

## Importance of education for preservation and promotion of ecotourism values of national parks: Case-study of Shebenik National Park in Albania

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**Abstract.** Shebenik National Park (SHNP) is critical in providing ecosystem services, including ecotourism, recreational activities, land and water protection, climate change mitigation, and more. However, the park's true potential for supporting the local community and sustainable development remains largely untapped. It is crucial to promote and guide the resources and values of the park in a manner that benefits the local community. An urgent issue in this area is the need to educate the community, particularly the younger generation, about the significance of recognizing and preserving the ecological and tourist values of the park.

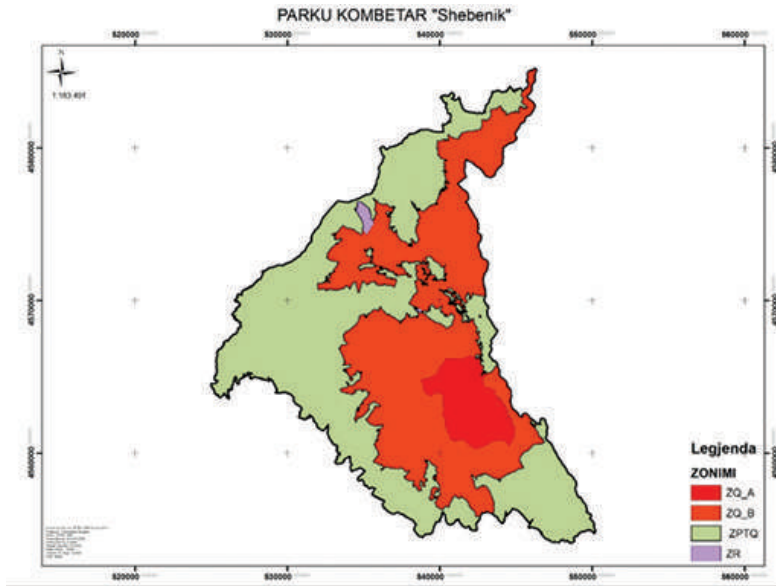
To address this, we conducted semi-structured interviews with rangers, residents, and various stakeholders in the six areas of the park. Stakeholder analysis helped identify key actors, including residents, local, regional, and national agencies, NGOs, and more. Ecotourism education emerges as a crucial factor in attaining a sustainable standard of living and improving the lives of the community. To achieve this goal, it is essential to emphasize the importance of education in preserving and promoting the park's natural and cultural resources and to leverage the diverse benefits available to diversify the community's income sources.

By strengthening ecotourism education and raising awareness about the park's values, Shebenik National Park can become a catalyst for sustainable development and improved livelihoods for the local community.

**Keywords:** Shebenik National Park, education, ecotourism, local community, stakeholder analysis

### Introduction

Shebenik National Park (SHNP) lies in the green belt of Europe and is also included in the arch of the Dinaric Parks. Additionally, this park is designated as a Candidate Emerald Site. The Emerald Network is an ecological network of Areas of Special Conservation Interest (ASCIs), which were established to conserve the species and habitats included in the Bern Convention on the Conservation of



**Fig. 1.** Map of Shebenik National Park

Source: "Shebenik" National Park 2022.

European Wildlife and Natural Habitats. Convention requiring specific protection measures. The park comprises an irregular strip of land approximately 30 km long in the north-south direction and 3-12 km wide in the east-west direction, with a total area of 33,928 ha. The park is situated between the Macedonian border to the east and to the north, the road connecting Stëblevë to Librazhd, and further southeast to Përrenjas; from Përrenjasi, it extends back to the border with Macedonia (see Fig. 1). The central point of the park is located at coordinates 24.4° longitude and 41.2° latitude (DCM no. 59, dated 26.1.2022).

The Shebenik National Park is divided into four areas, as shown on the map in Figure 1, each characterized by different levels of protection and economic activities (Table 1).

**Table 1.** The four management areas of SHNP

Area	Protection level	Surface (ha)	% of total area	% cumulative
Central	Level 1	14,046	41	41
Sustainable use	Level 2	5,253	15	56
Recreation	Level 3	2,209	7	63
Traditional use	Level 4	12,420	37	100
<b>Total</b>		<b>33,298</b>	<b>100</b>	

Source: Management plan of SHNP 2015-2025.

