

BASIC QUESTIONS OF ECOTOURISM IN GREECE: DEMAND AND SUPPLY, MANAGEMENT BODIES, ENTERPRISES

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The review and assessment of the ecotourism-related literature reveals confusion as regards the definition of ecotourism, its basic features, its activities and the principles governing it. The absence of a definition generally acceptable by the academic community, those shaping and those exercising politics and, in general, all parties involved in the tourist system, has led to the absence of reliable data about the current size of the sector. This paper is not aimed at providing another answer to the question "what ecotourism is?" or "which activities does it comprise?", but at demonstrating the multifaceted character of the phenomenon and highlighting the various aspects each approach focuses on, with a view to exploring, afterwards, its development prospects, focused on the data of the Greek reality. In this context, the methodological approach applied consists in the following steps: i) Secondary research of the literature on the theoretical framework, ii) Primary research concerning the characteristics of ecotourism in Greece: the features of ecotourist demand and supply, the features of ecotourism organisation and management and, last but not least, the bodies and enterprises involved in the ecotourist development process, iii) Synthetic analysis and assessment of the literature and the field study. The conclusions aspire to lead to

answers about the factors that are critical for the development and organization of ecotourism in Greece.

Keywords: *ecotourism, Greece, management body of protected area, ecotourism enterprise*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a critical issue for the developmental course of Greece and currently more relevant than ever before, because of its spatial and environmental dimensions. The new development planning for the period 2014-2020 has placed tourism among the main axes of the development strategy and acknowledged its very significant contribution towards the effort of the recovery of the Greek economy. In addition, certain reasons are intensifying the necessity for temporal diffusion of tourism and the development of new tourism products (intense seasonality, the rise of new competitive destinations that also offer “sea and sun”, the consequences of the economic recession etc.).

Ecotourism is a main form of the sustainable tourism model (and not only a special form of alternative tourism), given that it covers, under certain conditions, some of its forms (nature tourism, adventure tourism etc.). Furthermore, Greece has a great diversity, uniqueness and authenticity of environmental resources, which vary by type of territory (mountain areas, wetlands, insular/ coastal areas) and may support the ecotourism activity throughout the year. In this context, ecotourism is considered to have potential and also shapes prospects, in order to provide a solution to the issues of the less developed regions of the country.

This research study, starting from the above ascertainties and assessment, attempts to contribute to the exploration of the key factors concerning the development and organization of ecotourism in Greece: ecotourist demand and supply, ecotourism planning, protected area management bodies, tourist enterprises engaging in the field of ecotourism.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CONCEPTUAL APPROACHES AND DEVELOPMENT CHARACTERISTICS OF ECOTOURISM

Ecotourism has emerged through the development of the environmental movement (since the 1970s). Environmental sensitivity, in conjunction with the increasing resentment towards the conventional – mass tourism, has lead to the choice of ecotourism as an alternative form of tourism that is characterised by greater environmental and social awareness. Moreover, mainly since the 1980s, there have been many examples of less developed countries that have depended their development on ecotourism as a means for conserving their rich natural heritage, on one part, and for economic growth, on the other part.

According to the official definition given by the International Ecotourism Society, the first world-wide organization for ecotourism, ecotourism is now defined as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education" (The International Ecotourism Society, 2015).

Fennell, in his paper titled "Ecotourism", cites at least 14 different definitions of ecotourism and formulates his own definition, which is based on those that are, in his opinion, the most significant elements of the phenomenon and the need to ensure accuracy in these principles. Therefore, the definition given by Fennell is as follows (Fennell, 2001:73):

Ecotourism is a sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism that focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, and which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive, and locally oriented (control, benefits, and scale). It typically occurs in natural areas, and should contribute to the conservation or preservation of such areas.

