TOURISM FOR SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

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ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT OF RECREATIONAL CAPACITY IN NATURE-BASED TOURISM: STUDY OF FOUR LAKES IN ALMATY REGION, KAZAKHSTAN

Aliya Tankibayeva[1], Zhanna Assipova[2], Yeldar Nuruly[3], Aliya Aktymbayeva[4]
Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty, Kazakhstan

Abstract: *The article examines adaptability mechanisms deployed by four lake tourist sites in Kazakhstan. Drawing on the results of multilateral interviews and an analysis of the practical measures undertaken by these sites, the article identifies the peculiarities of the sustainable management of tourism carrying capacity in the context of an early-stage tourism sector development. The research undertook four case studies exploring the rationales for adaptive management in nature-based tourism sites, management inventory that increase and strengthen adaptive capacity in the selected sites and factors that constrain or diminish sites' adaptivity. This study contributes to literature by identifying research gaps in relation to nature-based early-stage tourism in contemporary context, and actualizes the discussion on conceptualizing "adaptive capacity" in itself, and in relation to sustainable tourism. It was found that intensity of tourism does not affect the character of enablers and constraints to adaptability. Whereas definitions of adaptability and sustainability of tourism varied depending on either vocational or nature-oriented recreational spectrum of selected sites.*

Keywords*: recreational capacity, nature-based tourism, adaptive capacity, sustainable tourism management*

INTRODUCTION

In Kazakhstan, the development of the tourism sector has intensified due to the country's strategy of economic diversification. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed both challenges and opportunities, and amplified the sustainable tourism agenda, bringing nature-based tourism into focus for tourists and destination developers. The nature-based tourism sector in Kazakhstan is currently at the stage of setting its priorities and finding tourism forms, aiming to increase tourism demand while finding the optimal supply of tourism with respect to socio-economic and environmental sustainability.

This paper explores and analyzes the practices carried out by lake tourist sites to maintain tourism activity not exceeding sites carrying capacity for tourism. The paper argues that in order to maintain tourism activity with respect to environmental conditions, the sites should have enough capacity to configure their tourism activity in the short-term, thus contributing to long-term sustainability of a site's natural environment.

[1] *Aliya Tankibayeva, PhD., Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty, Kazakhstan https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0341-0032*
[2] *Zhanna Assipova, PhD, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty, Kazakhstan; https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1260-4867*
[3] *Nuruly Yeldar, PhD candidate, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty, Kazakhstan, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9321-2285*
[4] *Aliya Aktymbayeva, C. Sc, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty, Kazakhstan; https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1269-4356*

Tourism at an early stage is characterized by concurrent and multiple developments in relation to shaping the sector's key product, segments of tourists and institutional forms. The literature is in consensus that the early-stage sector developments set the stage for the long-term trajectories, in particular through the formation of tourist infrastructure and facilities, as well as shaping area identity as a tourist destination (Butler, 2004; Weaver, 2018; Aswani et al, 2015).

Four nature-based sites were selected to explore the adaptive capacity in the context of tourism. The main research goal was to explore the links between adaptivity of site, tourism and sustainable tourism development. The sites differ in terms of tourism intensity. Although the tourism activity at all sites is shaped by the presence of natural water bodies - lakes, their recreational spectrum is different. Besides, the selected sites have various set-up of tourism players and the character of their roles in tourism sites' operation. Based on these differences a matrix was devised for examining how sites with different characteristics realize their adaptive behavior in relation to sustainable tourism development (Graph 1).

Table 1: Conceptual framework

	Recreational Spectrum	
Tourism intensity	vacational	nature-oriented
High	Alakol ● destination is located in a rather remote area from cities; however, has regular transport options from major cities ● offers resort and beach tourism ● tourism operators are multiple private enterprises - guest houses, wellness centers, etc. ● Has prevailingly agglomerations of capitally constructed buildings	Kaindy ● Destination is popular and highly visited due to its unique scenery; located in protected area; ● located in remoted and difficult to reach area ● Tourism is provided by one-day or short-term tours (either guided or self-organized) ● At peak seasons can be densely populated ● Has agglomeration of guest-houses of local residents houses and newly constructed hotels, campsites.
Low	Big Almaty Lake ● Destination is located in protected area, however within walking /quick-riding distance from the city ● Recreation on the water surface or in the water is prohibited, however camping, barbecuing or picnicking near the lake shore is very popular ● Prevailing infrastructure for cycling and hiking, observational sites and water /waste points - capital building are prohibited in the core protected area	Yazevoye ● Destination is located in remote area, is difficult to reach and is a protected area ● Known among visitors as a nature-intense place for spiritual recreation, adventure tourism, immersion with nature, and wellness based on nature-based solutions ● Capital construction is not allowed, fragmented road and utility infrastructure ● Number of visitors is growing but areas remain spacious and low populated

Research Questions: How do sites realize adaptive tourism management?

