



Regeneration of the protected area of Lake Shkodra for sustainable tourism development

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Abstract

Nowadays, sustainable tourism development is a necessity for all countries that appeal for tourism. The local community is considered to be an important factor in supporting tourism development. Shkodra Lake, the largest lake on the Balkan Peninsula, is a very important protected area with great potentials for tourism development. The purpose of this study is to address the need for the regeneration of this area for sustainable tourism development. The survey was used as a quantitative research method. The questionnaire to the local community of Zogaj village was used as a research tool. The research results showed the community's attitudes about touristic values of Zogaj village and the importance of their use for sustainable tourism development, about the situation and the prospect for the regeneration of Zogaj village for STD. The findings of this research will help tourism planners and decision-makers to sustainable use of local resource of this area for the successful tourism development today and future.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, local community, Shkodra Lake, Albania.

1. Introduction

Over the decades, tourism is the economic sector with the fastest growing in the world. It plays an important role in economic development all over the world. For most developing countries, it is the main source of income. Economic benefits from tourism result from the use of the attractiveness of the country's natural and historical-cultural heritage as the first input of tourist product. Those economic benefits from tourism have increased competition between tourist destinations (UNWTO, 2018). However, the tourism development, as a powerful agent of change in the developing countries, has the potential for positive and negative impacts, especially at the local level (Lankford & Howard, 1994; Lee, Li & Kim, 2007; Swarbrooke, 2002). Nowadays, data show that tourism will continue to increase in the coming years (UNWTO, 2018). If this expected growth of touristic demand is accompanied by uncontrolled developments of tourist activity, then it will lead to the degradation of the touristic product base, environmental resource (Dibra & Golemi, 2014; Paun, 2018; Zontek, Zontek & Szewczyk, 2018). On the other hand, nowadays, visitors are looking for products with local taste, culturally attractive and aesthetically pleasant (Cengiz, 2012). Under all these conditions, the quality of the local environment attractiveness and diversification of tourism products play a key role.

The impacts of tourism development are more sensitive to the local community of the area where tourism takes place. The tourism development pathway to minimise the negative impacts is STD (Choi & Sirakaya, 2005). STD is a long-term approach to moving on economically successful tourism today and future without harming the natural and social environment while ensuring tourist satisfaction and fair distribution of costs and benefits to host actors. In other words, if tourism development improves rather than erodes the local environmental quality, a more sustainable tourism product can be developed to support the local destination's economy (Batra & Kaur, 1996). In this way, tourism development will give its important contribution to the SD of the country.

Regarding the sustainability of tourism benefits at the local level, an integrated and consistent approach to planning and management is needed to protect natural resources from various tourism pressures (Gunn & Var, 2002). Causins and Kepe (2004, p. 45) states that local communities should play a proactive role to ensure benefits from tourism. In this regard, the participation of the local community in the process of planning for STD is very important. It has been considered as a positive force for change and passport to STD (Claiborne, 2010).

For as much as tourism activities involve local resources, the sustainable use of these resources, solving the problems of the local community or orientation of development in accordance with local aspirations and ability, local knowledge and folk cleverness are needed. The host community participation provides real information to the policy and decision-makers about potential tourism resources and attractions, actual problems within their communities, necessities for sustainable use of the environmental resources in their area and new ways to overcome problems in the community for STD (Lucky, 2016). This real information will allow policy and decisions-makers to orientate investments towards the real needs of the community, which will effect on increasing the efficiency of resource use and lead to improve the quality of community life, consequently it will empower the community's trust and support during the investment implementation process. Often, planners, policy and decision-makers may be unconscious of many tangible and intangible benefits of environmental resource to be used for the development of the country. Lack of current knowledge and information will lead them to improper policy and decision-making for SD. If policy and decision-making in tourism are unfair, their impacts can often be irreversible to nature and community or with a very high cost because tourism takes place in sensitive ecological and social environments with a touristic appeal (Middleton & Hawkins, 1998; Swarbrooke, 2002). Also, the local host community participation is an important factor for STD because the success of tourism relies greatly upon the goodwill and the hospitality of the host community as part of the tourism product (Swarbrooke, 2002). Local communities are one of the main reasons for tourists to travel and experience the way of life and material products of different communities, to enjoy the 'natural' landscapes, shaped by local communities, which in themselves will help shape the background of the tourist's experience in the