The main characteristics identifying real ecotourism are as follows (Honey, 2008):

- It involves travel to natural destinations, which are usually under some kind of protection (at the national, international, communal or private level).
 - It minimizes impact by using either recycled materials or plentifully available local building materials, renewable sources of energy, environmentally and culturally sensitive architectural design, regulated number and mode of behaviour of tourists, etc.
 - It builds environmental awareness through education, for both tourists and residents of nearby communities. Essential to good ecotourism are well-trained, multilingual naturalist guides with skills in natural and cultural history, environmental interpretation, ethical principles and effective communication.
 - It provides direct financial benefits for conservation; namely the environmental protection, research and education through a variety of mechanisms, including park entrance fees, tour company, hotel, airline and airport taxes and voluntary contributions.
 - It provides financial benefits and empowerment for local people. The local community must be involved with and receive income and other tangible benefits (e.g. infrastructure) from the conservation area and its tourist facilities.
 - It respects local culture. This is not easy, especially since ecotourism often involves travel to remote areas where small and isolate communities have had little experience interacting with foreigners. Part of being a responsible ecotourist is learning beforehand about the local customs, respecting dress codes and other social norms and not intruding on the community unless invited.
 - It supports human rights and democratic movements.
- Assessing the various definitions formulated to determine ecotourism, Diamantis (1999) concludes that most of them include three common elements:
- Ecotourism is natural-based. The main issue is that ecotourism takes place in both protected and non-protected areas, and that it has certain similarities with natural-based tourism.

- Sustainable management. Ecotourism should abolish the “tourism-centered” syndrome and adopt the “nature-centered approach in order to reflect sustainability rather than tourism principles.
- Education-interpretation. The different types of environmental education/ training programmes have highlighted a number of issues. The critical issues with these programmes is that they have to reflect the needs and the demands of both stakeholders and consumers.

Another interesting approach is that of Yeo and Piper from the field of social disciplines, which addresses the issue of defining ecotourism as an ethical and, actually, political issue. It cites characteristically (Yeo and Piper, 2011:12):

To answer the question "what is ecotourism?" is not to simply to say something about what in fact is counted as or called ecotourism but rather what, normatively speaking, should be counted or called ecotourism. The answer to this question matters not just for statistical purposes but also for policy purposes insofar as policy seeks to shape, manage and control the growing ecotourism industry.

Moreover, while the first conceptual approaches were focused on the experience a tourist searches for, which is natural-based, the most recent definitions place emphasis on the various principles that are related to the notion of sustainable development, since it is increasingly acknowledged by industry and governments that natural-based tourism may be sustainable in the long-run only if ethical and preventive management, from the ecotourist supply aspect, is applied (Blamey, 2001).

Concluding, the analysis of the definitions results in four main pillars on which the ecotourism construction is based:

1. Interest in the nature and contribution to its protection.
2. Benefits for the local society.
3. Promotion of education and interpretation.
4. Sustainable management.

Lastly, this study adopts a fifth pillar, which is considered by certain authors (such as Blamey, 2001; Fennell, 2001; Hill and Gale, 2009; Honey, 2008), but not by the majority, as essential to determining ecotourism; this is the small scale, arguing that, if ecotourism is not

maintained at that scale, then the impacts of mass tourism, which is interwoven with the large scale, will gradually emerge.

CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF ECOTOURISM IN GREECE

Methodology

Given that there are no researches and/or studies on the qualitative and quantitative characteristics of ecotourism in Greece, its spatial organization, its development capacities and restrictions, it is considered necessary to supplement the knowledge about the said research question with field study. In this context, the methodological approach applied consists of primary research also, following the exploration of the theoretical framework through literature review.

Specifically, the field study attempts to highlight the key features of:

- ecotourist demand (number of ecotourists, spatial and time allocation per protected area and month);
- ecotourist supply (protected natural areas and their allocation in the Greek territory);
- ecotourism planning (special environmental assessments, joint ministerial decisions/ presidential decrees designating and demarcating protected areas, management plans);
- the protected area management bodies involved in the ecotourism development process;
- tourist enterprises engaging in the field of ecotourism.

Target-populations have been selected so as to serve the research purposes and to answer to the questions posed by it. These are:

A. The 28 Management Bodies (MBs) of Protected Areas (PAs) in Greece, given that ecotourism takes place in natural areas and these areas are the primary field of its activity. The MBs have been, since their establishment by virtue of Law 2742/99, the institutional body having exclusive competence to administer and manage protected areas.