Research questions: How does adaptive capacity of sites condition / direct

METHODOLOGY

The main method of data collection were 29 exploratory interviews with experts, tourist sector practitioners, and policy-makers, as well as reviews from visitors and 12 interviews with tourists complemented data for analysis. Interviewees were approached from June 2021 till October 2021, during the peak season in the region. Among them were representatives of entrepreneurs (tourism providers), destination management organizations, protected areas' administration, visit centers and tourism-oriented interest groups. The purposive snowball sampling was applied in order to ensure inclusion of relevant groups of respondents given the consideration of access to respondents and their consent to participate.

RESULTS

Definition of adaptability.

Results of data analysis conceptualized adaptability as ability of tourist providers and respectively of tourist sites to operate with respect to uncertainty, under constrained resources and when needed to generate and manage tourism activity at the site. In line with the literature the adaptability in nature-based lake tourism in Kazakhstan is necessitated by the character of interaction of a site with exogenous contextual influences (Tompkins & Adger, 2004; Musavengane & Woyo, 2022; Tervo-Kankare et al, 2018). In the study, external influences were specifically observed concerning the volatility and low controllability of natural forces; and multiverse tourism preferences. In the study, highly-visited tourist sites of both vocational and nature-oriented character assigned high priority for the need of adaptive capacity. Whereas remote sites expressed need to be better informed and educated about approaches to ensure adaptability.

Sustainability objectives.

There is a general consensus that tourism carrying capacity denotes the capacity of a touristic site to satisfy tourists' demands without ecological deterioration and other types of adverse effects to natural ecosystems. Definition of sustainable tourism as expressed by interviewees to large extent corresponded to the concept of tourism carrying capacity with addition of priority of ensuring safety and affordability of tourism; and facilitating prosperity for areas, local residents and tourism providers. It was found, however, that sustainability priorities and envisioned approaches for making tourism more sustainable varies: In nature-oriented sites there was observed an increasing need for reconciling multiple forms of tourism,

which is manifested in form of competition over place use by various tourism activities. Recreational forms such as barbequing or outdoor team sports entail noisy and dense use of place, while hikers and retreat-seekers, conservation interest groups insist on less intrusive and solitary forms of tourisms. Policy-makers, experts and destination management organizations aim to enhance nature conservation and facilitate greater social and economic inclusion of nature-based tourism both for visitors and tourism providers. Nonetheless tourism providers express a need for a more targeted and coherent regulatory framework, while visitors suggest they need safer, more affordable and satisfying tourism.