**Table 2.** Summary details for six of the seven municipal units that contribute to the SHNP

Municipal unit	No. of vil-lages	No. of fami-lies	Popula-tion	Cultivated land (ha)	Agri-cultural land (ha)	Munici-pal for-est land (ha)	Total land area (ha)
Stëblevë	7	534	2,102	406	1,276	1,800	11,884
Lunik	7	869	4,180	718	1,249	2,470	10,841
L. Qendër	12	2,833	11,354	1,904	3,028	4,637	17,531
Hotolisht	8	1,932	7,104	909	1,465	3,688	17,610
Qukës	11	2,829	10,879	1,832	2,881	N/A	12,388
Rrajcë	7	2,629	10,639	1,227	1,742	4,151	6,735
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>11,626</b>	<b>46,258</b>	<b>6,996</b>	<b>11,641</b>	<b>16,746</b>	<b>76,989</b>

Source: Management plan of SHNP 2015-2025.

The population of the park is around 46,258 inhabitants (see Table 2). People have continuously inhabited this area. There are traces of early settlements from the Bronze and Iron Ages throughout the park. The local community primarily focuses on agriculture and livestock, producing organic products such as milk, cheese, butter, and the famous Stëblevë potato variety. Furthermore, the introduction of the area to various Albanian and international tourists has paved the way for the establishment of several guest houses, a sustainable and environmentally friendly form of tourism.

### **Problems in the current status of SHNP**

One of the key challenges in this area is the lack of community and youth education regarding the recognition and preservation of the ecological and tourism values of the site, which are crucial for benefiting from the park's potential activities. Many individuals within the Shebenik National Park are still unaware of their presence in a national park and the importance and value of the area. Moreover, it is crucial to promote the ecotourism values of the site for the development of family-mountain tourism, which can enhance economic income for the community. This is linked to the finding that the consumptive behavior of tourists can lead to destructive tourism activities. Therefore, ecotourism is seen as a solution for economic development, nature protection, and community welfare improvement (Theng, Qiong, Tatar 2015). Additionally, visiting a national park can contribute to supporting the livelihoods of local people and the park itself (Eagles, McCool 2002).

However, only a few initiatives are currently focused on sustainable development in the area. There is a pressing need for more accommodations, guides,

guest houses, quality hotels, restaurants offering traditional dishes, and other amenities. Although the Regional Agency for Protected Areas has made some efforts to mark trails, there is still limited information about the park's surface area and the destinations it offers. While community leaders generally support ecotourism, they recognize the need for more effective implementation of ecotourism policies. This is due to the weak and fragmented status of local institutions, a lack of professional leadership, challenges in political decision-making, and insufficient law enforcement (Hoyman, McCall 2013).

### **The values of the park**

Fundamental natural system values, assets, and opportunities (water environments, grasslands, scrub shrubs, and forests) include important habitats, high diversity of plants and animals, and the development of many endemic and threatened plant and animal species. We consider essential habitats listed in the Habitats Directive (Council Directive 92/43/EEC) (important for conserving European biodiversity), those restricted in Albania, or with species with limited distribution, rare or essential carriers. The park includes a vital catchment area for the Shkumbin River, characterized by numerous alpine lakes (natural and artificial), springs, streams, and rivers. These water environments provide essential habitats for a variety of aquatic species (wild fauna), including otters (mammals) and endemic brown trout (freshwater fish). Water resources are also crucial for the life of the local population: for primary purposes (especially springs and potable water), for irrigation, for aquaculture, but also as part of the landscape attraction and thus for tourism attractions. The forests provide essential habitats for several medium to large mammals, including the Balkan lynx, wolf, and brown bear. Forests are also important sources of timber firewood and various non-timber forest products, such as fruit plants, star junipers, and thermophilic deciduous forests (oak forests). The latter is particularly significant as a winter food source for livestock. Furthermore, the forests play an essential role in regulating water quality and flow regime, reducing the risk of landslides by enhancing water penetration and soil stabilization (geological risk), lowering soil erosion rates, and acting as a carbon filter, thereby reducing the risk of climate change. Additionally, they serve as a major attraction for tourism, contributing to the scenic beauty of the landscape. This region has been identified as one of the country's 45 Important Plant Areas due to the presence of endangered and endemic/restricted plant species, high overall species richness, and the existence of nationally or regionally critical habitats.