B. Tourist enterprises (tourist agencies, training schools, and any other provider of services related to ecotourism activities) engaging in alternative forms of tourism in Greece, placing emphasis on ecotourism. However, given that the Greek Tourism Organization has no structured database relating to enterprises exclusively or largely engaging in the said form of tourism, a database has been created using data from multiple information sources. The number of enterprises stood at 58.

C. Public, private and professional bodies carrying out ecotourism-related activities (Ministry of Tourism, Greek Tourism Organization, WWF Hellas, Hellenic Ornithological Society, Association of Greek Tourism Enterprises, Hellenic Association of Travel and Tourist Agencies etc.)

D. Tourism experts

A specific group of informers consisting of experts in matters of ecotourism and tourism in general.

Table 1: Field Study Identification Details

Target-Population	Sample	Data Collection Techniques	Timeframe	Research Purpose
Management Bodies of protected area	Full	Literature and online research – Structured interview	May-December 2012	Exploration/ Description
Tourist enterprises engaging in the field of ecotourism	Full	Literature and online research – Structured interview	May-September 2012	Exploration/ Description
Bodies carrying out ecotourism-related activities	Representative	Semi-structured interview	May-September 2012	Exploration/ Explication
Tourism experts	Representative	Semi-structured interview	May-September 2012	Exploration/ Explication

Source: data processed by the authors

Evaluation criteria of the 28 Management Bodies (MBs) of Protected Areas (PAs) in Greece

At this phase, the research was aimed at exploring some of the main parameters formulating the basic characteristics of the development and organization of ecotourism in the Greek territory. Within the above context, four criteria have been set for the comparative evaluation of the 28 MBs.

The first criterion that has been set is **the recognition of the environmental importance of the PAs**. The environmental importance of the PAs is documented through the comparative (between all 28 PAs with MBs) and composite (at national and EU/ international level) presentation of the framework (not only the legal but also the scientific one) recognizing the environmental value of a part of or the total PA that is under the competence of the MB and stipulating its protection (the geographical allocation of the PAs with MB is shown on the following map).

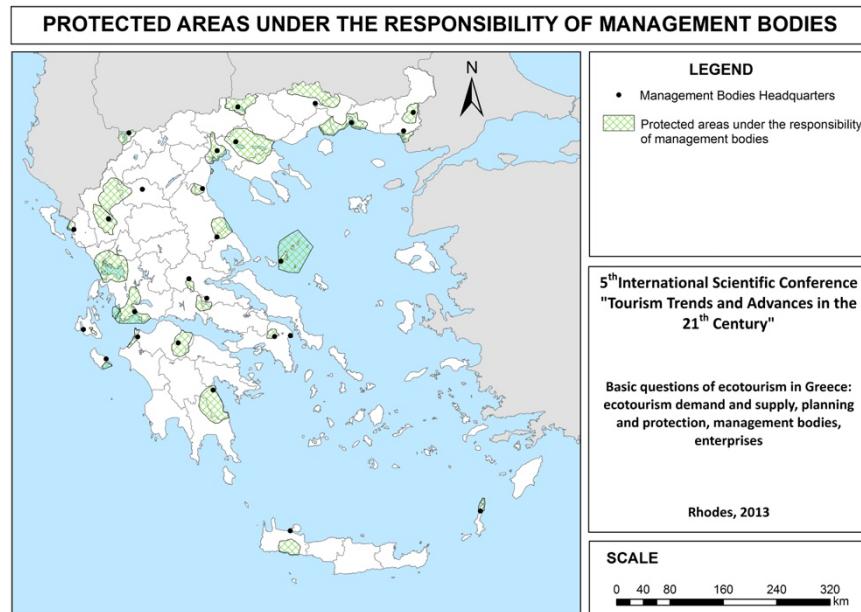
The second criterion is **the progress made in planning the PAs and, subsequently, their protection prospects**. One of the essential conditions for the development of ecotourism, as defined above, is that it must be governed by specific principles and implement a specific strategy pursuing clear objectives (organization, protection, management). Namely, the second basic evaluation criterion is the progress made in the planning, in this case environmental/ spatial planning, which is established by law and dictates the manner in, and the conditions under, which tourism may develop. Moreover, the progress made in the planning is subsequently translated into prospects for the protection of the PAs, which entails long-term quality of the PA's environment and, therefore, greater capacities for ecotourism development.