host community (Assante, Wen & Lottig, 2010; Richards & Hall, 2000). Consequently, if tourism development and planning are not in line with the local aspirations and opportunities, they can destroy the tourism industry's potential for SD of the destination. At the same time, if we have a community that is happy, who feel that they have a voice in tourism planning, it will support the tourism development, allowing tourism to bring social-economic and environmental benefits (Cavus & Tanrisevdi, 2003).

In order to plan and develop tourism in a sustainable manner, it is important that tourism planners and developers understand local populations' perceptions of tourism development. Thus, the research on local community's perceptions of tourism development is helpful for STD. Such research is useful for developing measures to overcome problems while exploiting market opportunities for further development of tourism, and for gaining local community support to make plans for further tourism development in a sustainable way. But, these local community's perceptions of tourism development in a developing country are much neglected (Ernoul, 2009).

This study is appropriate to deal with tourism development in a local protected area and its associated community in a developing country such as Albania. The purpose of this study is to address the need for the regeneration of this area for STD.

The findings of this research will help tourism planners and decision-makers to the sustainable use of local resource of this area for a successful tourism development today and future in Zogaj village. Also, this study fills the gap in the academic literature of the study on community perceptions to tourism development in developing countries.

2. The research problem statement

Now, it is acknowledged that sustainable development is the necessity of time for each country and that tourism is an important contributor in this direction if it is developed sustainably. This takes even greater importance when tourism is developed in a sensitive and delicate environment such as protected areas.

Albania is a developing country that after the 90s strongly appeals for tourism development as a catalyst for the economic and social development of the country. One of the potential tourist destinations in this country is Shkodra Lake with its surroundings. Shkodra Lake is the largest lake of the Balkan Peninsula in terms of its water surface, varying between 353 km² in dry periods and 500 km² in wet periods (REC Albania, 2010). It lies on the border between Albania and Montenegro with about two-thirds of its surface belongs to Montenegro and about a third belongs to Albania. Both parts have a different status of the protected area. The Montenegrin part of the lake and its surrounding area has National Park status. The Albanian part is designated as a Managed Natural Reserve. In 1996, by the Ramsar Convention for the lagoons, Shkodra Lake was included in the Ramsar list of lagoons of international importance. Shkodra Lake connects with the Adriatic Sea through the Buna River, a floating river and borderline between Albania and Montenegro. Mediterranean climate is pre-dominant in Lake Basin. The high annual potential of solar radiation is considered as an ecologic factor with a high importance for the area. 62% of the water of Shkodra Lake comes from the Moraca River of Montenegro. The lake is also supplied with water through sub-springs, locally named 'The Eyes'. They are located not far from the shore of Shkodra Lake and are interesting to visit. The unique physical environment has made it to consider as one of the most important natural habitats in the Balkan Peninsula: it was recognised as one of the 24 European transboundary wetland sites of international importance, identified as 'Ecological Bricks Sites'; it is one of the five most important sites in Europe that welcomes winter water birds; it is placed in one of the most important European migration routes of the birds, which travel to the Balkans; it has 203 species of birds, where about 90% of the birds belonging to migratory species and having international significance; it has unique and rich flora and diverse fauna that include numerous endemic species; it is also considered as one of the diversity centres for freshwater fishes and other animals for all of Europe (REC Albania, 2010).