The socio-economic values of the Park are related to the sustainable use of those resources and services that its ecosystem can provide. These include the water resources, the possibility of a variety of tourist attractions related to both the natural and cultural values of the park, a traditional agricultural system with good opportunities for specific and high-quality ecological products, the production of timber and various non-timber forest products, as well as oppor-

tunities for fish production through aquaculture. It is crucial to support and encourage the community to add medicinal plant surfaces to overgrown lands to reduce pressure on exploiting the park's natural resources. When the community receives economic benefits, it is encouraged to expand the agricultural land (Stone, Nyaupane 2018).

Cultural features are considered together as part of tourist attractions. The park also includes several historical sites, such as Skanderbeg's staircase and table, and cultural features, such as natural caves (Ice Cave, Christ' Cave, and Hermit's Cave), some of which have wall paintings.

In addition to the village of Qukës, there are other cultural treasures found in the region. These encompass time-honoured crafts like woodcarving, crafting stone objects like millstones, constructing stone houses, fashioning traditional costumes, and engaging in traditional dances. These cultural assets play a vital role in preserving the area's heritage and traditions.

Outdoor recreation activities are undertaken to create learning experiences that enable students to understand how human-nature relationships have been constructed over time (Board of Studies 2000). Visiting a national park will help support the lives of local people and the park itself (Eagles, McCool 2002).

### **The methodological aspects**

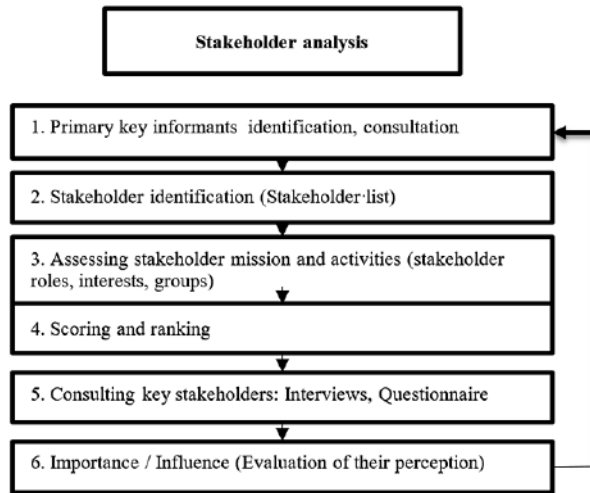
The main objective of this study is to emphasize:

- 1) the education and awareness for the community and the young generation to protect the values of nature;
- 2) the importance of promoting eco-tourism values for preservation and sustainable development.

The methods of obtaining data were:

- semi-structured interviews with rangers and park staff before and after the park visit;
- semi-structured interviews with residents of the six areas of the park and the other stakeholders.

Although the interviews were the primary data collection form, field observation, and analysis documentation were incorporated as a form of triangulation. This means of enriching and cross-checking the interpretation of primary data increases the depth and validity of the findings (Patton 1990, 187). Stakeholder analysis is one of the approaches we used to identify the main stakeholders who have the role and essential impact on the economy and the sustainable development strategy. We attempted to include all of the stakeholders to analyze their perceptions and attitudes (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2.** Stakeholder analysis

*Source:* Adopted by literature review.