Moreover, the evaluation comprises of **the facilities and activities provided by the MBs**, based on the institutional framework governing them and the last one criterion is **the tourist demand**. As revealed also by the literature review, it is very difficult to isolate the demand for

ecotourism, because there is, first of all, a disagreement relating to what is defined as ecotourism and which are its characteristics. Therefore, the assumption made by the research is that ecotourists are those who have visited the areas of highest environmental importance in Greece with a MB, using the data recorded in the information centers of these Bodies and in the forest directorates.

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Map 1: The geographical allocation of Protected Areas (PAs) under the responsibility of Management Bodies (MBs)



Findings from the primary research on the 28 Management Bodies (MBs) of Protected Areas (PAs) in Greece

The field study carried out revealed that the importance of these areas has been recognized by both the national legislation (national forests, national parks, etc.) and the EU and international legislation. Such an example is the Samaria canyon, which is the only canyon in Greece that has been awarded a Eurodiploma by the Council of Europe. Moreover, the Mount Olympus (4,000 ha) and the area of Samaria (4,850 ha) in Greece have been designated Biosphere Reserves. Four areas in Greece have been designated Geoparks to date, two of which belong to PAs with MBs and are the Helmos-Vouraikos National Park and the area of the Vikos-Aoos National Forest.

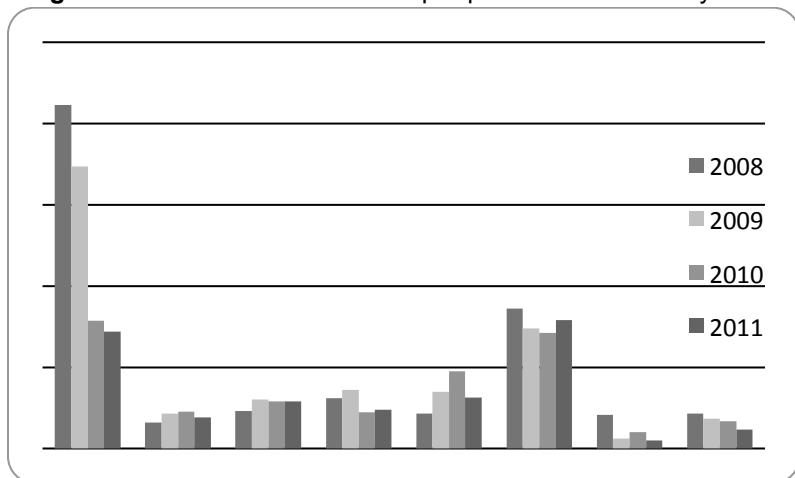
Furthermore, regarding the planning process of these areas, the majority of the PAs with MBs has an approved Special Environmental Assessment (SEA) (25 out of the 28 PAs). A Joint Ministerial Decision (JMD) or Presidential Decree (PD) has been adopted for the demarcation and designation for most of these areas (19 out of the 28 PAs), while since today no Management Plan (MP) has been approved.

In addition, most MBs have established information centers, organize training and awareness programs in cooperation with other competent public or private bodies, as well as conferences, seminars, workshops and other informational events for promoting the management objectives and achievements. The active Bodies with regard to promotion, support, organization and implementation of ecotourism programs are the following: the MBs of the National Park of the Evros River, the National Park of the Koronia-Volvi Lakes, the National Park of the Estuaries of the Axios – Loudias – Aliakmonas rivers, the National Park of the National Marine Park of Zakynthos, the National Park of Northern Pindos, etc. It is noted that WWF Hellas established in 1994 in the National Park of Dadia the first organized ecotourism system in Greece.