Shkodra Lake also represents an important source for the community close to it. One of these communities of the Albanian part of the lake, on the border with Montenegro, is Zogaj village. It is 12 km from the city centre of Shkodra and located at the foot of the Tarabosh Mountain and the shore of Shkodra Lake. There are some small swampy bays, surrounded by greenery. In addition to the unique natural environment, the characteristic stone houses painted in white, and the cobbled alleys that descend from above, add to the landscape's charm of this area. Zogaj is a fishing village over 300 years old. Fishing on the lake has generated a rich gastronomic culture, which is supplemented with the use of other local products. Also, lake encourages arts and crafts in the lakeside community producing well-known products and artworks. The area's women continue traditional crafts with a contemporary touch of carpet making and other hand-made work. Thus, the environment of this area with ecological, scientific, historical-cultural, recreational, health, aesthetic values and the welcoming community may be considered as important factors for tourism development. Traditionally, this community has relied on the primary industry such as fisheries, agriculture and livestock to sustain the local economy and shape their social identity. However, those industries are now in decline for reasons such as depletion of the fishing resource due to incorrect use of this resource, land use for building surfaces, emigration and migration of the population. Around 60 families are living in this village. They have a low level of socio-economic well-being. Tourism can, therefore, become a significant part of the community's economic bases in this area while diversifying the economy of the area, encouraging the development of other local economic activities, raising awareness of the environmental preservation and increase the quality of life of the inhabitants of the area.

The fast growth of world interest for the orientation of tourism activities towards places of special ecological importance resulted in the promotion of Shkodra Lake as an eco-tourism area. But the rapid and uncontrolled expansion of tourism in this area has significantly transformed the environment and the life of the local community. A group of the local community does not understand the tourism phenomenon and their role for the successful tourism development today and future. This is because tourism is a new phenomenon for the local community of Zogaj village, isolated until the '90s as a border area, and because they did not choose tourism, but tourism chose them. In addition, tourism development managed and organised for short-term benefits from the start and without any tourism authority to support the local community participation, which has made local community without awareness, influence and control (Dibra & Golemi, 2014). But, failure to recognise or estimate the relations between wetland ecosystem services and human well-being by policy and decision-makers may lead to the making of unfair decisions in wetlands, which are often irreversible to the nature and community of these areas or with a high cost.

In this way, this study undertakes to address the research question: What are the perspectives of the local community of Zogaj area on STD in their area? To clarify this question, these research objectives have been set: to explore and evaluate the attitude of the local community for the tourist potential of this area and local community's perceptions for the problems that need to be overcome for the regeneration of this area to STD, which will serve as necessary action guides to consider during policy and decisions-making for the sustainable development of this area.

3. Methods

The research design in this study was of an exploratory type. To cover contents of this research and to develop the survey, literature related with sustainable tourism development, the importance of protected areas, management of Shkodra Lake and resident attitude surveys were reviewed and the area in the study was observed. The survey was used as a quantitative research method to collect data as the most popular one for measuring attitudes that provide several, reliable and organised data, and keeps anonymity to push response to sensitive issues. Questionnaire was used as a research instrument. The questionnaire was generally structured with closed questions that facilitates management and analysis of data and facilitates the response of the respondents and makes these responses reliable. The population of interest was the local host community of Zogaj village. A

small-scale test was run to test the research instrument before its distribution. The validated final questionnaire consisted of five sections: a respondents profile containing six questions with alternative choices; the local community attitude on the importance of environmental protection in Zogaj, on the touristic potentials of area; on the role of tourism in the economy of Zogaj village, on the situation and the prospect of Zogaj area for the STD. All attitudinal statements were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, according to which participants stated on their level of agreement or disagreement with magnitude from (1) – strong agreement to (5) – strong disagreement. This is a very useful measurement scale when we need to obtain an overall dimension of attitude about a topic. Also, closed questions with alternative choices were used. The final instrument was administered in the study from the local host community of Zogaj village whom were over the age of 18 years old and were agreed to participate. Sample’s selection was random, but it had kept the report 50% female and 50% male in order not to have gender impact on the survey results. A total of 100 questionnaires were distributed in May 2018, of which 70 questionnaires were completed and usable. A research software tool – Qualtrics – was used as a fast and easy method to process the collected data. Descriptive statistical methods were used to analyse the research results. To easily interpret these results, the five-level Likert scales were grouped into three levels: agreement, neutral and disagreement.

