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# Some Issues Referring to the Management of Beaches at the Local Level - Case Study of Croatia

Mirjana Kovačić, Astrid Zekić

The authors based the research on the main topic that a beach is more than a strip of land dedicated to tourists for their leisure activities. In order to achieve this, beaches have to be developed in regard to the surrounding landscape and the needs of the local community.

The main focus of the research is on local and guests' perspective of beaches, thus results highlight important issues in this relationship which may enable improvements in beach managing.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the interdependence between sustainable beach managing and local/tourist needs and satisfaction.

The goal of this paper is to propose a model of sustainable beach managing that has a direct impact on development processes of the beach.

Research methodology includes an overview of recent projects and references and as a result it helps to understand why it is important that beaches should have sustainable managing. One of the important project goals is to differentiate different beaches and their main attractions as well as their adaptation to a particular target group and the emergence of new forms of specific thematic beaches.

## KEY WORDS

- ~ Beach
- ~ Tourists
- ~ Local community
- ~ Sustainable beach managing

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Beaches are one of the most important coastal resources and as such they require a holistic approach in managing. Today, beaches in Croatia are a resource whose development is more or less successfully managed by regional and local authorities.

When the first seaside resorts opened in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Holloway, 2006) and when they started to expand in the 1840s, the growing interests in seaside resorts meant also an increase in research activities. First research papers were published in England where the culture of the seaside vacation was the most established one. Other well-known European destinations, such as the Mediterranean coast in France and Spain, also gradually attracted the researchers' interest. Researchers focused at first upon geographical and geomorphological changes at the side landscape (Cendrero and Fischer, 1997; Cicin Sain and Knecht, 1998; Defeo et al., 2009; Williams and Micallef, 2009) and later the interest gradually extended to socio-economic aspect as well (Jovičić and Dragin 2008; Kovačić et al., 2013; Marković et al., 2010), including tourism which ranged from purely economical to sustainable and gradual to interdisciplinary researches, by combining different scientific fields (Kovačić et al., 2010; Ozhan, 1996).

However, beach managing is still an open question. It depends upon different variables. Some researchers (Botero and Hurtado, 2009; Jovičić and Dragin, 2008) think that the carrying capacity is one of the most common tools for beach managing, while some others (Botero and Hurtado, 2009) highlight beach user density as the most important variable. Finally, most researches assert that good managing includes beach evaluation.

This research provides a new point of view as it clarifies the relationship between the role of all stakeholders, the public administration, local communities, tour operators, spatial

planners, and the others aiming at sustainable beach managing, as well as the tourist satisfaction.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Nowadays, the value of a beach cannot be measured only by its natural assets. Tourist's demands are on the increase and they expect places where they can create their own experiences by activating their own networks and resources (Gnoth and Jaeger, 2007).

There are multiple beach evaluation methods that can be used to evaluate natural and cultural (Markelj et al. 2014; Micallef, 1996), as well as other socio-economic aspects of a beach and its environment (Kovačić et al., 2013; Simm et al., 1995; Williams and Micallef, 2009).

However, the paper focuses on the method of beach thematization that can be best described via a project done at the national and regional level (Kovačić and Magaš, 2014). The purpose of the projects Adriatic Sea Stars has been to raise awareness of all stakeholders in the tourism sector in order to preserve the coastal area.

In many countries, local government has the power to adopt subordinate legislation that is related to beaches and beach managing. Nevertheless, most provisions regarding beach managing are contained in Coastal Zone Management Acts or some sectoral provisions. Legislation (WHO 2000), that relates to the quality of the sea for swimming, beach safety, recharge and protection of the coast, access to beaches and protection of crucial ecosystems, is of particular interest for beach managing.

It is a recognizable concept duty of care, that includes responsibility by either private operators or members of the public (Williams et al., 2009). It implies that good practice of beach managing is based on interdisciplinary knowledge of scientists, experts, and the local community.

