



Article

Tourism Perspectives in National Parks—A Hungarian Case Study from the Aspects of Rural Development

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Abstract: Nature-based tourism has become increasingly popular in recent years. However, the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically impacted the tourism sector and triggered contradictory processes, even in protected areas. This phenomenon opens up new opportunities for nature-based tourism from the perspective of rural development. In this study, we assess the relations between tourism and nature conservation and examine the characteristics of practical cooperation in three Hungarian national parks. Based on in-depth interviews ($n = 76$), document review, and analysis of tourism-related data, our research proves that nature-based tourism could play an essential role in rural development, but this is far from being fulfilled. None of the sectors have been able to impact the comprehensive development of the rural areas concerned. We conclude that sectoral partnership is inadequate, and there is no effective policy coordination. There is a lack of multiday tourism programs, and the currently available tourism infrastructure is insufficient. Initiatives such as the national park product trademark exist but are not well managed, so they do not have a meaningful impact. The results point out that cross-sector collaboration must be strengthened after the epidemic to provide a basis for policy coordination and joint planning.

Keywords: nature-based tourism; nature conservation; rural development; national park; policy coordination; COVID-19; Hungary



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1. Introduction

The simultaneous importance of rural tourism, nature conservation, and related sectoral cooperation has prompted central questions in national parks for three reasons.

First, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen dramatic shifts in how we travel [1–6]. We have witnessed new trends worldwide, which are likely to change our travel choices and habits for a long time [7–13]. One of the most noticeable features of the restrictions and social changes during the pandemic was the rediscovery of inland natural attractions that were relatively easily accessible [14]. On the one hand, the number of official visits has fallen drastically in parks (due to the measures), but at the same time, unprecedented crowds have sought recreation in the vicinity of attractions [15–19]. In parallel, the paradigm shift that is already taking place in tourism has accelerated in many countries and expanded with new perspectives. Nature-based tourism has grown steadily and become the most rapidly expanding sector within tourism across Europe [20–23]. Thus, sustainability narratives, such as “eco-conscious experience”, “travel like a local”, “simple pleasures”, or “familiarists not tourists” [24], have come to the fore.

Second, the importance of policy coordination [25] is also substantial (independent of the COVID-19 situation). Tourism and nature conservation have long been interdependent, but they are in an unresolved dispute on some issues. For example, inappropriate land use, overcrowding, visitor attitudes, and seasonality pose serious challenges [26–30]. Several authors believe that three things can prevail in the relationship between the two sectors: conflict, coexistence, and symbiosis [31,32]. Based on our experience, we believe that only

a synergistic relationship can benefit tourism and nature conservation in the long term. Moreover, both are particularly important in national parks [33]. Thus, policy coordination and practical cooperation are more and more advantageous for nature conservation and local development [34]. It is no coincidence that the UNWTO [9] designated 2020 as the Year of Tourism and Rural Development.

The need for a multisided partnership and territorial aspects gives the third actuality: the environmental–social issue of rural development. We share Adamowicz’s [35] view that “sustainable tourism is one of the ways to improve the socio-economic situation in lagging behind rural areas while maintaining high natural values and attractiveness”. However, tourism alone may not be able to bring positive social and environmental changes. The strength of a single sector alone cannot provide a comprehensive perspective for developing protected rural areas [36]. Therefore, tourism strategies must evolve with ecological principles, optimizing social needs concerning nature’s capacity [37,38]. Fortunately, several countries put these principles into practice, and because of the pandemic changes, new concepts were formulated that promote rural catching-up from different directions [9,39]. The pandemic uncertainties have brought new travel trends in many parts of the world, including the European Union (EU). In some member states, such as Hungary, tourism was already a “Jolly Joker” in the catching-up process of less developed regions. However, the sector has only become truly competitive in a few regions and managed independently of rural development [40–42]. Furthermore, the changes caused by COVID-19 have drawn attention to specific recreational destinations; thus, sectoral replanning has become important again.

In the context of cross-sectoral partnership, we need to explain the interdependencies between rurality and tourism and clarify the concept of nature-based tourism. Rurality and rural problems (aging and youth out-migration, agricultural decline, unemployment, etc.) have been an important scientific and political issue since the 1980s [43–45]. Researchers and policymakers have increasingly focused on tourism as a possible solution for diversifying the economy and promoting rural development [46–48]. As a result, tourism has become one of the essential pillars of rural development and, as an integral part of the rural economy, draws attention to the endogenous resource of natural values, such as protected areas and national parks [49–53]. All the while, tourists’ travel habits have changed significantly, and natural assets have become determining factors in travel choices [54]. In the last 2 years, the epidemic has further boosted the interest in nature-based tourism (NBT). NBT is defined by Fredman, Wall-Reinius, and Lundberg as all human activities that involve visiting natural areas outside their usual habitat [55,56], closely matching the general definition of tourism. Nature-based tourism includes all forms of tourism where relatively undisturbed natural environments form the primary attraction. It can include consumptive and adventurous as well as nonconsumptive contemplative activities, which in turn can include ecotourism and conservation tourism [57–59]. Adopting the findings of Lane and Kastenholz [49], we consider NBT as a crucial pillar of rural tourism. It means NBT is also a component of comprehensive spatial development. Several European researchers have studied NBT in rural areas and its specific domains over the last decade [60–64]. However, NBT in lowland areas, such as the Great Hungarian Plain, has received little attention so far.