4. Results and discussions

4.1. Respondent’s profile

In terms of participation in the survey of the 70 respondents by gender, female respondents dominated with 54% in the total respondents participating, which tells us that women trust more for a better future of their village through tourism development, whereas by age, respondents in active work age (18–60-year-old – 86%) dominated the survey. In relation to the respondents’ educational level, most of the respondent had the first and second level of education (39% each of them), while the rest had a university education. This level of education was reflected in the low level of income of most respondents (69% of respondents had their family's monthly average income under 200 euro). Almost half of the respondents (49%) had fishing as the main source of income for their family. As the main source of income for the family of the other part of the respondents were from tourism, handcraft, retail, medicinal plants collection, public institutions and retirement income. At the same time, 11% of respondents of local host community were unemployed. Most of the respondents had over 20 years living or working here (56%) and consequently know the nature of the development of this area. From the above data, women, married persons, highly educated people and employed were the most sensitive and aware of the importance of involvement in the survey and the purpose of the survey.

4.2. Community attitude on the importance of environmental protection in Zogaj area

All respondents accepted their responsibility to take care of nature. Almost all of them understood that their socio-economic welfare is based upon nature and biodiversity of the area and for this is too important the environmental protection (Fig. 1).

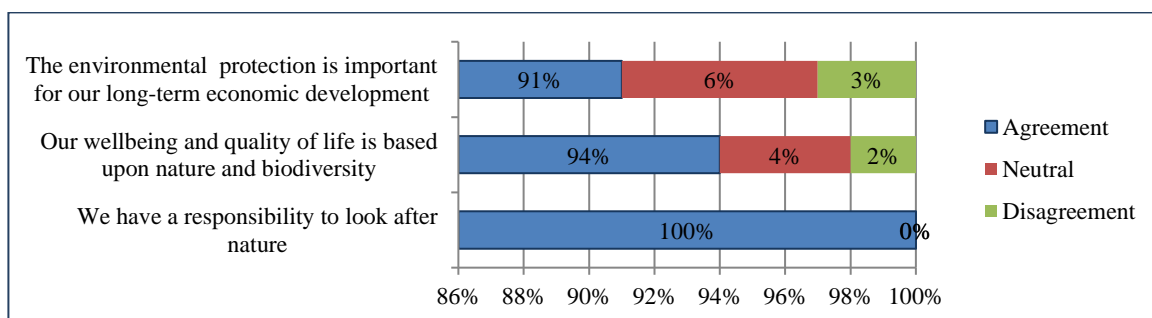


Figure 1. Community attitude on the importance of environmental protection in Zogaj area

4.3. Community opinions on the touristic potentials of the area (Fig. 2)

The local host community of Zogaj village can identify the potential attractive sources for tourism within their area. All respondents believed that Zogaj area has considerable potentials to develop tourism as a significant part of the local community's economic base.