Beach managing in Croatia can be perceived from the aspect of sea protection, ecological aspect and the aspect of authority that was, in accordance with the Maritime Domain and Seaports Acts (OG 158/03, 100/04, 141/06, 38/09, 123/11, 56/16) and the Concession Act (OG 69/17), given to the regional self-government (counties), and local authorities (cities/municipalities). In this way, it is possible to apply concessions and concession approvals, and beach management has the function of retaining or improving a beach as a recreational resource and it has a very important function in beach managing.

Concessions for beaches in Croatia are given by regional self-government, and in some counties this responsibility has been assigned to the local government. Managing on a local level is carried out according to maritime domain management plans issued by cities/municipalities in the way that concession approvals are given or that communal companies manage it.

Over the last few years, the aspiration and willingness of local government to assume responsibility for managing beaches through the concession institute in their administrative area is visible. In this way, local government has an additional motive, in accordance with the existing spatial plans, to directly manage the development of beach resources.

Croatian public administration mainly stipulates conditions for beach usage with an emphasis on the capacity, i.e. the maximum number of beach equipment and accompanying facilities (Jovičić, 2008; Marković et al., 2010). As the legal provisions in Croatia are very complex, their implementation at the local level is dependent on the knowledge of employees and their understanding of beaches as a resource of special importance. The lack of knowledge and evaluation of beaches sometimes leads to their overuse. This results in a dissatisfaction among the local people and different tourists' expectations. The conflict caused by a different understanding of beaches, wishes, motives and experiences have been the subject of the research whose results are given hereafter.

## 3. RESULTS

The realisation of the fundamental objective of this research was to recognise the economic and ecological impact of the increase in tourist traffic and tourists consumption. A special focus was on the growth of tourist satisfaction and greater opportunities for the employment of local people. A large study, which included an analysis of 1000 beaches in Croatia along the Adriatic coastline, was carried out during 2014. In 2015, the Primorsko-goranska County started working on a regional program of planning and managing beaches. The project leader of both projects was the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality, Opatija, Croatia, as well as several interdisciplinary teams of scientists who also participated in the project.

The project included a series of activities from conducting surveys among stakeholders (concessionaires, locals and tourists) to workshops in cities and municipalities of the region. The survey questionnaire covered several groups of questions, the general ones and the specific ones addressed to concessionaires and tourism workers, and in particular questions for tourists and questions for the local population to find out how they perceive the issue. The most important results of the study are presented in this paper.

The analysis of the questionnaires indicated a series of open questions and issues, opposed interests, different desires and motives.

More than 80 % of respondents think that they know who manages beaches while 12 % of them say they do not know it. The others gave no answer to the posed question about who manages beaches. Those who do not seem to know who

manages beaches think that local government should manage them, independently or in cooperation with concessionaires, tourist board or agency in charge of maritime domain managing.

Stakeholder (concessionaires and locals), who were asked what they thought about the present model of beach managing, emphasised the absence of a beach managing model with clearly defined rights and obligations, a complex legal framework, overlapping of jurisdiction, a complex procedure of granting concession, frequent changes in spatial planning documentation, redundant administration, the lack of understanding of development initiatives, unsolved property and legal relations, out of date beach categorisation, uneducated local people, the impossibility of closing the beach to ensure a quality offer to tourists and their safety, and issues related to beach managing within camps. On the other hand, local people advocate open beaches in camps, and concessionaires and tourists think that camps must have a security check. Concessionaires are almost unanimous in assessing that local government should support those concessionaires who are willing to invest in beaches to raise the quality of service and offer. They have a positive opinion regarding beach thematisation. They have also pointed out the importance of beach categorisation with regard to the equipment and service quality. Concessionaires think that their association does not make enough effort to promote their interests.

The local population thinks that institutions (regional, local government and tourist board) do not pay enough attention to beach resources. They also point out issues regarding an adequate access to beaches, especially for people with disabilities, and the lack of parking areas. Furthermore, the locals think that some beaches are usurped by both the concessionaires and tourists, so that the locals have a reduced possibility to go swimming.

Moreover, the locals point out the problem concerning the breach of the concession agreement, i.e. the use of beaches in such a way that the obligations regarding investments are not respected and that besides the activities for which the concession was given, some other activities, not given by the concession, are carried out. Also, some other facilities are set up and the number of sun loungers and parasols is increased. The locals are in particular sensitive to the closure of beaches and think that it is justifiable only in special cases, when beaches are part of naturist camps, luxury hotels and resorts. Nevertheless, the entrance to these beaches has to be allowed by paying the entrance ticket.