Based on the above starting points, the general aim of our work is to examine the sectoral partnership and cooperation practices between tourism and nature conservation in the broader context of rural development. The study presents the tourism-related trends in national parks—with an outlook on the pandemic changes. We focus primarily on NBT that takes place in the protected areas of the three chosen national parks (Hortobágy, Kiskunság, and Körös-Maros National Parks in the Great Hungarian Plain). Through their cases, we provide an insight into tourism activities and demonstrate the factors that influence partnerships, opportunities, and counterinterests. The results present the positive and negative processes that could help the management of existing environmental and economic conflicts and point to development dilemmas that need to be addressed both in Europe and worldwide. With our results, we also want to encourage environmentally conscious attitudes and specific actions for sustainable development.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Sample Areas

To answer the research questions, we chose rural areas where (1) tourism involving national parks has been present for a long time, (2) there is specific cooperation between the two sectors, and (3) nature-based tourism can play an essential role in rural development.

The two oldest national parks in Hungary, the Hortobágy National Park (HNP) (established in 1973) and the Kiskunság National Park (KNP) (established in 1975), fulfill these criteria. In these parks, “puszta” or steppe tourism as a tourism product had already appeared in the 1980s. “Puszta” (steppe) is a grassy wilderness area usually dominated by grazing livestock (sheep, cattle). As emblematic sites of Hungarian peasant culture and the shepherd tradition, these areas were popular destinations for international and domestic visitors [65]. However, due to the pressure on grasslands, mass tourism was already considered a threat in the early 1990s [66].

We extended our research to the area of the Körös-Maros National Park (KMNP) (established in 1997), where several protected areas were previously part of the KNP. The territory of the three parks covers almost the entire Great Plain east of the Danube and the NUTS2 regions of Northern and Southern Great Plain (Figure 1 and Table 1). Within this area, we further refined our study area to settlements that have an IUCN category II–V protected site and value, or nature trail, or some other visitor facility.

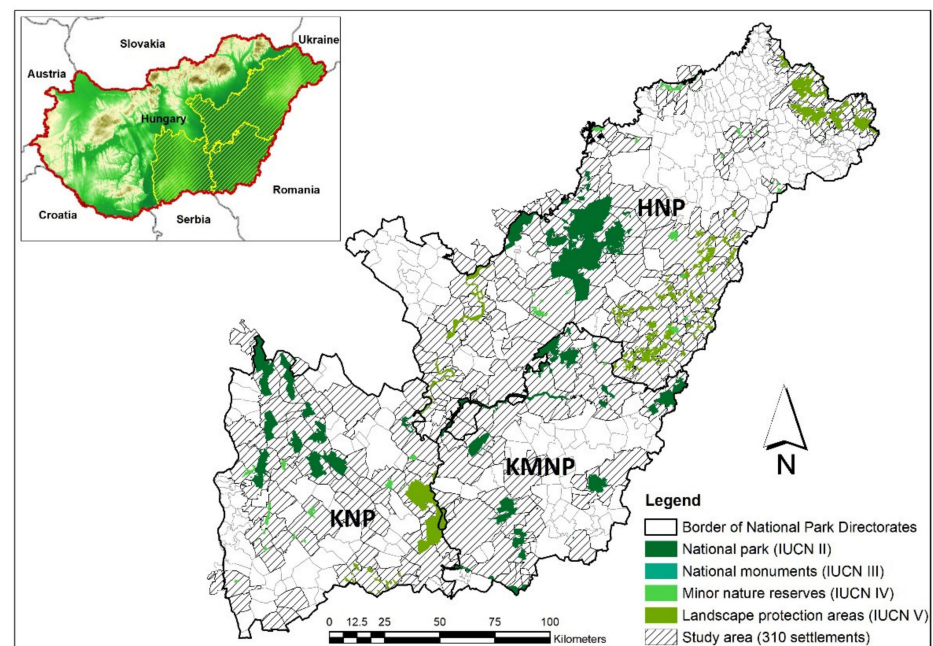


Figure 1. Map of the study area. Source: own elaboration. Data: European Environment Agency, ArcMagyarország by GEOX Ltd. (Montebelluna, Italy), Information System of Nature Conservation.

Following these criteria, we chose 310 settlements (Figure 1) with a total administrative area of 22,469 km², a population of 1,669,712 (for further details, see Table 2). Thus, the number of rural settlements is 280, and the rural population is 625,955 (38% of the total). (According to the Hungarian Rural Development Program 2014–2020, all settlements with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants are considered rural.) The population density of the study area is 74.31 people/km², so we can consider it rural.

According to the second appendix of Government Decree 106/2015 (23.IV.) on the classification of beneficiary municipalities, from the 310 settlements, 143 have social, economic, and infrastructural problems, while 103 have high unemployment rates, and 80 municipalities are in both categories (more data in Table 3).

Table 1. The operation area of the three national park directorates.

	HNP		KNP		KMNP		Total	
	Number of Sites	Area (ha)	Number of Sites	Area (ha)	Number of Sites	Area (ha)	Number of Sites	Area (ha)
National park (IUCN II)	1	80,367	9	50,522	1	51,247	11	182,136
National monuments (IUCN III)	0	0	3	4	0	0	3	4
Minor nature reserves (IUCN IV)	20	6068	19 (20) *	5006	4	164	43	11,238
Landscape protection areas (IUCN V)	4	55,532	3	26,833	0	0	7	82,365
Total	25	141,967	34	82,365	5	51,411	64	275,743

Data sources: European Environment Agency and termeszetvedelem.hu. * The CDDA by the EEA 2019 database does not contain the latest changes.

Table 2. Basic data of the selected settlements.