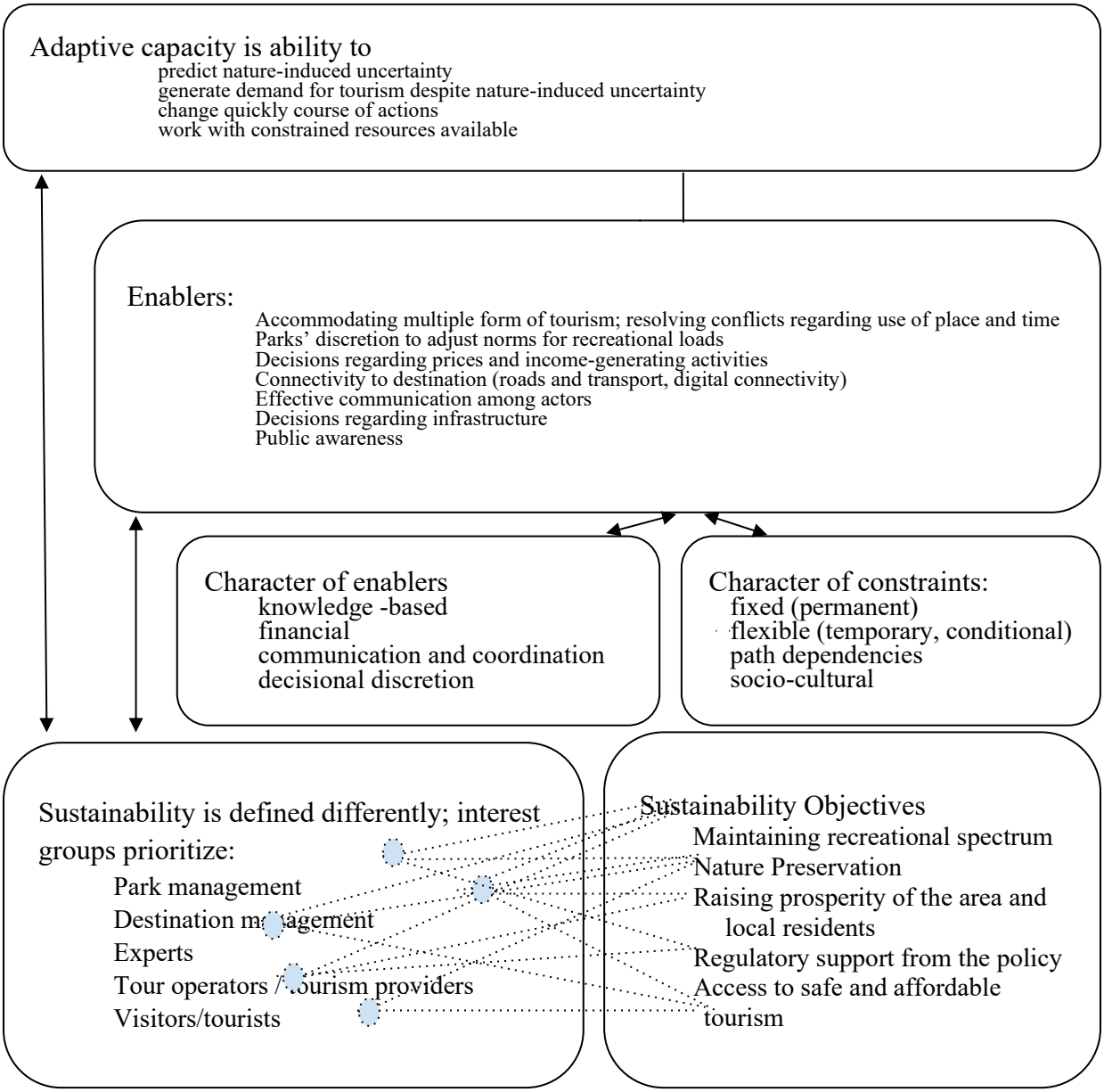
Enabling adaptive capacity-sustainable tourism links

According to the data analysis, the adaptive capacity of sites is linked with sustainable tourism by a common set of enablers: properties of decision-making, resource-management, infrastructure and connectivity. Therefore, fostering sites' adaptive capacity is positively associated with sites' potential to develop sustainable forms of tourism. The research identified 7 factors to be present in management practices of tourism providers at all sites, yet with different degrees of presence (Graph 1). For instance, tourism providers in sites with intense tourism activity suggest that they have more adaptive capacity due to more experience in managing multiple forms of tourism, communication with multiple stakeholders, and experience in income-generation and price management.

Nature-oriented tourism providers were protected areas, hence operated on the basis of policy-established norms. They indicate that they are more adaptive when they have discretion to make decisions about norms of recreational loads and infrastructure so that they can adjust to specifics of tourism in their sites and in particular situations; and when there is effective communication among the tourism sector. Tourism providers at the remote sites (Alakol, Kaindy) suggest that the environmental sustainability of tourism will increase with establishing greater connectivity, monitoring and public infrastructure - roads, sanitation and water points, waste collection systems. The tourism providers and destination managers from the low-visited remote site (Yazevoye) expressed that low visitation and low connectivity results in low economic vitality of the area and its residents (tourism providers and local residents) and insufficient finance to maintain and expand tourism infrastructure; and ensure more intensive sustainability and nature-preservation actions.