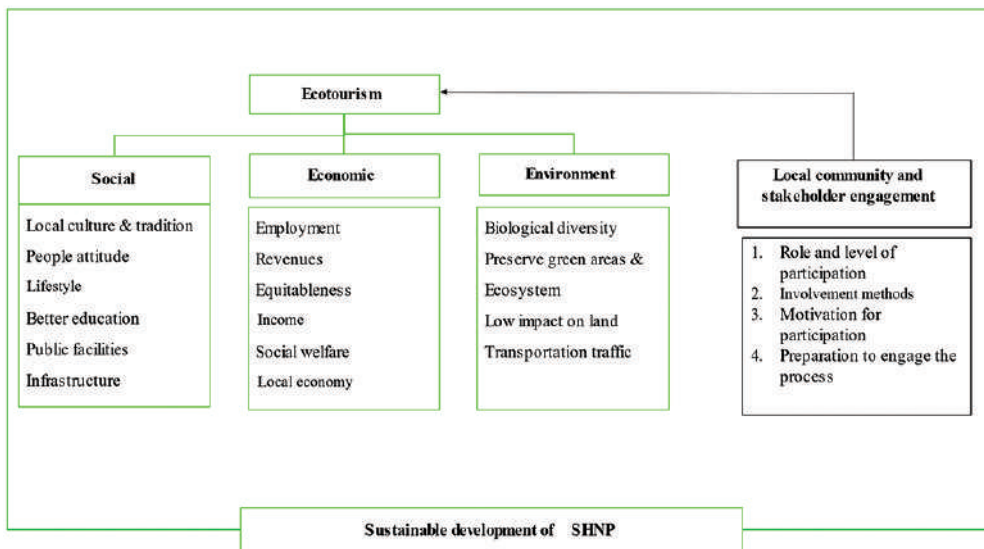
### **Importance of ecotourism**

According to Dowling and Fennell (2003), Osland and Mackoy (2004), the United Nations World Ecotourism Summit (2002), and Weaver (2008), ecotourism refers to sustainable nature-based travel. It aims to preserve the natural environment, provide economic benefits to local communities and industries, and educate and satisfy tourists. Educating tourists about the environment and local culture influence their awareness, comprehension, appreciation, values, and behaviors, advancing the goals of ecotourism. This, in turn, enhances visitor experiences and satisfaction while boosting the park's economic performance.

Despite the recognized importance of education in ecotourism (e.g., Gilbert 2003; Kimmel 1999; Marion, Reid 2007) and the need for tourists to learn about the local environment and culture (Fennell 2001), ecotourism remains underdeveloped in this region. Mass tourism is evident, particularly on weekends, even though 75% of visitors are aware of the environmental effects (survey findings).

To promote the growth of ecotourism as a component of sustainable development in this region, an effective strategy is vital. The strategy should be analyzed across three dimensions: social, environmental, and economic. It requires the full inclusion of all stakeholders, including the local community. A careful analysis of their involvement is crucial, as depicted schematically in Figure 3.

The primary objective is to address improper behavior that poses risks to wildlife and the environment to support the conservation of nature (Orams 1996; Rodger, Moore, Newsome 2007). Palmer (1998) suggests that tour op-



**Fig. 3.** Conceptual framework for a successful ecotourism strategy as part of sustainable development

*Source:* Adopted by literature review.

erators have a responsibility to instill in their guests a sense of personal accountability and stewardship, which will influence their behavior in natural environments. Shianeez and Kavanagh (2008) argue that ecotourism operators should actively promote sustainable tourism by fostering environmental awareness and ethical conduct among guests, employees, and the local community. To achieve this, ecological education is extended to tourists through various channels such as on-site programs, in-school initiatives, and employee training programs.

## Results and discussion

The village of Fushe Studen serves as the location for the visitor center of Shebenik National Park. Since its establishment, the visitor center has played a crucial role in providing information and assistance to both local and international tourists seeking to explore the abundant natural offerings of Shebenik. Tourists can conveniently access comprehensive information within the visitor center to enhance their experience in the area. The majority of our interviews were conducted at the visitor center, amounting to a total of 379 semi-structured face-to-face interviews with various stakeholders, as presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Breakdown of the interviewees

Government, state officials, policymakers	15
National Agencies of Protected Areas (NAPA and RAPA)	8
Scientists/Research/Professor	18
NGOs	5
Tour operators	7
Tourists	100
Hunters and fishermen' representatives	5
Farmers' representatives	7
Local communities' representatives	10
Local community	200

In relation to the data processing carried out with all these actors, Shebenik faces major challenges about the importance of education and the opportunities for developing an ecotourism strategy. These challenges include:

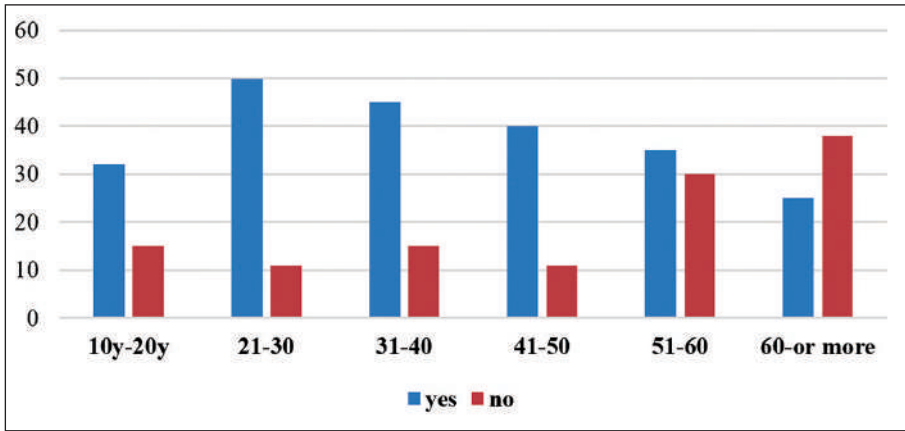
- Insufficient environmental awareness and education.
- Inadequate infrastructure.
- Lack of recognition and understanding of the park's values.
- Mismanagement of budget and revenues.
- Unsustainable agricultural practices and deforestation.

Based on our interviews, it was found that emigration, agriculture, and tourism are the primary sources of income for families residing in these areas. Surprisingly, guest houses generate the highest revenue among the various activities in the park, despite falling short of the required standards. An overwhelming majority of visitors (85%) highly appreciate the scenic beauty, landscape, cuisine, and local products offered in the area, which are reasonably priced and of exceptional quality. The region holds immense potential for both the local community and tourists alike.

The survey reveals that a significant majority (75%) of respondents grasp the wide-ranging significance of SHNP for sustainable development.

However, a paradox arises when considering the residents living in the park area. Among respondents aged 60 and over, 40% lack awareness of the significance of residing within the park. For some, the park is merely perceived as a "forest area". Interestingly, due to emigration, the 21-30 age group, which is underrepresented in this region, exhibits a greater understanding of the benefits associated with living near a park. Approximately 50% of them acknowledge the value of residing in proximity to a park but express concerns regarding the limited job opportunities, and inadequate infrastructure such as roads, schools, hospitals, etc. (Fig. 4). Additionally, a considerable portion of those who choose to remain do so to eventually leave the country, as previously outlined.

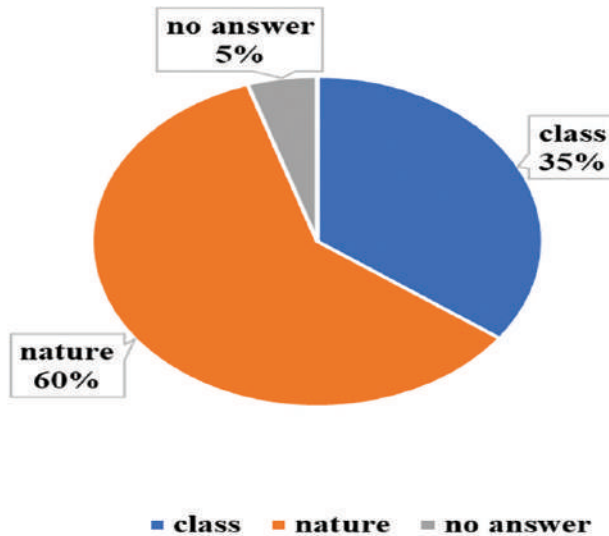




**Fig. 4.** Distribution of the answers to the question “Do you know that you are living in a national park?”

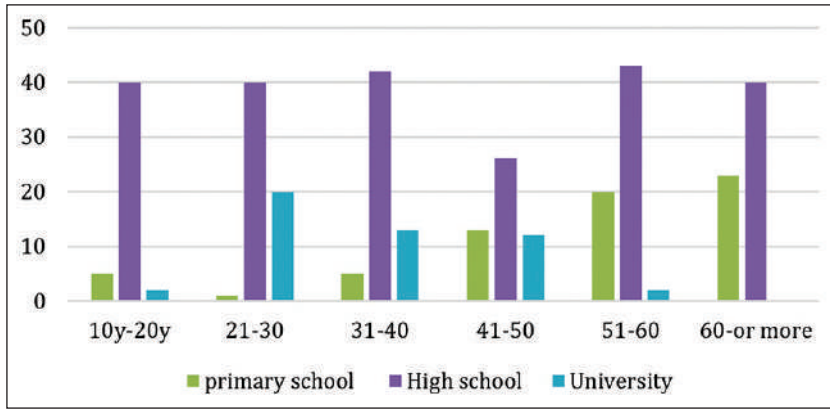
*Source:* Data processing by the authors.