Number of settlements	310
of which city	75
of which village	235
Number of rural settlements	280
Area of the study area (sqkm)	22,469
Total population in 2019 (head)	1,669,712
Population of cities in 2019 (head)	1,307,326
Population of villages in 2019 (head)	362,386
Population of rural settlements in 2019 (head)	625,955
Population density of the study area in 2019 (head/sqkm)	74.31

Data source: HCSO T-STAR settlement level data, TeIR.

Table 3. Development status of the selected settlements.

Number of settlements with social, economic, and infrastructural problems *	143
Population in this category (head)	187,949
Number of settlements with high unemployment rate *	103
Population in this category (head)	244,801
Number of settlements with social, economic, and infrastructural problems and high unemployment rate *	80
Population in this category (head)	113,877
Total number of beneficiary settlements	166
Population of the beneficiary settlements (head)	318,873

Data source: HCSO. * Based on Government Decree 106/2015 (23.IV.) on the classification of beneficiary municipalities.

2.2. Methods

Our analyses used both primary and secondary data and were processed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The present work is a continuation of our systematic interviews carried out in the KNP from 2017. Then, we conducted 51 structured, face-to-face interviews on land use conflicts affecting protected areas, including the impact of tourism activities. In 2020, we expanded our study area to include two other national parks in the Great Hungarian Plain and extended our previous questions to examine the increased interest in protected areas during the COVID-19 pandemic. The 25 new interviewees were selected based on their professional background and recommendations (snowball method). Most of the interviewees had decades of experience, and some of

them took us on field trips to observe the reality and recent situation. Respondents included institutional representatives, tourism experts, entrepreneurs, conservationists, and prominent individuals from NGOs involved in rural development and tourism. These highly experienced professionals, from tourism (22 people), nature conservation (28 people), and rural development (26 people), expressed credible and relevant opinions. We followed the basic rules of qualitative interviewing with open and in vivo coding using partly general and sector-specific question sets. In addition, we prepared an interview protocol matrix based on Rubin's and Castillo-Montoya's methods [67,68] and systematized the opinions and comments expressed according to the questions. The questions mainly focused on:

- What historical factors have shaped the opportunities and positions of nature conservation and tourism in the examined national parks, particularly nature-based tourism?
- What are the barriers to cooperation between nature conservation and tourism?
- How would you describe the changes in conservation and tourism since the pandemic began?
- How can the visitor numbers in national parks be increased and optimized sustainably? What are the prospects for nature-based tourism in protected areas?
- What role can national parks as institutions play in tourism and rural development?
- Is it possible to develop a tourism product package linked to national parks to help the rural areas' economies?

For certain frequently and similarly occurring responses, we used separate coding, with the abbreviations for the sectors concerned. Interviewees in the tourism group are marked with "T", the nature conservationists with "N", and the rural experts with "R". We placed both abbreviations after the statements, in cases when respondents expressed the same views in both sectors. The numeric code is used to indicate the number of respondents.

Our research also included a systematic document analysis. We reviewed the annual reports of the national parks (between 2002 and 2020) and examined and studied the relevant laws and regulations that govern the operation of nature conservation [69,70]. In addition, we assessed the spatial development strategies related to the regions concerning tourism. We also reviewed the National Tourism Development Strategy 2030—Tourism 2.0 Revised and the county spatial development strategies and other tourism development plans. From the selected documents, we identified meaningful passages and highlighted relevant information for the research. According to the content and thematic analysis [71,72], we arranged and summarized the documents' relevant statements and numerical features.

We built a municipality (LAU2)-level database in MS Excel to map the data in GIS (ESRI ArcGIS version 10.6) and also to add a quantitative foundation to the results of the interviews. We relied on the following data sources:

1. Tourism data published by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HCSO);
2. Visitor statistics published in the annual reports of the three national parks;
3. Local tourism tax data from the Hungarian State Treasury downloaded through the National Regional Development and Planning Information System (www.teir.hu, accessed on 11 August 2021);
4. Data collected by web scraping from the sites of the nature conservation sector (magyarnemzetiparkok.hu, accessed on 6 August 2021; termeszetvedelem.hu, accessed on 5 August 2021) and tourism organizations (falusiturizmus.eu, accessed on 11 August 2021).

3. Results

3.1. Results of Interviews

3.1.1. Historical Factors

The consensus among experts is that nature conservation has become more important in recent decades. Promoting natural attractions and exploiting their tourism potential have been primary since establishing the national parks. All strategic plans stated that the parks

would serve as a tourist destination for natural and cultural values. In the HNP and KNP, established in the 1970s, this coincided with the socialist rediscovery of rural areas and the increasing Western European interest during regime change. The antecedent of larger-scale tourism were the European-famous steppe tourism, horse shows, and open-air fairs with a few hours' visits to protected areas. As several experts have noted, it has become almost a patriotic duty to cultivate rural traditions (interviews: T, 11; N, 14; R, 5). In this process, the main partners of the park directorates were the state farms. Experts estimate that in the 1980s and 1990s, these programs attracted between 70,000 and 100,000 people/year/park (mainly German visitors) to the HNP and KNP. These two parks acquired new land and farm buildings during the reorganization of state property after the regime change. By using or leasing these new estates, the parks strengthened their tourism developments. "However, this boom stagnated and then fizzled out by the turn of the millennium. The era of the bus-group and guided tours to the wilderness was over." The KMNP, founded in 1997, was in a completely different situation. "The floodplains and salt lands have never really seen a mass turnover here, so there has not been a downturn."