Infrastructure appears to have an important influence on creating or avoiding path dependencies. For instance, capital construction - especially, hotels and resort guest houses - that emerged spontaneously over more than 20 years in Alakol. The transfer to new types of materials and reconstruction / renovation in line with the contemporary standards and renewed destination development plan requires time and engaged owners. The existing housing infrastructure is seen rather of low adaptability -in peak tourism seasons there is not sufficient housing, while off-seasons the housing maintenance is costly. While environmental sustainability objectives for the destination are recognized by tourism operators, tourists, destination management, - tourism providers do not have sufficient motivation or competence to reconstruct/renovate. In nature-based sites (Big Almaty, Kaindy, Yazevoye) with high visitation, the adaptive capacity is high where routes and trails are interoperable and where facilities are multipurposes, and even mobile. All groups of respondents (visitors, park management, experts, destination managers and tourism providers) suggest that some trails and routes are regularly overloaded whereas others are not used to their full capacity. In his case, interoperability is a way to reconstruct or construct trails to be easy to switch tourist flows between each other and to distribute tourists flow more evenly. Besides, possibility to assign when hiking trails can be used for cyclists, or similar multimodal use of route infrastructure might positively affect both recreational spectrum and recreational load management. At the Big Almaty Lake site, where the recreational-vacation oriented component is quite essential, the mobile catering points turned out to be helpful in satisfying tourist demand across wider areas, therefore preventing excess visitors' concentration in certain sites. Adaptability and sustainability objectives are both enhanced through such infrastructural arrangements. Overall, it appears that infrastructure when interoperable, mobile and suited to environmental standards is an important factor for achieving both adaptive capacity and sustainability of tourism.

Graph 1: Model for enabling adaptive capacity - sustainable tourism links



Last, public awareness about sustainable behavior as tourists and overall sustainable forms of tourism was mentioned as important enable by tourism providers, park management, destination management and experts. For park administration, public awareness increases their adaptive and sustainability capacities when visitors behave responsibly, follow environmental and safety guidelines. The Big Almaty Lake sites, corresponding visitor center have partnered with the independent School for survival in the mountains, which is a community of trainers for trainers where a visitor can learn necessary skills for safe mountain and lake tourism; and further volunteer to become a trainer. The tourism providers and destination managers from the remote lakes Kaindi and Yazevoye want to generate more awareness about their uniqueness

and tourism value among the public in order to vitalize tourism and simultaneously close infrastructural and connectivity silos.

While Kaindi is a highly visited destination and Yazevoye is low-visited - tourism providers (usually small-scale enterprises) of both sites suggested that they need better awareness and regulatory and knowledge support regarding both adaptive and sustainable tourism models and management tools. For that they also suggest the need for effective communication with other actors in the sector, as well as ways for them to participate in destination development planning. In this way, awareness of the actors regarding tourism functioning and sustainability objectives are seen as important factors contributing to sustainability, whereas effective knowledge exchange and expertise sharing contributes to increasing adaptive capacity and sustainable practices at the sites.

DISCUSSION

It should be acknowledged that the four-case sample is relatively small to draw conclusions for recommendations applicable for all destinations across Kazakhstan. Nonetheless, the in-depth exploration and analysis of the cases have allowed to generate a systematized view about the character (classes) of enablers for tourism providers' and sites' adaptive capacity, as well as to have insights regarding tourism providers and destination management operators to approach constraining factors.

First, it was identified that their classes of factors that enable adaptive capacity are as of following characters: knowledge-based, financial, communication among actors and tourism sector coordination (including regulatory measures and supports) and discretion and competence of tourist providers and destination operators over decisions and their implementation. Adaptive capacity is therefore a complex capability consisting of knowledge, skills, regulations, specific modes of interaction of tourism actors with each other and visitors. The nature-oriented sites in our sample were protected areas and emphasized the role of scientific ecological and management knowledge and modern monitoring and planning aids. The scientific community can step in to amplify environmental management as well as help facilitate sustainable tourism models and trajectories for destination development. At the same time, it is important to develop financial models for sustainable tourism development and facilitate effective communication among stakeholders regarding goals of destination development, sharing of risks as well as ensuring that new financial models are inclusive.

Second, it was insightful to explore the character of constraints as perceived by tourism providers and destination managers. Whereas path dependency is a type of constraint quite discussed in the literature, it was also found that decisions are made and efforts are allocated depending on whether the resources and capabilities are enough to overcome the contraining situation (flexible and temporary constraints) or choices that are made because situations are perceived as impossible to overcome or resources are insufficient (fixed constraints). Frequently, tourism providers mention that flexible constraints are demand volatility, and that they can work within the existing regulatory norms relatively well. Among fixed constraints were lack of funds for renovation of capital infrastructure, and connectivity to a destination or their sites. Socio-cultural constraints such as difficulties with visitors to adopt environmentally responsible behavior were seen as important, but flexible.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of cases suggests that operating tourism sites at selected lake sites is indeed characterized by complex and dynamic processes requiring adaptive capacity. Adaptive capacity has been conceptualized as the ability to respond to environmental pressures under constraints and enablers. The four lake sites in the sample adopted the trajectory for developing sustainable forms of tourism and suggest that in multiple instances the sustainability objectives are linked with better adaptive capacity of the tourism providers and destination management.

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