Finally, major problems that the MBs have to deal with are the lack of staff, the lack of financial resources, etc., that are reflected in the organization and operation of these Bodies. Certainly, this is a basic

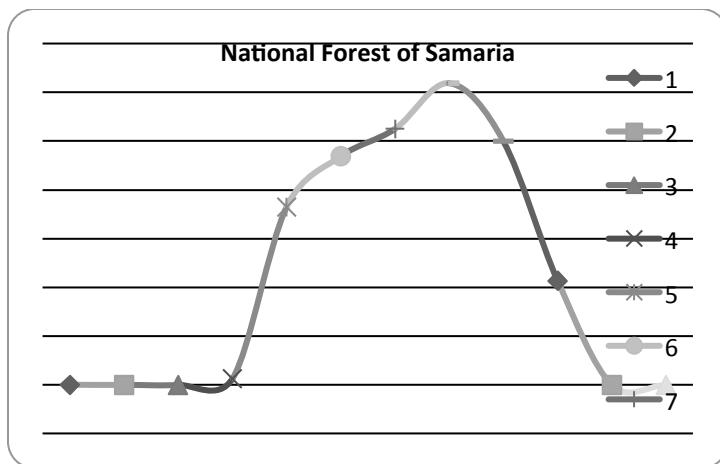
reason that they are not keeping tourist traffic data. As regards those that have provided such data, it is observed that the protected area with the highest number of visits is the National Forest of Samaria, with 135,000 tourists in 2011, followed by the National Forest of the Mount Olympus, with approximately 115,000 tourists. However, it must be stressed out that no safe conclusions may be drawn regarding the demand, since the National Forest of Samaria is the only PA in Greece where tickets are paid for visits and, therefore, the number of visitors is controlled, while the National Forest of the Mount Olympus features a central guard post, through which most visitors enter the national forest, being the central entrance to it, and, therefore, that number approximates the actual demand. This is not the case in the other PAs with MB, since the data come from the visitors' records of the information centers, which means that a person may have visited the Prespes lakes, for example, without having passed through the information center first and, therefore, he has not been recorded.

Diagram 1: Number of ecotourists per protected area and year



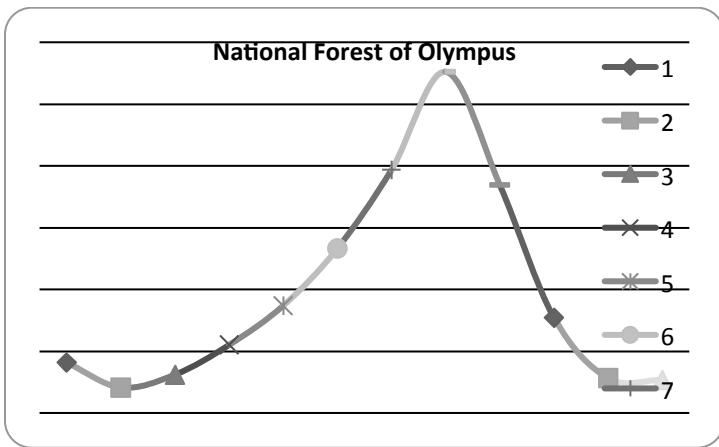
Source: field research, data recorded in the information centers of MBs/ in the forest directorates

Diagram 2: Number of ecotourists per protected area and month:
National Park of Samaria and Lefka Ori Forests



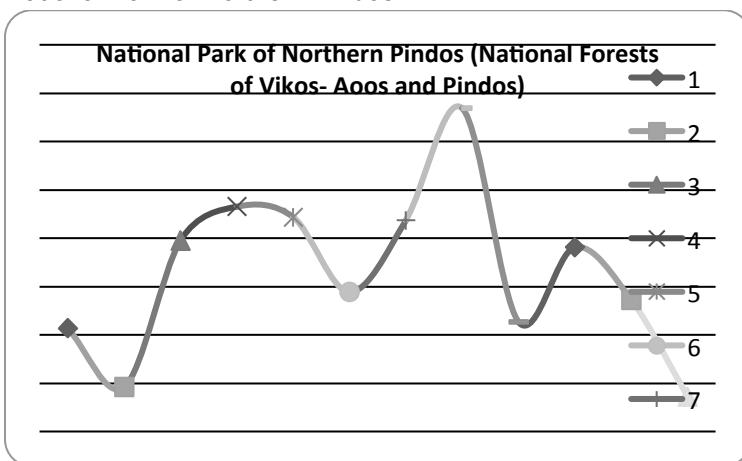
Source: field research, data recorded in the Forest Directorate of Chania