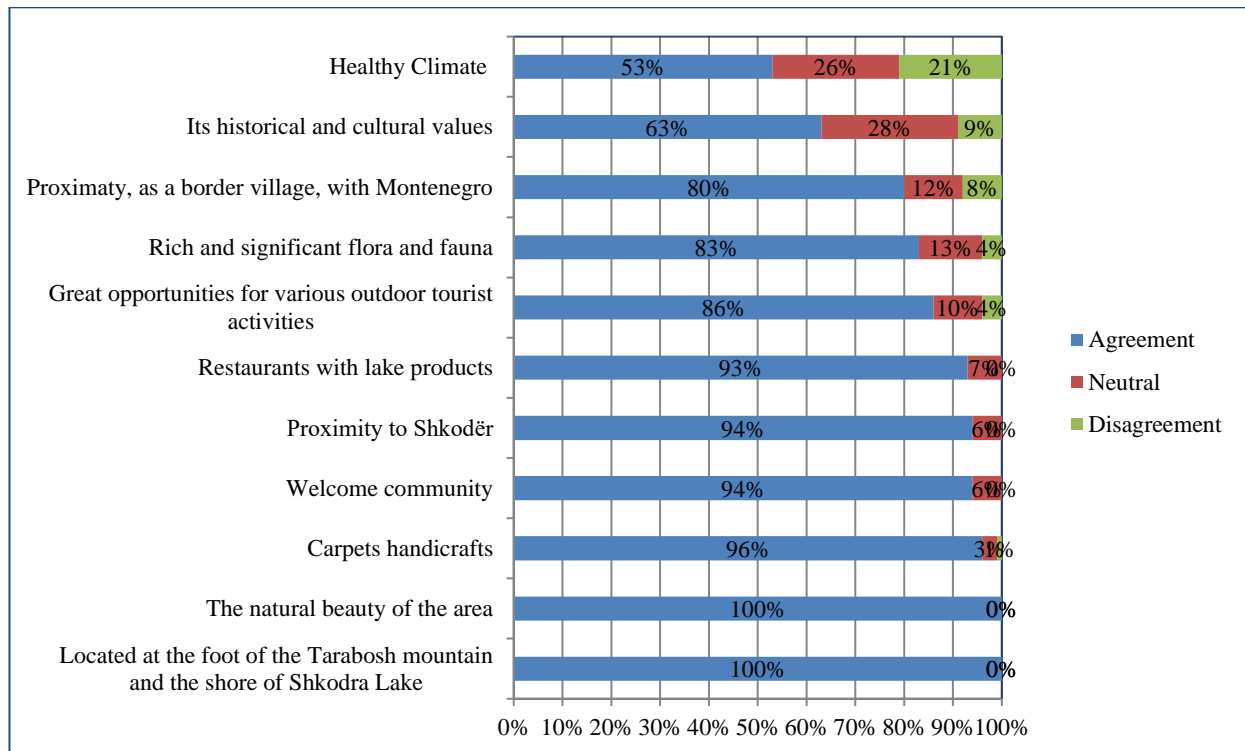


Figure 2. Community opinions on the touristic potentials of the area

In particular, they initially evaluated the geographical position of Zogaj village, situated on the shore of Lake Shkodra and at the foot of Tarabosh Mountain and beautiful natural landscape scenery. Almost every one of them (96%) agreed that the village handcraft tradition in the manufacture of carpets, a tradition which has been preserved throughout the generations, is an added value of the tourist potential of the area. It is worth pointing out that almost all respondents (94%) understood the value of their tradition in hospitality in the experience of potential visitors in this area. Among the other tourist potentials, most respondents expressed their agreement for the possibility of developing gastronomic tourism with lake and local products (93%), and for great opportunities for developing various outdoor activities throughout the year (86%). 83% of respondents then evaluated the rich and important flora and fauna of this area is another tourist potential. At the same time, more than half of the respondents acknowledged the tourist potential that derives from historical-cultural values (63%) and the healthy climate (53%) towards this area. They also value the fact that this village is accessible from the capital of northern Albania – Shkodra city (90%), and being a border village with Montenegro country (80%), with the potential to be accessible directly from this country through the lake or in earthly roads.

4.4. Community opinions on possible tourist activities throughout the year in Zogaj area

The local host community of Zogaj village is able to identify potential tourism activities that derive from these sources in their area. All respondents believe that the tourist potential of the area provides

opportunities for various tourist activities throughout the year, such as lake tourism, ecotourism, gastronomic tourism, scientific tourism, cultural tourism, cycling tourism and agritourism (Fig. 3).