Meantime, diverging policy visions complicated the partnership between the sectors. The conflicts mainly stemmed from a segregative philosophy of nature conservation. The national park directorates worked and acted as "state within the state" institutions. This approach worked relatively well until the regime change; then it became less effective in a multistakeholder economy and increasingly diverse local needs. In addition, parks could not become active players in rural development. In many cases, they were an obstacle to implementing development ideas from the point of view of the municipalities. Disputes over land use and property rights were frequent. According to the answerer, this was the main reason for losing the parks' public authority in 2005, which the conservationists still regret. Finally, based on the interviews, nature conservation has taken many steps towards an integrative approach. "Since the E.U. accession, there has been a paradigm shift, which put the relationship between nature conservation and tourism on a new footing." It has become clear that "conservation without people" is not the right idea. This is particularly noticeable in tourism concepts. Thus, the 2008 National Ecotourism Development Strategy already highlighted, "A significant proportion of the country's tourist attractions are in national parks". However, the most recent comprehensive concepts show that cooperation with regional actors has been hampered by the marginalization and subordination of national parks in the last decade. According to experts, park directorates are not sufficiently involved in tourism planning and decision making. As a result, some respondents are concerned that tourism interests are more potent than nature conservation. "The principles and good practices of nature-based tourism have emerged over the last 20 years, but the benefits are highly localized so that the positive changes have not reflected at the regional or national administrative level. Much closer sectoral, institutionalized cooperation is needed to make the positive impact of sustainable tourism at district or regional level", said a researcher with decades of experience in rural development.

The local natural values had to be made accessible to the public, both domestic and foreign tourists. "To this end, we created new "attractions" for visitors in protected areas, presenting the natural features in a way that would not damage them. In many places, we have also tried to reconcile this with management and created the first nature trails and new visitor centers", said a national park staff member. It is important to note that some authors emphasize the role of thermal baths and rural spas in visitor growth from the 2000s [73,74]. Some believe that the real demand for nature-based tourism has emerged only during recent years in the affected regions (interviews: T, 11; N, 12; R, 14). In any case, these parks operate various visitor centers, forest schools, nature trails, and other demonstration areas. Their activities have a strong emphasis on environmental education for young people and organizing awareness-raising events.

3.1.2. Barriers of the Partnership

Concerning the broad role of nature conservation and tourism in rural environment and economy, the actors of the two sectors have stated that protecting the natural environment and coordinating tourism is a fundamental issue for rural development. Most respondents agree that building a tourism brand based on the values of protected areas is a critical challenge for the national parks concerned (interviews: T, 20; N, 18; R, 19). However, these areas are disadvantaged in several respects: “Although there are distinctive landscapes and iconic sites (Nine-Hole Bridge in Hortobágy, the dunes of the Kiskunság, the gallery forests of River Körös), none of these offer the potential to increase visitor numbers significantly”. Several interviewees noted that the “primary underlying problem is the missing emblematic natural attraction”. Apart from one or two up-and-coming visitor sites (Lake Tisza Ecocentre), visitor numbers are not growing. Moreover, the programs typically last a few hours, a maximum a day, and these are also just seasonal. Thus, the transformation of natural values into tourism products is problematic (interviews: T, 15; N, 21; R, 11).

The respondents also highlighted the lack of financial resources and policy coordination as the main problems. Some say that “bottom-up development in the sectors is not aligned with the EU subsidies or domestic funding”. “There are always a few enthusiastic professionals or local leaders who do a superhuman job. Still, there is a high risk of burn-out.” Local development ideas have been around for a long time, but few resources are for investments and maintenance costs. There have also been fiascos: “A large-scale ecotourism project plan was developed many years ago but remained incomplete due to a lack of funding (KNP—“Böszörcsök—Western Gateway to European Grassland”)”. Although there was a winning complex ecotourism application, the authorities have withdrawn part of the funds during the process.

Entrepreneurship is also a serious concern. Due to the unpredictable number of guests, several entrepreneurs do not dare to get involved in the developments. National parks are also cautious, mainly because of previous negative experiences with tenants and subcontractors. A further difficulty is that NBT attractions are located primarily on settlements with a shortage of quality accommodation. Thus, in many cases, the bulk of tourism revenues (e.g., accommodation income) and local tourism taxes is not realized in the settlements offering the natural attractions but in nearby cities.

3.1.3. Changes with COVID-19

Data over the last 10 years have shown regular attendance in national parks. Until the beginning of the pandemic, we saw occasional short periods of decline and then minor upturns. Tourism-related activities have been sensitive to all the waves of COVID-19. Statistics show a large-scale reduction in guest numbers because visitor centers, forest schools, tourist accommodations, and enclosed spaces had to be closed during periods ordered by the national authorities. However, the interest in attractions that are open to the public (e.g., nature trails) has increased significantly, but this phenomenon is not included in the visitor statistics. All three parks estimate about 100,000 visitors in “free to visit destinations” in 2020. This raises the question of the maximum number of visitors that these protected areas could accommodate. According to experts, “the carrying capacity of habitats is different”. The erosion of landscapes and their ability to accommodate tourists depend primarily on the parks’ infrastructure. Although most nature trails are not yet overcrowded, a rapid increase in visitor numbers is not desirable. Several interviewees see further potential in guided walking or cycling tours (interviews: T, 20; N, 21; R, 11).

It was a problem before, but since COVID-19, it is even more true that tourism has become less predictable. In 2020, the number of visitors increased at an unprecedented rate in some destinations during the quarantine situation. This (1) caused pressure on natural resources and biodiversity and (2) spoiled the experience of visiting nature while also increasing health risks. The main triggers of the conflicts were the polluting effects of mass fishing tourism and the so-called “party tourists”, whose attitudes are not environmentally

conscious. The tourists' influx and disturbing effects are particularly noticeable in the central city of the KMNP in Szarvas. Here, the increased interest of people from Budapest has led to overcrowding. It is difficult for these rural municipalities that visitors arrive in large crowds at the same time.