The analysis of answers given by tourists indicate the lack of offer and order, overcrowded beaches, and the issue of beach pollution. Tourists showed partial satisfaction with the quality of beach services, and they emphasised the purity and beauty of the sea and beaches. The following answers have been given to the question whether some form of payment should be introduced

to use well maintained beaches: most of them (29,3 %) is against the introduction of a fee to use well-maintained beaches. 13 % of them advocates eco-fee, 10,9 % are in favour of a parking charge and 8,7 % of respondents advocate the introduction of beach tickets. A significantly small number advocates a compulsory use of beach facilities (3,3 %) and the introduction of magnetic cards (1,1 %). There are also 33,7 % of them who advocate a combination of all these payment models. The key stakeholder as well as the locals, representatives of the tourist board, local government and other tourist workers attended workshops held in 19 coastal cities and municipalities of the region. The principle of cooperation and inclusion of copartners in the process of intensive communication, discussion and exchange of opinions, is a very important part of the process of solving key issues that have been identified during the implementation of the project.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

An overview of the total number of beaches, their surface area and the ratio between maintained and non-maintained beaches was given on workshops. The beach typology was established according to the Study "Sustainable Beach Management in the Republic of Croatia –Guidelines and Priority Actions" written by the Centre for Regional Activities of the Priority Action Program (CRA/PPA) UNEP Mediterranean Action Plan, in which beaches are classified as: distant beaches, rural beaches, urban beaches, maintained resort beaches/hotel beaches. Furthermore, topics for beaches and their names were suggested. Carrying capacity by topics and stars was defined; a maximum tolerated carrying capacity for maintained urban beaches, naturally partially protected beaches, natural beaches without protection. Special attention was paid to the beach capacity in relation to the number of swimmers, and in accordance with the beach type.

Thanks to these projects and its results it is possible to propose a model as an efficient tool for communities beach managing. The fundamental determinant of a managing model at the local level includes participation of citizens in decision-making on issues of public goods and the partnership between local authorities, civil society organizations and the private sector.

The importance of beach managing due to their use as a tourist resource is based on the fact that vacation and swimming are one of the key motives for arrivals at Croatia's coastal destinations. Beaches in Croatia represent a significant economic resource that provides additional income for the locals. Thus, 74 % of the total tourism in Spain refers to beach tourism, in New South Wales beach tourism amounts to 57 % of the total profit from tourism, and in the USA the annual profit from beaches amounts to US \$ 170 billion, while beach maintenance in Malta

(St. George Bay) increases the value of surrounding real estates for 13 % (Marković et al., 2010).

It is important to note that today beach managing is a component of an integral coastal area managing that is focused on the preservation and improvement of beach quality as a recreational and most importante resource.

Integral managing includes beach evaluation, classification systems and beach assessment that are focused on a holistic approach that takes into account a larger number of elements (e.g.: water quality, access, facilities, services, environment). A holistic approach in this respect should take into account wishes and interests of beach users, especially locals and tourists and all other partners at the destination. It is also important to reconcile eventual conflicts of interest, by reasonably respecting the users' preferences and wishes.

The research has shown that the current model of beach managing in Croatia, which derives from legislation, gives a very important role to regional and local authorities. The basis for the development of a sustainable model of beach managing has been found in issues noted during the implementation of regulations, primarily due to an inadequate intellectual capacity, conflict of various interests and pressures, as well as the results of conducted survey and conclusions made at the workshops.

The proposed model (Figure 1) is based on the holistic approach that includes defining the beach managing strategy at the regional level. Strategic goals include economic effects and benefits for the locals and tourists.

The basic starting point of the model is the regional physical planning and beach managing as well as the proposed thematisation.

