8th INTERNATIONAL RURAL TOURISM AND DEVELOPMENT CONGRESS
&
13. ULUSAL KIRSAL TURİZM KONGRESİ

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8. ULUSLARARASI KIRSAL TURİZM VE KALKINMA KONGRESİ

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September 5-7, 2024, Konya, Türkiye

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Wildlife preservation and rural tourism: Observations on Okefenokee Swamp, Georgia, the USA

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Abstract

Wildlife preservation is very important in terms of assuring the security of old-aged districts, vegetative structures and living creatures, some of which need to be protected for next generations. While this is valid almost everywhere in the world, the abilities to convert these protectionist actions into income generating touristic attractions are not very widespread. Specific examples can be found in the Americas. Yet, wildlife preservation and management of the districts are very important for the USA. The National Park Service has overseen protection, maintenance and promotion of national landmarks in the USA since 1916. The national level organization acts in collaboration with the state level and local authorities, NGOs and investors. There are more than 400 national parks and most of them are open for visits. A specific national park example, which elaborates wildlife preservation and rural income generation is Okefenokee Swamp of Georgia. The swamp and its refuge have been open for touristic attractions including boat tours to observe the specific species as American alligator and Florida black bear since 1974. The swamp, its history, the way it is protected, the income generation system is evaluated within this research as an example of rural tourism management and wildlife preservation maintained in the USA.

Keywords: wildlife preservation; rural tourism; national parks; USA

1. RELATION OF WILDLIFE PRESERVATION AND TOURISM

International organizations and researchers focusing on wildlife conservation have increased their voices in the 21st century. Assuring security of special districts in the world that are rich in wild species and are reducing in number has become a concern for developmental organizations as well as for environmental organizations and protectors and representatives of animal rights. In this extent, attachment of specific districts that need to be secured to rural tourism had become an appealing alternative. Thereby the intentions to open venues for rural tourism either in the form of safari or hunting lands, where allowed by law, or as observatories and providing experiences have been attached to the desire to earn incomes and provide opportunities to rural labor and to meet preservation costs of the venues (1). In accordance with environmental preservation,

sustaining environmental knowledge and traditions are also important contribution of wildlife-based tourism.

Wildlife tourism includes whale/shark observation/hunting (where allowed), diving, bird-watching. The industrial revenues are highly appreciated by many countries. As a previous record, it can be noted that only bird-watching produced more than 100 billion Dollars in the USA by 2013 (2). Around the same period global contribution of visiting/observing protected districts used to generate US $600 billion/year globally and induced US $250 billion/year in consumer surplus (3).

Wildlife refuges, wetland basins and conservation areas started to pull attention with the rising interest of outdoor daily tourism activities. This is also a representation of commodification of everything. The wetlands, once considered as threat to human health relying on factual experiences, turned into touristic products. This process was called as neo-liberal natural protection by researchers (4). Prior to marketing, there appeared conservation and assuring sustainability for sure. Due to recent records of the International Union for Conservation of Nature reports that more than 45.000 species are under risk of endangerment (5). And the non-governmental financial support is not adequate for conservation. So, this emphasizes the potential financial contribution of wild-life tourism to protection. On the other hand, even the supporters of wildlife-tourism point out the importance of protection.

Looking from this perspective it was intended to overview and understand wildlife-based tourism focusing on the experience of the United States and with reference to Okefenokee Swamp and refuge, which hosts around 400.000 guests per year.

2. THE WILDLIFE PARKS IN THE USA

The National Park Service (NPS) of the USA was established in 1916 with the objective of preserving natural sites and transferring history of the USA to next generations. The governmental authority having a supra-state structure represents natural, cultural, historical, ethnographic and environmental preservation areas that host around 320 million visitors/tourists per year. By 2023, the number of visitors was 325 million. The distribution of these participants to different destinations was demonstrated in Table 1. Looking at the data received from NPS, it was seen that 4 % of visitors were involved in wetland – wildlife-based tourism in 2023. When historical and ethnographic district were excluded, the share rises to 10 %.

Table 1: Number of Visitors to National Parks - 2023

	millions		millions
National Park	92,39	**National Preserve**	5,08
National Recreation Area	51,44	National Military Park	4,19
National Memorial	41,15	**National River**	3,94
National Parkway	32,32	National Lakeshore	2,76
National Historical Park	27,65	National Battlefield Park	2,49
National Seashore	23,01	National Battlefield	1,89
National Monument	19,77	**National Wild & Scenic River**	1,63
National Historic Site	8,08	**National Reserve**	0,09
		International Historic Site	0,01
		Park (Other)	7,62

Source: (6): https://www.statista.com/statistics/206801/number-of-visitors-to-national-parks-by-type-of-park-since-2010/

When the number of visitors were considered due to target region, 73 million of 325 million people visited the South-east of the States counting 23 % of total touristic movement. The region encompassing Georgia and Florida appeared to be most visited regions of the USA. Main reason attributed to high visitation of the region is Great Smoky Mountains, which can easily be attributed to rural/regional touristic values. Yet, the mountains are not the only sites that have been visited in the region.

The financial contribution of national park tourism can be visited as well. After elimination of direct effects of the COVID-19 and social distance measures, it was seen that USD 1,31 billion was received in 2022, which rose to USD 1,4 billion in 2023.

3. OKEFENOKEE SWAMP AND ITS SOCIO-ECONOMIC EFFECTS

The NPS system manages and organizes activities in 474 national parks. Among these 12 parks take place in the boundaries of the State of Georgia. A specific route that passes through 6 states is the Trail of Tears (7) is attached to our field of interest in Georgia. This Trail of Tears is both a historical memorial and a natural preservation area signing the forced inter-state migration of Indian American Cherokee people living in Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina and Tennessee to Oklahoma between 1938 and 1939 (8). The mostly on-foot migration of Cherokee people merged with some wildlife reserve areas as Okefenokee swamp and this contributed to mass-death of almost 100.000 Cherokees, who were native to the region since 2000 BC (9). Okefenokee swamp and refuge is the largest blackwater wetland in Northern America, the second largest after Atchafalaya basin and it is the best secured one in the Atlantic.