3.1.4. Potential of NBT

There is consensus among our interviewees that there is still considerable potential for NBT in protected areas. National parks have a crucial role to play in exploiting and managing this potential. However, this requires a new basis for cooperation between the national park directorates and the relevant tourism institutions (especially local destination management offices, Hungarian Tourism Agency, and Hungarian Tourism PLC). Some respondents mentioned a need for a new policy coordination unit: a state secretariat within the Ministry of Agriculture or the Ministry of National Economy. "The ministries and local governments should strengthen partnership in coordinating nature conservation—landscape management—tourism and rural development." "Nature conservation in Hungary can best flourish through tourism in protected areas. This is the most effective way of educating society about the holistic environmental issues." Unfortunately, according to some, these objectives cannot be achieved because the current human resources are insufficient in either sector. In addition, the shortage of professionals is just as acute at the national as at the local level.

Several respondents emphasized that the attractions of the Great Plain are not as prestigious as those of the mountainous parks (e.g., Aggtelek), and therefore, these parks must provide a variety of linked products and complex programs (interviews: T, 13; N, 16; R, 19). An example of this is the Mini-Hungary maquette park in Szarvas, which has significantly increased the number of visitors to the neighboring arboretum and the KMNP's visitor center. In other words, attractions that generate a high level of interest can help to boost nature-friendly active tourism. It is also noticeable that more and more people are looking for the terms "green", "eco", "environment-friendly", and "E" (electric) in tourism packages. This raises the question of whether steppe tourism is worth reviving. The rural idyll is no longer attractive enough. People today want a different kind of experience, as is shown by the fact that only a few agents offer this type of program. Moreover, this gives an idealized, nonauthentic image of these areas in Hungary.

According to experts, the essential criteria for optimizing tourism in protected areas are upgrading the infrastructure and acquiring environmentally friendly equipment. One such initiative is implementing e-bike tours, launched in 2020 and 2021. Bike tours already exist in all three parks and can be a good practice in many places. "It is much more exciting to explore the landscapes and the wildlife in an exciting and varied way (combining e-bikes, canoes, adventure tours, mobile applications). Access to services requires digitization, smart devices, and online backgrounds. The pandemic has significantly widened and accelerated the new trends and consumer habits. E.g., the Digital Wanderer APK (for mobile phones) developed for the Hungarian parks' nature trails has quickly become popular", said a tourism expert.

"Linking conservation and tourism can strengthen the local economy, leading to the rural development aspect". It is a positive experience that the predominantly conservation-minded professionals' answers strongly emphasize rural development aspects, such as sustainability of local communities and multifunctional agriculture. In this context, the promotion of national park products and the trademark system are also important. With a positive perception from producers, ecologists, and restaurateurs, "the park trademarks are the best examples of rural-type cooperation based on mutual interests". However, there is a clear need for national parks and the state to raise brand awareness and develop supply chains. It is also evidently perceived that guests are more interested in food products and less in handicrafts. Currently, the producers' income from sales is relatively low. For this reason, "some registered producers are concerned that their products have not received

sufficient support and attention after being awarded the trademark”, as an expert described the situation.

3.2. Tourism Data and Indicators of the Study Area

This section presents the interest in nature-based tourism of protected areas and their evolution over time. Then we scrutinize the compiled data and tourism indicators at the municipal level to support and verify the opinions and statements of the respondents.

The interest in attractions of protected areas has fluctuated over the last 10 years, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Yearly visitor data of the national parks.

Year	Number of Guests			Number of Guest Nights		
	KNP	HNP	KMNP	KNP	HNP	KMNP
2011	146,118	103,244	16,276	3861	n/d	2460
2012	137,158	180,558	30,138	3339	1623	2071
2013	115,384	191,659	31,081	3494	2351	2418
2014	96,436	138,108	38,731	4080	1731	2639
2015	96,271	160,483	42,168	4033	3023	2345
2016	101,620	178,063	49,437	4250	2681	2617
2017	104,195	156,762	64,442	3257	3090	2427
2018	113,468	159,065	80,524	3458	3494	3315
2019	108,753	160,499	96,801	3894	2906	3374
2020	19,256	74,774	60,369	2187	1232	2057

Data source: annual reports of the KNP, HNP, and KMNP.

In the KNP and HNP, the number of tourists has shown considerable variability, while in the KMNP—which is newly established compared with the other two—the developing showplaces have attracted an increasing number of visitors, with a dynamic 600% growth between 2011 and 2019. In 2020, official figures showed a significant drop in all three national parks, up to 80%. However, according to the national park experts interviewed, this was only due to the restrictive measures, as visitors to protected areas were not registered because guided tours were not possible for a large part of 2020. Their view is confirmed by Google Trends data on Hungarian internet searches for the term “nature trail”, which was at a record high in 2020, and this upward trend continued in 2021 (Figure 2).

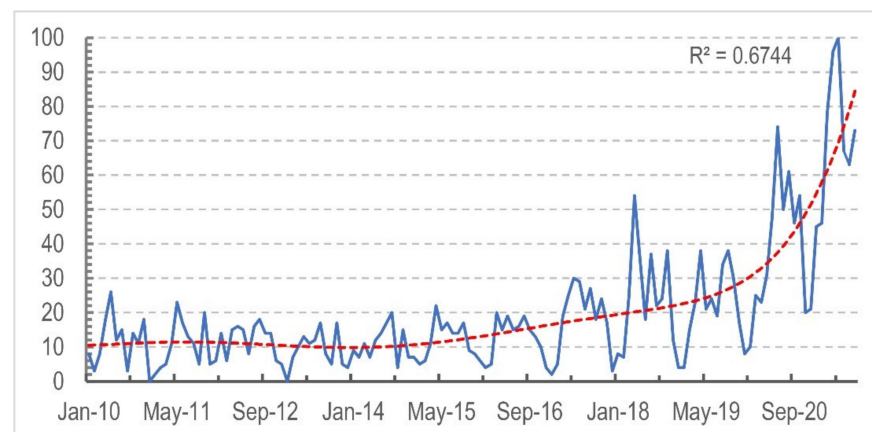


Figure 2. Frequency of internet searches for the term “nature trail” in a 0–100 point scale. Source: own elaboration. Data: Google Trends.