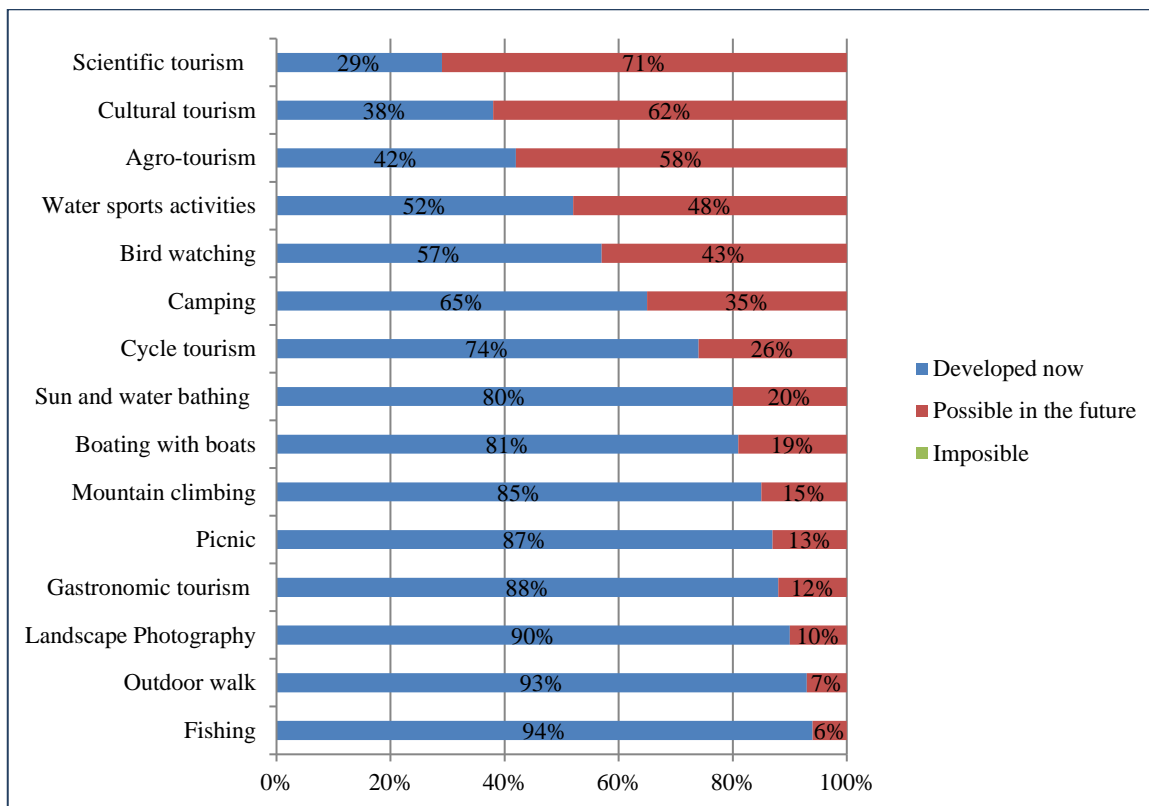


Figure 3. Community opinions on possible tourist activities in Zogaj area during the year

4.5. Community perceptions on the situation and the prospect of Zogaj area for the STD

More than half of the respondents (57%) felt that tourism is a significant part of the community's economic base in Zogaj village. The rest of the respondents did not yet see tourism as an important contributor to the community's economic well-being of this village. But almost all respondents (96%) agreed that the regeneration of this area for tourism development could contribute to the sustainable development of the area. However, in the conditions when Zogaj village was an isolated border village before the 90s; when, after this period, it did not choose tourism, but tourism chose Zogaj area; when the local community assesses the potential of the area for tourism development and the latter's contribution to the SD of this area, local community participants in the survey present a number of problems to be solved for the regeneration of this area for STD (Table 1).

Table 1. Community perceptions on problems to be solved for the regeneration of this area for STD

Problems to be solved	Agreement	Neutral	Disagreement
The problem of land ownership	95%	4%	1%
The expansion of Zogaj–Shiroke connecting road with another course for vehicles and a course for bicycles, with the necessary lighting, road signal and parking area	92%	7%	1%
Prohibition of aluminium waste spill into the lake from a factory in Podgorica of Montenegro country	92%	7%	1%
The expanding of outdoor tourist activities throughout the year and the development of public spaces for this	90%	9%	1%
Creating of a mark for this area	87%	13%	0%

Construction of a local promotion centre	86%	14%	0%
Development of qualified human resources in tourism	72%	22%	6%
Need for the reconstruction of the health service centre to operate this service in Zogaj	70%	20%	10%
Installing the sewage system	70%	16%	14%
Extension of the public bus service timetable	70%	24%	6%
Opening the Customs Point with the Kraja area of Montenegro state	65%	21%	8%
Control of constructions to respect status as a protected area and the local character of the area	57%	33%	10%

