2 displays that 73.5% agree to involve in any possible ecotourism venture, 53% of them being permanent residents. Regarding the type of tourism venture suggested by the residents, 39.13% voted for hospitality businesses, and 19.57% chose ecotourism ventures as displayed in figure 2.

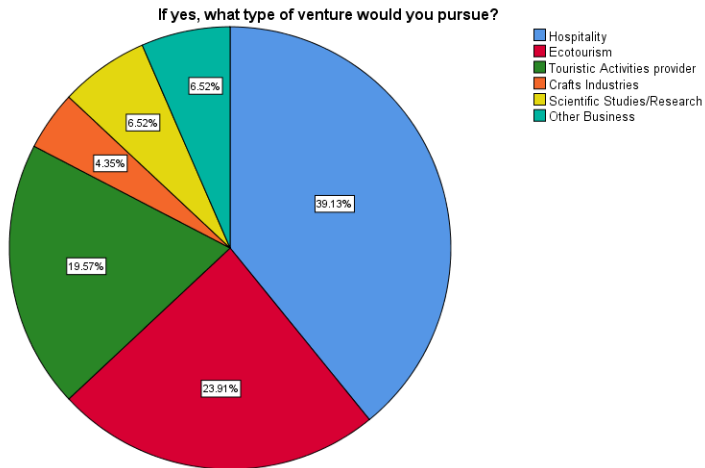


Figure 2. Type of tourism venture suggested by residents
 Source: Authors' own contribution

From the residents' perspective, Camping and Hiking activities would be the most interesting activities for tourists with 24% and 22.2% of the votes, respectively (see figure 3).

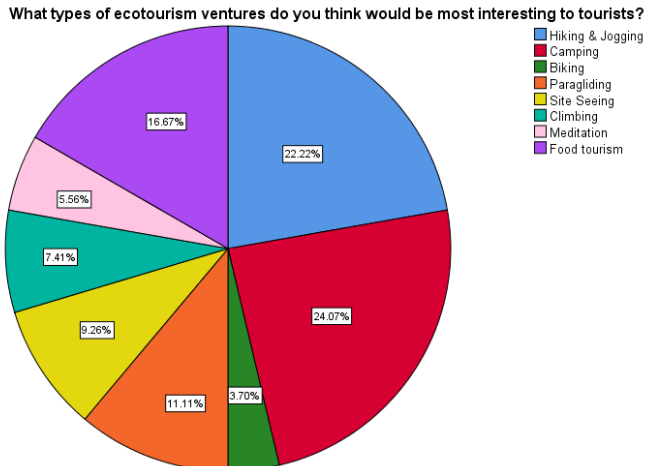


Figure 3. Ecotourism ventures suggested by the residents
 Source: Authors' own contribution

As regards locals' involvement in ecotourism activities, awareness program and decision making, the results shows that 83% are ready to participate in awareness programs about ecotourism and wildlife conservation, (53.3% of them are permanent residents).

Moreover, around 80% are eager to participate in decision-making about the ecotourism management in the reserve, 56% of them being permanent residents.

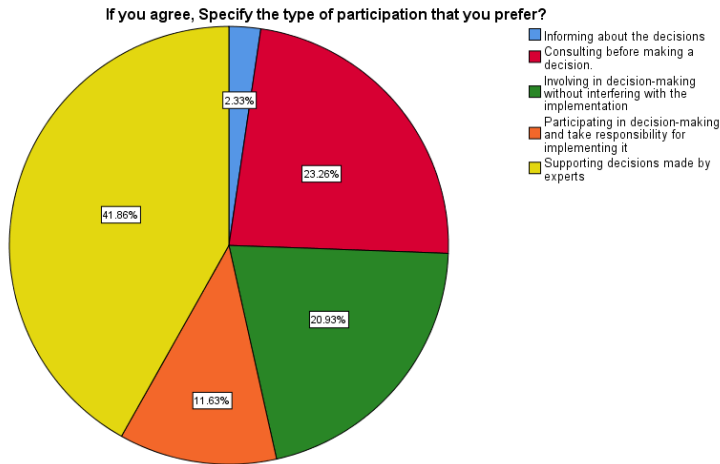


Figure 4. Frequencies of participation Levels in ecotourism management of the Yammouneh nature reserve

Source: Authors' own contribution

Five levels of participation were determined in the questionnaire as defined by WCPA in the Guidelines for Management Planning of Protected Areas. The results in figure 4 show that 41.8% of the residents are in favour of the highest level of participation, which means deciding along the collaboration of experts. Nevertheless, only 2.33% chose to be informed about the decisions without being consulted. This proves that, without the inclusion of residents in the management process, actions plans will be hard to implement in the nature reserve.

6. Conclusion

The permanent and seasonal residents of Yammouneh region were very responsive and supportive of advanced protection measures and showed their willingness to participate in tourism/ecotourism ventures and awareness programs. The only obstacle while dealing with locals was their exclusion from the planning and management process. This led many tourism management plans to perdition. Locals want to be involved in decision-making and implementing processes and have many ideas about tourism and ecotourism in their region. They have the culture to embrace tourism planning. Still, the rural tourism is seen as a trend and not as a culture. Thus, it is crucial to incorporate awareness programs in the rural tourism strategy as well as in the educational system.

References

- [1] Ceballos-Lascurain, H. (1996). *Tourism, ecotourism, and protected areas: The state of nature-based tourism around the world and guidelines for its development*. Gland, Switzerland, and Cambridge, IUCN in collaboration with the Commission of European Communities: UK.
- [2] Green Line Association (2001). *Biodiversity conservation through sustainable use of natural resources in Yammouneh*, Retrieved from: <http://greenline.me.uk/wp-content/uploads/2001/08/Yammouneh-Use-of-Natural-resources-2003.pdf>
- [3] International Union for Conservation of Nature (2020). *WCPA publishes a new guide to identifying ecosystem services in protected areas*. Retrieved from: <https://www.iucn.org/news/protected-areas/202009/wcpa-publishes-a-new-guide-identifying-ecosystem-services-protected-areas>
- [4] Jalani, J. (2012). Local people's perception on the impacts and importance of ecotourism in Sabang, Palawan, Philippines, *Procedia - Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 57, Philippines.
- [5] Ma, B., Yin, R., Zheng, J., & Hou, Y. (2019). Estimating the social and ecological impact of community-based ecotourism in giant panda habitats. *Journal of Environmental Management*.
- [6] MacKinnon, K. (2001). Editorial. *Parks* 11(2). IUCN, Gland, Switzerland.
- [7] Ministry of Tourism Lebanon (2015). *Lebanon rural tourism strategy*. Retrieved from http://www.mot.gov.lb/Content/uploads/Publication/150225013030192~Rural%20Tourism%20Strategy_English.pdf
- [8] Ministry of Environment (2020). *Protected Areas in Lebanon*, Retrieved from: <http://www.moe.gov.lb/protectedareas/>
- [9] Thomas, Middleton & IUCN (2003). *Guidelines for Management Planning of Protected Areas*. Retrieved from <https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/PAG-010.pdf>
- [10] World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) (2003). *Best Practice Protected Area Guidelines Series No. 10 IUCN – The World Conservation Union*. Gland, Switzerland, and Cambridge, UK.