A majority (60%) of respondents expressed a preference for learning outside the confines of a traditional classroom (Fig. 5). They cited reasons such as finding it more straightforward and conducive to better understanding, avoiding fatigue, enjoying the experience, promoting inclusivity, and the practical and hands-on nature of outdoor learning. In environmental education, out-



**Fig. 5.** Distribution of the answers to the question “Which environment is better for learning - the classroom or the outdoors?”

*Source:* Data processing by the authors.



**Fig. 6.** The level of education of the residents

*Source:* Data processing by the authors.

door and adventure learning have been integrated primarily through a “practical-interpretive” paradigm, as Palmer (1998) proposed, which provides opportunities that stimulate enjoyment while nurturing a deeper understanding and awareness of the environment.

In terms of the correlation between education and the sense of place, the responses indicate that 65% of residents near Fushe Studen harbor concerns and attribute higher significance to education and ecotourism compared to those residing farther away. Our observations revealed a trend wherein individuals residing at greater distances from the center exhibited less interest and knowledge regarding the importance of living in a protected area. This pattern also holds for residents’ level of education and recognition of the value of ecotourism education (Fig. 6).

According to Shuhui Yang and Xiaoyu Duan (2020), ecotourism education in foreign national parks is primarily implemented through diverse channels, including schools, local communities, parks, environmental education centers, and specialized ecotourism programs. It is worth noting that 85% of respondents, along with a majority of researchers and foreign visitors, underscore the significance of fostering ecotourism development in the park. They emphasize the value of adapting education practices employed by developed countries to the specific context of this park.

The key types of ecotourism education encompass the following:

- Conducting both formal and informal ecotourism courses.
- Disseminating ecotourism guides to raise awareness and understanding.
- Equipping locals and tour guides with the knowledge to serve as “ecotourism interpretive guides”.
- Encouraging tourists to engage with local communities by visiting families.
- Organizing environmental education activities within parks and schools.

- Strategizing and implementing ecotourism education projects for effective planning and execution.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

In conclusion, community awareness regarding the protection of the natural resources within the Shebenik National Park, including the importance of preserving the UNESCO-designated area, is vital. It is recommended to encourage the community to expand the cultivation of medicinal plants and engage in economic activities that cater to tourists, thereby improving their quality of life.

Ecotourism education can be effectively implemented during different stages of tourism, including “before the tour”, “during the tour”, and “after the tour”. Hence, it is suggested to develop environmental education activities encompassing these three stages.

To achieve these goals, it is crucial to enhance the understanding of the significance of education in preserving and promoting the natural and cultural resources within the park area. Additionally, the utilization of various benefits to diversify income sources should be explored.

The following recommendations are proposed:

- Emphasize landscape and environmental preservation through education and raising awareness within the local community, since living in protected areas it is not considered a long-term profit for them (Muça, Diku 2020).
- Promote ecotourism by integrating cultural and natural values, creating a mutually beneficial relationship.
- Strengthen the communication and educational components of park management by establishing long-term educational programs and setting up an informative nature center and educational games.
- Establish permanent Local Awareness Committees, consisting of various civil society actors, that are formally connected to the park management.
- Encourage collaboration between non-governmental organizations, the National Agency of Protected Areas of Albania (Agjencia Kombëtare e Zonave të Mbrojtura - AKZM), and local groups to improve park management practices.
- Integrate ecotourism education into schools and foster collaboration between park agencies and educational institutions to promote environmental education.

By implementing these recommendations, the Shebenik National Park can effectively promote sustainable practices, enhance community engagement, and facilitate the preservation of natural and cultural resources while fostering economic growth.

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