Almost all respondents (95%) agree on the primary importance of solving the problem of land ownership in Zogaj village. This will serve to increase investment in tourism development in this area. Respondents understand the importance of ensuring access to a tourist area. This will have an impact on increasing the number of visitors and tourism investments in the area. Therefore, they (92%) sought expansion of Zogaj–Shiroke connecting road with another course for vehicles and a course for bicycles, with the necessary lighting, road signals and parking area. 92% of them agree on the importance of prohibition of aluminium waste spill into the lake from a factory in Podgorica of Montenegro country was the third problem to be solved. This shows that they were aware of the impact of this action on making unsafe water for swimming and living underwater. They (90%) also required the development of outdoor tourist activities throughout the year, so that tourism brings sustainable income throughout the year to the host community. This is the necessary development of recreational areas for beaches, public spaces for leisure, observation points, paths for walking, etc. They sought the creation of a tourist brand for the Zogaj area (87%) to identify the attractiveness of this area from the tourist market and the construction of a centre for promoting local products for the tourist market (86%). 72% of respondents understood the need to build local human capacity for tourism development in this area, where tourism is a new phenomenon for the local community. Just, the pleasure of tourist consumers depends on the quality of human resources in tourism structures because the service distributed by these employees is the essence of the tourist product offered. Respondents expressed a high degree of agreement (70%) to the need for the reconstruction of the health service centre to operate this service in Zogaj. This shows that they feel responsible for the lives of visitors during their stay in this village. 70% of the respondents' demand for the installation of the sewage system is made even more urgent with the increase of investment in tourism structures. Extension of the public bus service timetable is needed by 70% of respondents not only for the local community but also for the attraction of visitors, especially from the city of Shkodra. At the same time, 65% of respondents saw opening the Customs Point with the Kraja area of Montenegro state as an opportunity to increase the number of tourists. Furthermore, more than half of the respondents (57%) are responsive that the new land development must be in line with the natural and local character of this area and to respect its status as a protected area.

5. Conclusions

This research takes a closer look at tourism based on the local area and its associated community. Zogaj village can be visited for different dimension values. The local community of this area agrees that the regeneration of this area for tourism development could contribute to the sustainable development of the area. Before tourism is used as a development tool in a community, it needs to be developed. In this regard, the participation of local people is important in the planning of successful tourism development today and future. For this, findings of this study on local community perceptions of Zogaj village on natural, the cultural-historical values of the area, potential tourism activities that derive from these values in their area, the importance of tourism development for their socio-economic welfare, and the prospects of the tourism development in their area would be helpful to guide future collaborations in conjunction with the Strategic Plan of the regeneration of this area for

STD. So, the local community should aware of the natural, historical-cultural values of their area, and they believe that these values should be protected for sustainable tourism development. Hence, they express their responsibility by seeking prohibition of aluminium waste spill into the lake from a factory in Podgorica of Montenegro country, installing the sewage system, and that the new land development must be in line with the natural and local character of this area and to respect its status as a protected area. They also believe that these touristic sources of this area should first be easily and safely accessible from the tourist market so that this area can attract more tourists and investor in tourism. Moreover, they appreciate the tradition of their hospitality as another important reason for tourists to travel to it, to experience the way of life and local produce of this area. Also, the local host community in this area should aware that the satisfaction of tourist customers depends on the quality of human resources in tourism structures. Therefore, they seek the development of local human resources for tourism. The study further concludes that it is necessary to increase the number of outdoor tourist activities throughout the year by developing recreational areas for beaches, public spaces for leisure, observation points, walking paths, events for the sustainable socio-economic well-being of the local host community. Understanding residents' perceptions help tourism planners strategically to utilise resources for the regeneration of this protected area to STD and to gain resident support for further tourism development.

Although this research was useful in exploration some of the residents' attitudes towards tourism in Zogaj village, more research needs to be done to complete the picture. A future research effort can be a regression analysis between the demographic variables and the participants' attitudes towards tourism development.

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