To illustrate the attractiveness of protected areas, it is worth comparing the number of visitors between the parks and the Northern and Southern Great Plain NUTS2 regions. Data for 2019 show that 366,000 visitors came to visit the natural assets, while the two areas welcomed 2.5 million tourists. This means only 14.05% of visitors are interested in the attractions of national parks. This ratio is only 0.14% for overnight stays, although accommodation is not crucial in the parks' activities. Their accommodation is mainly linked to forest schools, and they have some research guesthouses too.

In the second half of our analysis, we first took stock of the facilities in the three national parks that serve tourism purposes (Table 5).

Table 5. Number of tourism-related facilities in the national parks.

	HNP	KNP	KMNP	Total
Number of reception, visitor, and information centers	2	3	3	8
Number of countryside houses	1	0	0	1
Number of museums and exhibition places and other visitor facilities	17	6	1	24
Number of forest schools	1	2	3	6
Accommodation in forest schools (head)	36	74	84	194
Number of nature trails	11	25 (26) *	7	43

Data source: Annual reports of the NPS. * With the Narmada nature trail, which is inconsistently recorded in the registers.

The three national parks have 39 properties (in 22 municipalities) connected—but not limited—to their tourism activities, and they also have a total of 43 nature trails (in 35 municipalities) (Figure 3). More than 50% of the facilities were built or renovated in the 2000s (mainly after 2007). The situation is similar for the nature trails, 80% of which were established in the 2000s.

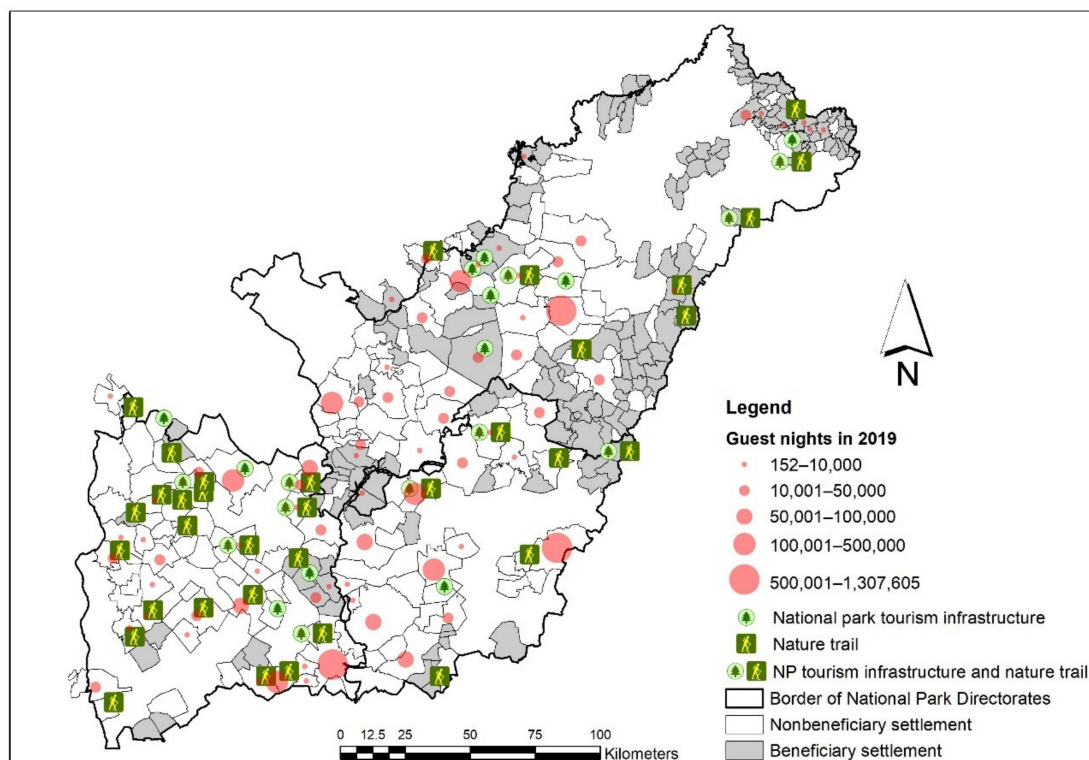


Figure 3. Map of tourism infrastructure, nature trails, and guest nights in the study area. Source: own elaboration. Data: magyarnemzetiparkok.hu, termeszetvedelem.hu, accessed on 21 October 2021, HCSO.

Another essential feature of national park tourist facilities is that they are relatively spatially concentrated, with only 7% of the 310 municipalities with protected areas having a tourist facility and 11% having an educational nature trail. It is also worth noting that half of the protected areas (from the 18 sites in IUCN categories II and V) do not have independent visitor facilities. Thus, this means the three national parks have a relatively new and probably still insufficient tourism infrastructure.

As a further aspect, we also assessed the data of beneficiary settlements. We found that only one-fifth of the tourist facilities and trails of the three national parks are located in such municipalities (13 out of 166). This raises the question of how much these facilities and trails can help the development of rural municipalities with employment problems and other disadvantages.