Diagram 3: Number of ecotourists per protected area and month:
National Park of Olympus Mountain



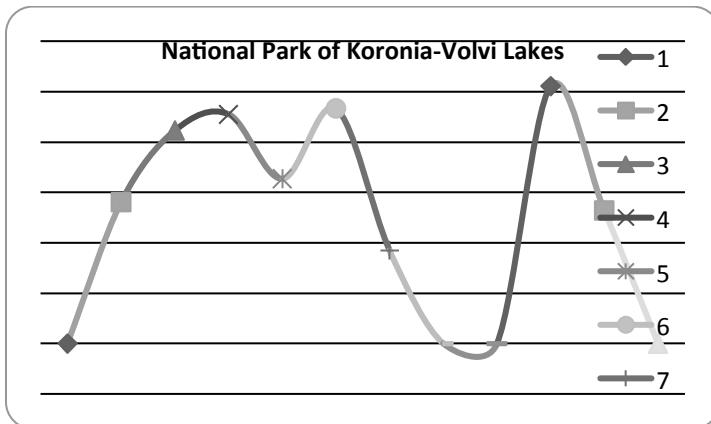
Source: field research, data recorded in the information center of MB

Diagram 4: Number of ecotourists per protected area and month:
National Park of Northern Pindos



Source: field research, data recorded in the information center of MB

Diagram 5: Number of ecotourists per protected area and month:
National Park of Koronia- Volvi Lakes



Source: field research, data recorded in the information center of MB

It is also observed a fall in the number of visitors in 2011 as compared to the 2008 data, i.e. at the beginning of the economic recession, with the exception of the National Park of the Nestos River Estuaries - Vistonida Lake - Ismarida Lake, the National Park of the Koronia - Volvi Lakes and the National Park of the Prespes Lakes (diagram 1).

As regards the profile of visitors, the main categories of visitors are: students at primary and secondary schools, persons participating in organized tours, members of mountaineering associations, individual Greek or foreign tourists with special interest in nature.

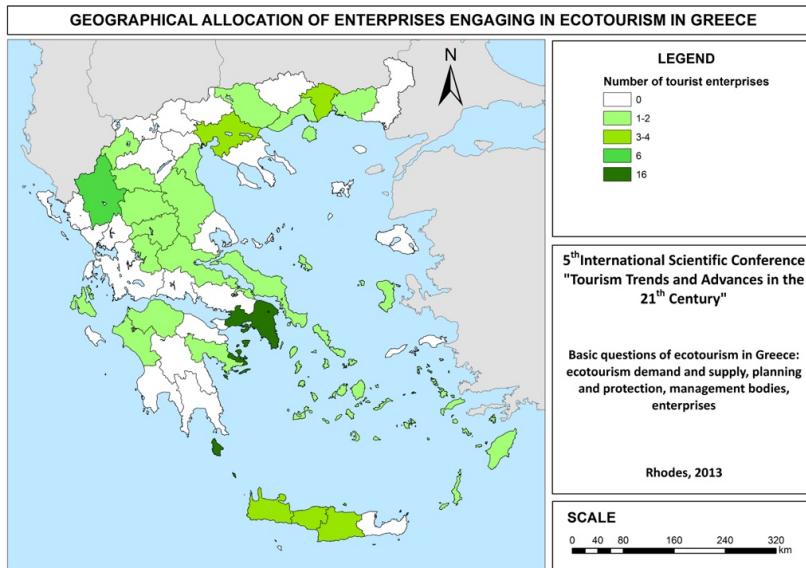
Finally, it is concluded that ecotourism, depending on the environmental resources of each area, may be exercised throughout the year. For example, the Samaria canyon is open for visits from April to October and is mostly visited in August, since that is the time when the highest tourist demand is recorded in the greater area. In other cases, such as the National Park of Koronia- Volvi Lakes, the highest tourist demand is recorded during the spring and autumn months, etc (diagrams 2 - 5).