In addition to having attached to NPS via Trail of Tears with the length of more than 8.000 km, Okefenokee basin is a part of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the federal organization responsible for preservation of wildlife. Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1937 as a breeding ground for migratory birds and species at the intersection of Suwannee and St. Marys rivers. The swamp is in the borders of Georgia and Florida, but it is more significant economically as a touristic destination for Georgia. The tourism and recreation industry are also a significant driver of the coastal Georgia economy, featuring natural attractions that Cumberland Island National Seashore, and Tybee Island are the other touristic centers with Okefenokee Swamp (9).

By 1971, the Okefenokee refuge was announced as Wetland of International Importance with Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (10, 11). The swamp hosts a lot of endangered animal species in addition to around 600 wild plants with its 440.000 acres (178.000 hectares) of wild environment. The wildlife refuge was announced as a World Heritage Site nominee in 2023 by the NPS (12).

The specific animal species are red-cockaded woodpeckers, wood storks, indigo snakes. American alligator is a foremost important specie that has been providing touristic opportunities to the swamp. Florida black bear is also an important specie that is worth to see especially on Florida boarders. The touristic valuation of the swamp initiated by the Department of Agriculture in 1946 and with leasing of 1.200 acres (485 hectares) of the refuge by local NGOs, the swamp park was opened for visitors (13).

The timeline of the refuge and swamp and their acceptance by the authorities and societies can be indicated as below table.

Table 2: The Designation of Okefenokee Refuge and Swamp

Supra-structure	Year	Status
Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge	1937	Established
Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge	1971	Wetland of International Importance Home for endangered species
Okefenokee Swamp Park	1946	Department of Agriculture established non-profit and partner to the U.S Department of the Interior
Okefenokee Swamp Park and Adventures	2020	Park acquired the private Adventures complex

According to the 2017 Banking on Nature Report, the total recreational expenditures for the four counties surrounding the refuge were $64.7 million with non-residents accounting for $59.8 million. The contribution of recreational spending in local communities was associated with about 753 jobs, $17.2 million in employment income, and $5.4 million in total tax revenue for the counties (14).

Apparent prices for visiting the swamp with different services included were indicated in the table below. This data signs to significance of the swamp for the local economy as visitors are expected to spend 40 USD on average. Therefore, the direct income received from the swamp entrance solely was estimated to be around USD 16 million.

Table 3: Prices for Admission and Touristic Attractions

Services	USD
General Admission	25
Boat-Train-Nature Show - 3 hours	35
Boat Tour Only - 2 hours	25
Guided Boat Tour with stops - 2 hours	70
Guided Paddle Tour with stops - 2 hours	45

Source: Official 2024 prices retrieved from park-site: https://okeswamp.org/about-us/

In addition to these daily activities, the park offers overnight excursions for camping as well starting from USD 700 for 1 person/night to USD 1300 for 4 nights (Anonymous, 2024b). Besides, specific occasions are being planned, as light shows that take place in July. The Annual Samp Run takes place in October and its price is USD 35 for 2024. Specific events are being held for Halloween in October. Prices for 2024 were announced as starting from USD 15. There are Christmas activities that host residents of the neighborhood as well as exterior tourists.

In addition to these touristic attractions, the swamp management, being supported by local NGOs, provides different training programs from kids to grown-ups. School groups are guided separately, and virtual tour organizations are being held as well.

In addition to the announced prices and projections, the reports of NSP provide information on the revenues and expenditures for the recent periods (15).

Table 4: Annual Average Expenses of Okefenokee Swamp and Adventures (2018-2021)

Account	USD
Labor	990.519
Non-labor (maintenance – utilities – supplies – carrier)	628.780
TOTAL	**1.619.299**

In addition to 1,619 million of direct-indirect expenditures, Okefenokee Swamp and Adventures' economic contribution for the same 4 years is as following (15).

Table 5: Annual Average Economics Contribution of Okefenokee Swamp and Adventures (2018-2021) – thousand USD

Account	Expenditure	No of Jobs	Job Income	Output	State tax revenue	Federal tax revenue
Non-labor	628,8	12	542,4	1.617,2	122,7	138,7
Labor	990,5	19	656,7	2.314,0	93,7	286,4
TOTAL	1.619,3	31	1.199,1	3.931,3	216,4	425,1

Therefore, with the creation of 31 additional enterprise level jobs, the total economic output produced directly appeared as 7,39 million USD per year. This generated income does not include the impact over the neighborhood. So, conservation and marketing of the Okefenokee swamp contributed significantly to the economic well-being of Georgia and the USA.

4. CONCLUSION AND INFERENCES

No need to repeat findings, the wild-life conservation that's been taken seriously, not only contributes to environmental sustainability and security, but also helps generation of income. There are very significant examples. The one considered in this paper is Okefenokee swamp and corresponding refuge of the State of Georgia. It was recorded that around 400.000 visitors visit this swamp and its surroundings to see and experience the conserved wildlife. The generalized revenues sign considerable direct and indirect income generation both to the actors and to state level and federal governments. This data may lead consideration of alternative touristic excursions even in the conventional touristic districts of especially developing countries. The activities may be financed by the governmental authorities, private sector and civil society organizations as NGOs focusing on environmental or wild-life conservation. Yet, the important observation on the site has been private organizations under guidance and support of Department of Agriculture and specific supra organizations as National Park Service and Fish and Wildlife Service for the USA example.

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