The analysis of data on accommodations for commercial and business purposes shows similar results as previous ones. On the one hand, only less than a third of the 310 municipalities have commercial accommodation (99 in 2019 and 92 in 2020), while business accommodation is present in about two-thirds (198 in 2019 and 195 in 2020). Almost all commercial accommodation registered guests, but in business accommodation (including village hosts), only 85–90% of the municipalities had overnight stays in 2019 and 2020.

In beneficiary settlements, 17% have commercial accommodation, while for business accommodation, this proportion is 52% (86 municipalities out of 166). According to data from the National Federation of Agro and Rural Tourism, 30% of the registered hosts are located in the beneficiary municipalities. As for overnight stays in 2019 and 2020 combined, hosts reported guests in 87 beneficiary settlements, corresponding to a 52% rate. The concentration of accommodation and guest nights is also high. The 25 settlements (that register the most guest nights) covered almost 90% of all overnight stays in 2019. These include the major spa towns of the region, the county capitals, and settlements with natural attractions (riverside, lakeside, backwater, protected areas). The most important tourist destinations are generally the more developed municipalities in the study area, as indicated by the fact that only 1 of the top 25 tourist destinations is included in the list of beneficiary settlements from the government decree. In 2019, only 3 settlements out of the 310 surveyed reached the 500,000 overnight stays' threshold, which indicates a stable, strong, and self-sustaining tourism sector. These account for more than half (54%) of all overnight stays. Ten settlements had more than 100,000 overnight stays, accounting for more than three-quarters of the total.

The pandemic had substantial impacts in 2020. The 310 municipalities surveyed have seen a more than 40% drop in visitor numbers. The high concentration remained, with the share of the top 25 settlements falling by only 1% compared with the previous year. Restrictions and closures caused by the epidemic have reduced the most popular tourist destinations (spa towns and cultural tourism destinations) by 40–50% (Table 6). However, some rural settlements benefited during this period. These were popular destinations because they had a waterfront or other natural attractions and many small accommodation facilities (e.g., private resorts and holiday homes) that allowed for isolated recreation and social distancing during the pandemic. One example is Békésszentandrás, where the number of nights spent doubled, making it one of the top 10 settlements in terms of the number of nights spent. Two Lake Tisza settlements also made a big step forward in the top 25.

Table 6. Number of guest nights in the settlements.

	Guest Nights in 2019	Guest Nights in 2020	2020/2019 (%)
Top 3	2,482,212	1,302,832	52.49
Top 10	3,472,992	1,934,582	55.70
Top 25	4,116,524	2,423,145	58.86

Data source: HCSO.

From the analysis of local tax revenue data for 2019, we can assume that the overall role of tourism in the local economy and rural development is not significant. Of the 310 municipalities, only 87, and from the 166 beneficiary settlements, only 21 have tourism tax revenues. An amount of 1.6% comes from tourism within all local tax revenue, corresponding to USD 5.3 million in absolute terms. There is a wide variation between municipalities, as the share of tourism tax revenue in local taxes varies between 0% and 24%, with only 10 municipalities exceeding 5%. For the 166 beneficiary settlements, the average rate was only 0.79%, and only 3 municipalities exceeded 5%. However, even in these 3, the revenue was still low in absolute terms, ranging between USD 1650 and USD 19,000.

4. Discussion

First main finding: The pandemic has further differentiated rural tourism.

We agree with the fundamental idea: “the global megatrends have several effects that are more or less specific to nature-based tourism” [75]. In this regard, COVID-19 has emerged as a global driver and has caused rapid and dramatic changes at different spatial levels, including national park tourism [18]. Several studies show that rural tourism has become popular due to COVID-19 [76]. Our experience aligns with that of Cretu et al. [77] that the pandemic was an “asymmetric shock” for the tourism industry and has highlighted the harmful effects of mass tourism on the natural environment. We found contradictions in the tourism of the examined national parks and rural regions. Although the visitor areas were officially closed during the epidemic, many of the protected sites were overcrowded as visitors tried to “discover” the attractions. Our interviewees have expressed concern about the erosion of protected values, reinforcing the view that the threat to iconic habitats and species can devalue the tourist experience. Data and interviews from the last 2 years show that the restrictions and closures caused by the epidemic have reduced visitor numbers by 40–50% in the most popular destinations. However, some destinations experienced a significant increase in visitor arrivals due to natural attractions and environmental characteristics. In some protected areas, visitors traveled informally (without registration) and looked around freely for a large part of the year. Some accommodation facilities near waterfronts, especially smaller capacity apartments, holiday rentals, and private resorts, operated at maximum occupancy during all pandemic phases. Some experts believe that certain areas were overvisited in 2020. However, most respondents see further potential to increase visitor numbers with appropriate restrictions and good organization and planning. Our results confirm the European experience, showing that postepidemic tourism can have different scenarios in different rural areas. There may be a “long-term reduction” or a “return to a pre-pandemic state” or a “change in the orientation of tourists” [78]. In our study area, policymakers and society are optimistic about the future. “The post-pandemic renewal requires a change in environmental attitudes and the coordination of sustainable tourism and rural development policy—especially in protected areas”, said an experienced local leader.

Second main finding: Barriers have emerged: (a) lack of NBT infrastructure, (b) absence of international attractiveness, and (c) weak sectoral partnership.