Evaluation criteria of the 58 Tourist Enterprises engaging in ecotourism in Greece

The following criteria have been set for the comparative evaluation of the 58 tourist enterprises:

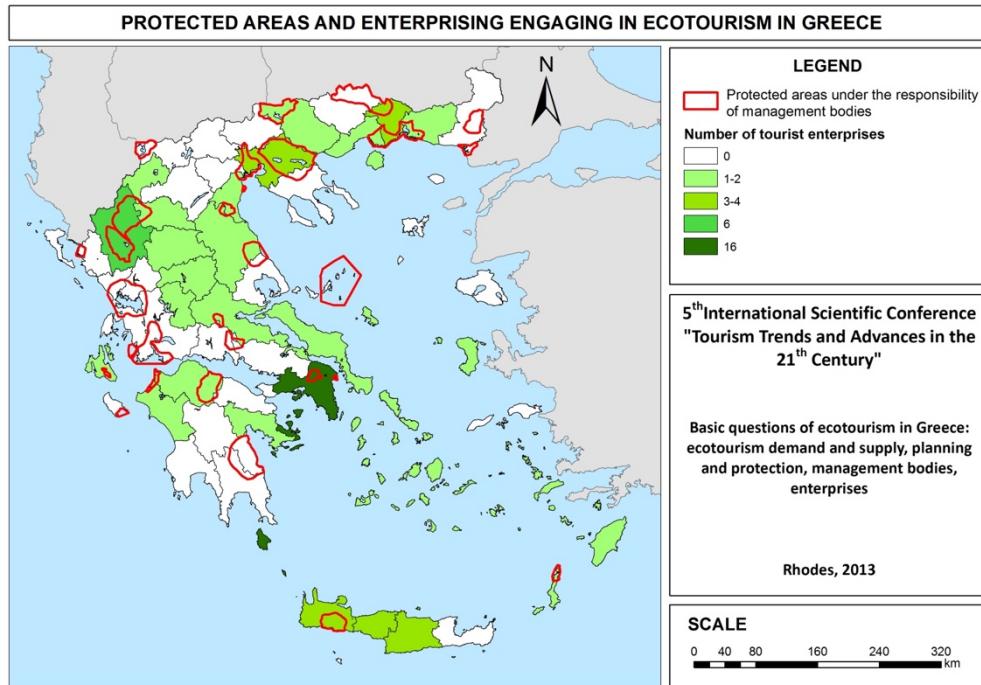
1. The geographical allocation of enterprises engaging in ecotourism (which have been verified to currently operate). This allocation is shown on the following map (map 2).
2. The legal form of the enterprises and their year of establishment.
3. The proportion of tourist agencies in the total number of enterprises.
4. The object of the enterprises.

Map 2: The geographical allocation of enterprises engaging in ecotourism in Greece



Source: field research

Map 3: Protected areas and enterprising engaging in ecotourism in Greece



Source: field research

Findings from the primary research on the 58 Tourist Enterprises engaging in ecotourism in Greece

The field study carried out revealed as regards the geographical allocation of enterprises, that the largest proportion of them are headquartered in the Prefecture of Attica (16 enterprises or approximately 28%), followed by the Prefecture of Ioannina with 6 enterprises (10%).

From the survey deduced also, as expected, the correlation (high or low) of services / activities offered by these enterprises to natural resources (map 3). For example, significant correlation of these two key components of the ecotourist supply occurs in the case of Ioannina. This happens because in the Prefecture of Ioannina located the largest part of the National Park of Northern Pindos as well as the Eco-Development Area of Pamvotis Lake and the National Park of Tzoumerka, Peristeri and Arachthos Gorge.

