

# Visitors' Perspectives on Sustainable Tourism: A Comparative Study of National Parks in Kosovo, Montenegro and Albania

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## Introduction

In the south of the Dinaric Mountain range, which includes the borders of Kosovo, Montenegro and Albania, mountain tourism has been increasing during the last decades. This preceded the decision of each of the Western Balkan countries in this border triangle to create their National Parks (NPs), motivated by a commitment to protect ecological and social-historical locations, while promoting sustainable tourism practices. Four NPs and one regional park have been created within this region. Bjeshkët e Namuna is the largest NP in this region with an area of about 63,000 ha. This park lies in the south and west of Kosovo, along the border with Montenegro and Albania. Prokletije is a NP in Montenegro, which has an area of about 16,000 ha. Valbonë and Thethi are NPs in Albania. These parks are also known as the "Albanian Alps".

After the end of the Balkan conflicts in 1999, the first cross-border cooperation materialized into initiatives promoting peace, tourism and environmental conservation. These initiatives were led by foreign organizations and local experts, activists and intellectuals. The Balkan Peace Park project, initiated in 2001, aimed to promote peace and sustainable development practices in the region, through the cooperation of local residents, to create employment opportunities for local residents and also respect the environment. These projects that continued year after year helped in the cooperation of local residents, but also in the promotion of tourism, which is increasing every year.

The evaluation by visitors of the destination they visit is very important, in the case of providing tourist services. Mountain tourism has its own specifics, which are related to the terrain, logistics, safety and enjoying the scenic views during visits to the mountains. Taking tourists' satisfaction into consideration has a great importance in formulating offers that match their preferences. Previous research shows a link between general life satisfaction and their daily satisfaction in different areas such as health, work, family or leisure.

Pleasure derived from tourism experiences plays a key role in enhancing overall life and leisure satisfaction, a central tenet of individual well-being. Satisfaction is usually approached through two main perspectives: hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives. Tourism experiences influence satisfaction in both hedonic (eg fulfilling the need for relaxation after a vacation stay) and eudaimonic (fulfilling basic needs for competence and connection through lasting experiences) well-being.

This study aims to evaluate the opinions of the visitors for the destination which they have visited. In the study, we presented two main hypotheses:

1. What is the opinion of visitors about the destination they have visited?
2. Are there significant differences in the overall satisfaction levels expressed by visitors from Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro regarding the NPs they have visited?

## Methodology

A structured questionnaire consisting of 15 questions was carefully designed to assess various dimensions related to destination evaluation, including aspects such as road conditions, access to local culture, maintenance of cultural sites, park cleanliness, availability of souvenirs, quality of cuisine, accommodation, quality of service, environmental conditions and landscape assessments. Sampling was conducted to ensure a representative perspective, with approximately 350 surveys calculated based on an estimated population size of 200,000 individuals who resided in or had visited one of the KPs under study. The questionnaire was administered to visitors who had visited NPs at least once, in order to capture a comprehensive view of their experiences and preferences.