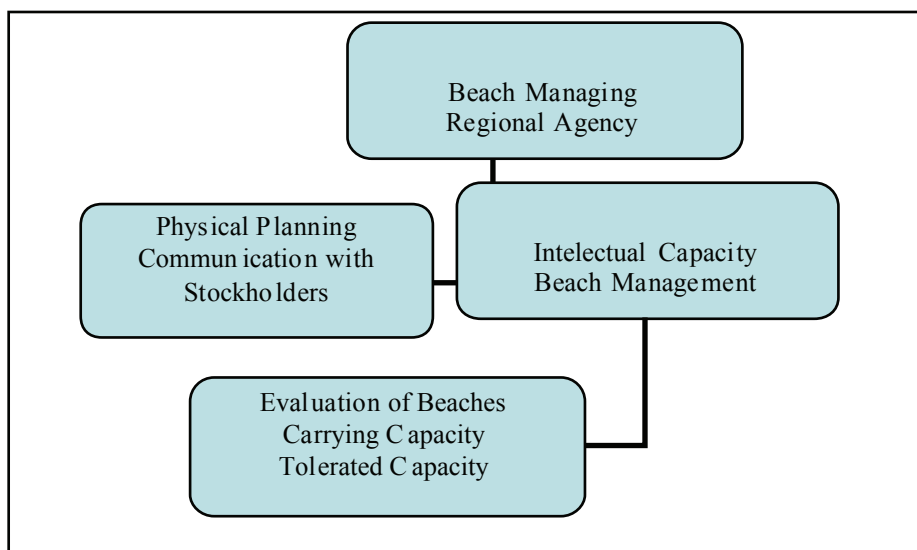


Figure 1. Model of Beach managing.

The beach managing model assumes the establishing of a special agency for beach managing at the regional level. In that way, one can take care of the protection of beach resources (monitoring) and their economic use in one place with an appropriate intellectual capacity.

One of the essential elements of the Model is determining the effective carrying capacity based on the UNEP's evaluation of carrying capacity, which does not include the contact zone of the sea and mainland (tidal wave). The first step is to define the physical carrying capacity of a beach that is based on available beach area per swimmer, i.e. so called tolerated capacity.

The tolerated capacity defines the lowest and the highest level of the number of people on a beach. Smaller parts of the

beach necessary to ensure the unobstructed flow of swimmers on the beach are excluded from the available beach area, which depends on the type of a beach (for example, resort beaches will require higher comfort levels and larger area per person, and thus they will have less available beach area). It should be emphasised that carrying acceptance is not a predetermined size but it depends on several elements, and among the the most important ones is the geographical microlocation of the beach.

The role of management is not only to understand and valorise beaches as a resource but to implement a basic knowledge of managing. A special management role is manifested in the maintenance of national quality standards

and water quality, and in co-operation with the environment and pollution team. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to improve communication with the locals, tourists, tour operators, and other stakeholders. At the same time, economic effects should be planned, which will be achieved by granting some beaches in concessions or issuing annual permits. Blackmore (Blackmore et al., 2002) point out that for the majority of beach users it is acceptable to pay some additional facilities like eco tax and other. According to authors, the willingness to pay varies with social class, earnings, amount of beach use and between local, domestic and foreign user groups. Thus results are very indicative where beach management is concerned, since it implies managing the offer and demand of beach facilities.

Although the economic effects are important for the whole economy, it is even more important to understand the essence of unreasonable use of beach resources.

The proposed model is an open type model and it should be changed and adjusted in the interaction with the environmental changes affecting it.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Beaches are an integral part of the integral tourist product of a destination. It is a highly valuable resource from the natural, social and economic aspects, whereas beaches have a recreational potential as well. They make the tourist product more attractive and represent the reason why a certain number of tourists is likely to choose the destination.

The literature on beach management provides theoretical basis and good practice that can be implemented on future planning of sustainable beach managing in Croatia. The research intends to help to co-create a well-being for the local population and the tourism industry by providing tools for efficient model of sustainable beach managing in Croatia.

The proposed model is a result of the experience in managing the maritime affair, theoretical and empirical knowledge, and conducted researches and projects. The model is not a predetermined size, but is modifiable along with environmental changes and new circumstances, and it can contribute towards an understanding the importance of beaches as a resource that has to be specially taken care of.

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