(a) In Hungary (as in the other CEE countries), rural development started with the SAPARD program at the turn of the millennium. In contrast, much of the national parks’ tourism infrastructure was created or upgraded after the 2010s. This represents a significant time lag in ecotourism development for complex reasons. On the one hand, the nature conservation sector preferred a more segregated approach in the earlier period; on the other hand, rural development was essentially synonymous with the development of agriculture in Hungary. Today, E.U. development funds have partly remedied this, but the infrastructure to serve tourism in protected areas is still insufficient, which is a handicapping factor, given that it has a fundamental impact on the sector’s functioning [79]. In our study area, the number of visitor facilities is low compared with the number of protected areas, and most NBT attractions are in municipalities with little or no accommodation options. Therefore, there will be a significant need for investment in buildings and services

in the future, but until then, tourism revenues (e.g., income from accommodation) and tourist tax will be absorbed in municipalities elsewhere, mainly in larger towns and cities. These developments would also require substantial domestic funding, as E.U. tenders are complicated and not necessarily adapted to local conditions [80].

(b) The lack of “flagship attractions” that would attract foreign visitors was highlighted by many experts. According to some experts, complex product packages can improve the situation. The development of these attractions would require the participation of several municipalities at the same time. In the study area, the most recent example was steppe tourism, which had not been replaced since its decline. The national parks concerned (except for one or two events, e.g., the Hortobágy Fairs) have been unable to attract foreign visitors ever since. Health tourism links to spas and thermal baths concentrated in cities, with little linkage to nature-based rural tourism. The national park attractions are often only offered as complementary, seasonal, and relatively short programs, hampering the cooperation. “Conscious interest in specific national park programs is mainly limited to certain groups: e.g., nature lovers, young families, photographers”—the opinion was expressed.

(c) There is no close cooperation between the various actors (tourism and nature conservation institutions, municipalities, rural development agencies, NGOs) involved in NBT in our study area. The plain reason is that there were no prominent projects to generate cooperation in the past. A further symptom is that the central bodies involved in sectoral planning (Hungarian Tourism Agency, Ministry of Agriculture) do not seek cooperation. There are only 29 “Tourinform” offices and only 12 tourist destination management (TDM) organizations in the region, which is also a barrier of local partnership. In 2020, a new operational framework started in Hungarian national parks, which further complicates the situation because the national park directorates have more of a coordinating role in this new system, and landscape offices have a degree of autonomy. In other words, the already-fragmented institutional system has become even more disintegrated. More active national parks involvement in rural development would be essential to generate a partnership between stakeholders (accommodation providers, farmers, national parks). In principle, they could carry out well-coordinated product development and marketing activities and become the real “owners” of tourism in a given municipality or area. All stakeholders recognize interdependence, and there are good examples at the local level, which is missing at the regional level. We can see similar phenomena in other European countries: “tourism lead approach produced mixed results due to low levels of demand in some areas and lack of a cooperative behavior among providers to maximize the opportunities offered—by the wide range of attractions” [81].

Third main finding: The role of tourism in protected areas in rural development should be further strengthened.

Our observations align with international experience: the coordination of tourism and nature conservation sectors embedded in rural development remains a challenge for the institutions, municipalities, and other actors [82–85]. Our research has shown that local tourism development has only been successful in certain more privileged municipalities and has not been successful at the regional level: subsidies and development funds primarily concentrate in spa towns and larger cities. Thus, tourism revenue is concentrated in urban centers and does not majorly affect rural areas. According to our results, this is also true for the income from NBT, which is currently very modest. We accept Margarian’s observation that building on endogenous resources (in this case on natural values) has its limitation [86]. Therefore, there will always be localities where tourism should not be given disproportionate importance.

Nonetheless, we believe that tourism activities can have a real development impact, given the growing demand for natural assets and authentic rural experiences! We agree with those who consider sustainable development of rural tourism as an opportunity to preserve rural areas and communities [87–90]. However, this goal can be achieved only with complex planning and harmonious cooperation between the involved sectors! We

can find an excellent example of this in Austria, where they developed the “Masterplan T” strategy. The main objective of this document is to create economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable tourism through a paradigm shift. This means that the needs and expectations of the sector’s employees and the local population are just as crucial as those of visitors. Therefore, in rural tourism, both sectoral cooperation and cooperation with the local society are crucial.

5. Conclusions

The COVID-19 outbreak has highlighted the tourism sector’s intense vulnerability and the social demand to access nature. The pandemic has reinforced the trends already underway in the sector, such as the value of safe recreation in rural landscapes and national parks. This phenomenon opens up new opportunities and pathways for rural development worldwide, but NBT also poses challenges in environmental pressures and potential negative socioeconomic impacts. Our results show that the risks of overtourism can be managed in Hungary. Therefore, NBT can be a pillar of rural development in the coming years but only with good policy and planning coordination at the national and regional levels and effective cooperation in the localities. Joint professional planning, tendering, and implementation are sine qua non for creating and managing tourism products that attract visitors while being environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable. In addition, infrastructure development is also critical, as the national parks and rural entrepreneurs currently do not have sufficient capacities, according to our results. We consider the introduction of national park product trademarks a good initiative, but creating such a system is not enough. It must be operated and actively promoted by the national parks and other organizations too.

As with all case studies, the results may be too specific to the region or national park under investigation, which is an explicit limitation of our research. However, we intend to investigate this in a forthcoming study where the situation in Central and Eastern European countries is very similar due to the postsocialist development trajectory and the legal framework provided by the European Union. This also allows us to examine the cooperation between tourism destinations, which we hypothesize will be a very important success factor, thanks to the complex package of experiences and services offered to visitors. Partnerships, for example, between the natural attractions of the Danube region in V4 (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary) and C5 (V4 plus Austria) would provide mutual benefits for all participants, from travelers to national parks.

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