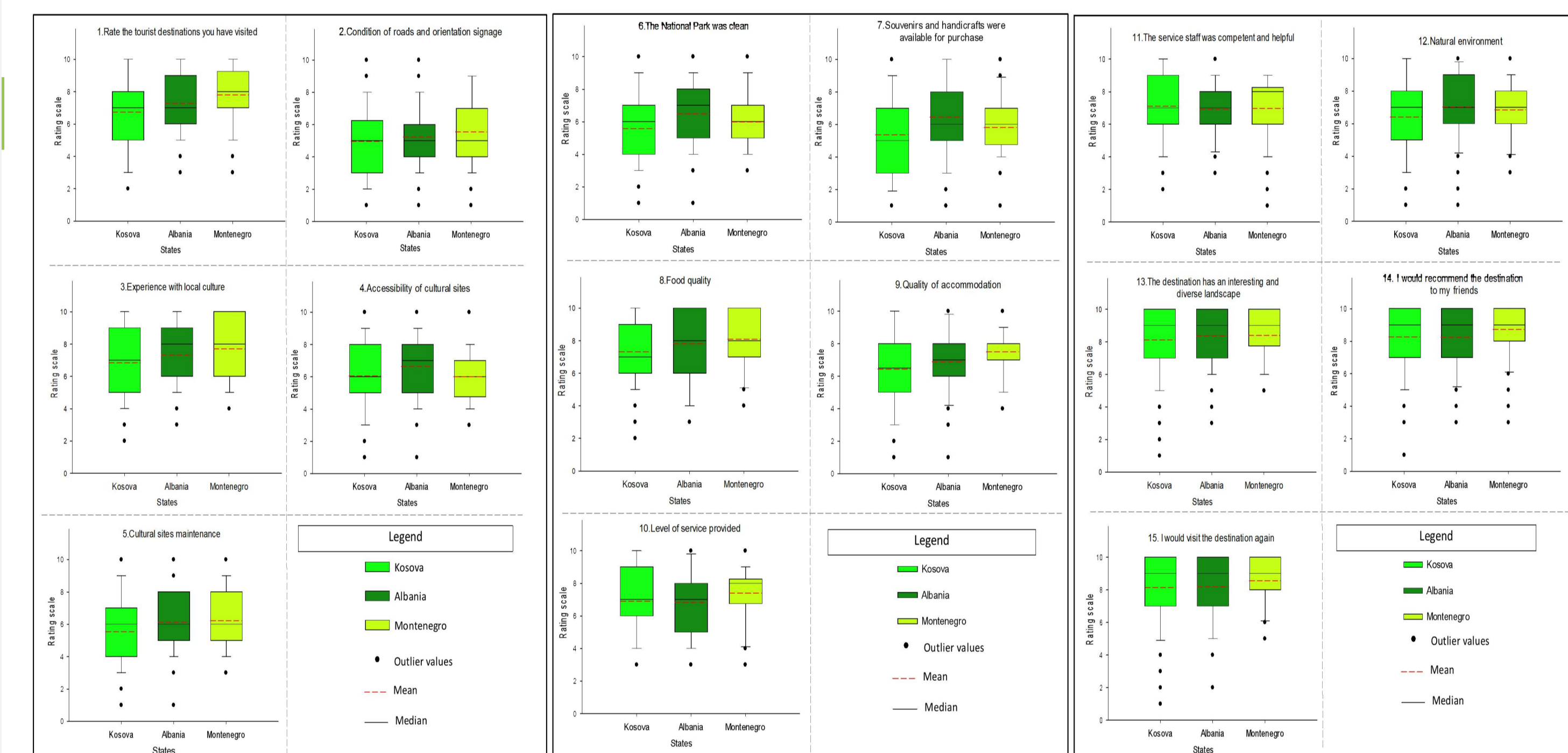
In terms of data analysis, descriptive statistics were used to summarize and clarify the characteristics of the data collected. Measures such as mean, standard deviation, standard error of the mean, and confidence intervals of the mean were calculated for each question in the questionnaire, providing insight into the distribution and central tendencies of responses on the various dimensions assessed. Analysis of variance was used to compare data sets from different countries and to assess differences. Additionally, graphical representations, particularly box plots, were used to visualize the distribution of responses and to spot any distinct trends or disparities across the surveyed countries.



Column	Size	Missing	Mean	Std. Dev	Std. Error	C.I. of Mean
1. Rate the tourist destinations in general	366	1	6.749	2.219	0.116	0.228
1. Condition of roads and orientation	365	3	5.116	2.194	0.115	0.227
1. Experience with local culture	366	0	6.94	2.212	0.116	0.227
1. Access to cultural sites	366	2	6.156	2.091	0.109	0.215
1. Maintenance of cultural sites	366	2	5.732	2.227	0.117	0.229
1. Cleanliness of the National Parks	366	1	5.795	2.267	0.118	0.233
1. Souvenirs and handicrafts	366	3	5.624	2.542	0.133	0.262
1. Food quality	364	5	7.663	1.988	0.105	0.206
1. Accommodation	365	0	6.581	2.171	0.114	0.223
1. Level of service provided	362	1	6.577	2.136	0.112	0.22
1. Service staff capability	366	1	6.688	2.26	0.118	0.233
1. Natural environment	364	1	6.568	2.203	0.115	0.226
1. The landscape	361	1	8.137	1.997	0.104	0.205
1. I would recommend destination	365	1	8.261	1.978	0.104	0.204
1. I would visit the destination again	364	2	8.159	2.146	0.112	0.221

## Results

- Visitors generally have positive impressions of national parks (average rating: 6.72 out of 10), citing natural beauty, diverse landscapes, local hospitality, and quality of traditional food.
- Hospitality rated higher in Kosovo compared to other countries
- Challenges facing national parks include inadequate infrastructure, bureaucratic obstacles, and environmental concerns such as inappropriate construction and poor waste management, particularly in Kosovo.
- Hiking is the primary activity preferred by visitors, with initiatives like the Balkan Peace Project (B3P) encouraging cross-border cooperation and economic growth.
- Sustainable tourism practices face challenges due to local reluctance, historical distrust of government initiatives, and limited cross-border cooperation.
- Limited cross-border cooperation exists due to factors like political reasons, bureaucratic obstacles, and information gaps.
- The promotion of responsible tourism in cross-border cooperation is insufficient in the design of a unified environmental policy for responsible tourism.



## Main conclusions

- Understanding tourists' preferences and perceptions is essential for adapting tourism offers and enhancing visitor experiences within protected areas.
- Mostly positive feedback was observed regarding the natural beauty, local hospitality and culinary experiences in the national parks in the Dinaric Mountains region.
- Challenges such as poor infrastructure and poor maintenance reduce visitor satisfaction and present barriers to sustainable tourism development.
- Efforts to promote sustainable development must address barriers such as historical mistrust, lack of education and economic disparities among rural communities.
- Bridging the gap between state authorities and local residents through initiatives and awareness campaigns led by NGOs is essential for fostering cooperation and promoting environmentally responsible practices.
- Sustained collaboration between stakeholders is essential for balancing conservation efforts with socio-economic development and ensuring the long-term sustainability of national parks.