Relating to the legal form of the enterprises, half of them are companies (approximately 45%), while approximately 28% of them are sole proprietorships. It's also worth noting that the specific enterprises have been mostly established after 1990 (more than 40%), while approximately 28% of the enterprises asked have been established after 2000. This is in line with the opinion that ecotourism, in its wider sense, appeared in Greece in the 1980s (approximately 9% of the enterprises were established in the 1980s), as most forms of alternative tourism did, but mostly developed in the 1990s.

The percentage of legally operating tourist agencies in the total number of tourist enterprises does not exceed 52%, while a large percentage of the enterprises are classified as "other enterprise", which is usually a sports center, a training school, but they also provide, in practice, the services of a tourist agency (i.e. transportation, transfer, accommodation of individual persons or groups of persons).

Lastly, as regards the scope of activity of these enterprises, more than 50% of them provide the services laid down in the law - provision of any kind of tourist agency services (elaboration and execution of excursion

and tour plans, mediation for booking accommodation, mediation for booking tickets, etc.). More than 40% of the enterprises have stated that they may provide any service according to the demand in cooperation with relevant tourist agencies – partners. It has been, also, identified that 17% of the enterprises are specialized in one activity only (e.g. rafting).

CONCLUSIONS

From the literature review inferred that the question of the definition of ecotourism covers a major part of the literature. For example, Fennell (2001) recognizes 85 definitions of ecotourism and finds that dimensions, such as conservation, ethics, sustainability, education and benefits to the local community, tend to dominate in the more recent analysis (Weaver and Lawton, 2007).

Concerning the relation of ecotourism to other similar forms of tourism, there is a subtle distinction in the conceptual definition of three forms of tourism which some researches tend to address as one, due to numerous difficulties. These forms are: ecotourism, nature tourism and adventure tourism and this happens because all three of them usually take place in natural areas of environmental significance. In Greece there is an additional confusion with agrotourism as well.

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the largest part of researches in the literature is covered by case studies related to the ecotourism destination, namely the protected areas of less developed countries. There are almost no researches on the qualitative and quantitative features of ecotourism in Greece. In addition, it is proven that case studies on ecotourism pertain, in their vast majority, to public protected areas.

As regards the basic findings from the primary research on the Protected Areas with Management Bodies in Greece has to be mentioned that even though the institutional framework strengthens the MBs, this is rendered impossible, in practice, due to the serious and chronic lack of economic and human resources.

The evaluation relating to the execution of their competences shows that some Bodies are much more active than the others. This does not

happen only when some Bodies have been established earlier (e.g. the MB of the National Marine Park of Zakynthos), but also because some areas featured a relevant infrastructure which has been reinforced by the establishment of the Body (e.g. the Society for the Protection of the Prespes Lakes facilitated the work of the MB of the National Park of Prespes).

Concerning the planning in PAs in Greece is assessed as incomplete, fragmented and, in certain cases, even non-existent, which largely restricts protection capacities. Moreover, even in PAs where there are plans, there are no appropriate mechanisms for their implementation, control and follow-up. In particular, even though the elaboration of the Management Plans has been an obligation since 1999, no MP in the PAs has been approved to date.

Relating to the enterprises, many of them are referred to as "ecotourist", but they feature very few or none of these characteristics, which means that ecotourism is used to attain economic objectives, by promoting the quality of the environment as a means for attracting tourists and not for conserving the natural capital (a few cases are excepted).

In addition to the above, it must be understood that each Protected Area is unique and special, its ecological value and its carrying capacity per zone must first be recognized by the planning and, subsequently, the conditions/ criteria for its management must be set. For that reason, it is necessary to promote specific and substantial institutional and structural changes that will lead to the creation of a coherent and operating National System of Protected Areas, which will cover not only the areas that currently fall within the competence of MBs, but also all areas that have been included in the ecological Natura 2000 network.

Setting as a prerequisite the rational planning and management of ecotourism in PAs, the potential socio-economic benefits from the development of ecotourism in Greece are as follows:

- Economic diversification, especially in mountainous, remote and rural areas and strengthening of the local economy.
- Increase in the direct and indirect employment.

- Increase in the demand for local products (e.g. ecological/ organic) and services (support to local producers and local entrepreneurs).
- Enhancement of the environmental conscience/ ethics both of the local residents and of the tourists.

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