

## ASSESSMENT OF THE MAIN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM INDICATORS IN THE PROTECTED AREAS OF THE GJIROKASTRA REGION

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### ABSTRACT

**Aim:** This study analyzes various tourism sustainability indicators within the protected areas (PAs) of the Gjirokastra region in Albania. Gjirokastra is a highly preferred destination, attracting a significant number of domestic and international visitors. Assessing tourism sustainability indicators in PAs is a necessary step to ensure that tourism growth in these regions remains balanced, sustainable, and aligned with the goals of nature conservation and biodiversity preservation. **Methods:** For this study, interviews were conducted with representatives of local institutions, and surveys were administered to the local community and visitors to the region’s PAs. The selected indicators were examined from socio-economic, environmental, infrastructural, and institutional perspectives. Using descriptive statistics, we assessed the sustainability indicators by analyzing the results of 112 surveys from the local community and 168 surveys from visitors to these areas. **Results:** The analysis revealed an increased level of awareness among the local community regarding the benefits of PAs, particularly in relation to natural and cultural heritage. Additionally, visitors expressed a positive evaluation of socio-economic and environmental indicators. One of the key findings is the lack of information concerning planning and community involvement in the management of PAs. **Conclusions:** The primary challenge for the destination is establishing priorities for the sustainable development of the region, which necessitates collaboration among all stakeholders. To achieve this, tourism development must be carefully planned, with a focus on environmental preservation and improving the quality of life for residents.

**Key words:** sustainable tourism, protected areas, Gjirokastra, Albania

**JEL codes:** Q01, R10, Z32

### INTRODUCTION

The Gjirokastra Region is situated in the southern part of Albania and is a rich tourist destination associated with a variety of natural and cultural attractions within a small geographical area, making it easily accessible to the European tourist markets [Boboli and Muça 2022]. The region also has a favorable

geographical position, where agricultural space is the fundamental component of its agrarian ecosystem, presented as a complex of natural and human elements and factors in constant interaction and change [Boboli et al. 2023]. In the Gjirokastra Region, the tourism sector has transformed into one of the most important drivers of economic development. The economic and social impact has begun to be felt, as nearly all indi-

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cators in tourism components show growth. In 2024, Gjirokastra registered a record number of visitors – approximately 135,000 in protected areas (PAs), marking a 38% increase compared to 2023 [MTM 2024]. Especially in recent years, international attention has grown, accompanied not only by an increase in tourist numbers, but also by a rising awareness among locals to offer better hospitality capacities. The region's tourism offer is rich in cultural sites and natural monuments. The PA and, more recently, the declaration of the Vjosa River as a National Park, unique for the country and for Europe, place Albania and the Gjirokastra Region in particular in a new category on the European tourism map. This opens a new path toward economic and social sustainability, which requires careful management and balanced development of the PA.

Though the relationship is complex and sometimes argumentative, tourism is always a critical component to consider in the establishment and management of protected areas [Gúčik and Marciš 2020]. Tourism can make a significant contribution to three dimensions of sustainable development: creating jobs, generating trade opportunities, recognizing needs, and supporting tourism activities; creating important capacity that promotes environmental conservation priorities and cultural diversity [Baloch et al. 2022]. Gjirokastra offers many kinds of tourism, including historic, cultural, mountain, agritourism, ecotourism, archaeology, adventure, family, winter, health, and equestrian activities [Ktona et al. 2023].

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable development requires the integration of its principles into all activities. This means that development does not include only environmental aspects, but also the positive conditions for residents and other stakeholders connected with social and economic benefits [Gúčik and Marciš 2020]. To measure sustainability indicators, it is important to use region-specific sets of indicators that include not only macro-level quantitative statistical data, such as the number of visitors, businesses, and employees,

but also other data that reflect the level of satisfaction and involvement resulting from tourism development. These indicators provide valuable insights for decision-makers, investors, the local community, institutions, and local governance. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), various PAs have specific management objectives and need to achieve multiple goals (education, research, conservation, and recreation) [Sobhani et al. 2022]. Supporting innovation and ecological education for tourists and local communities is crucial [Pomianek and Kljajić 2025]. An analysis of the indicator set allows us to consider to what extent these indicators are likely to stimulate individual and collective change [Blackstock et al. 2014].

Sustainable development is the guiding principle for advancing human and economic development while maintaining the integrity of ecosystems and social systems on which the economy depends [Richardson 2021]. “Sustainability”, “sustainable tourism”, and “sustainable development” are all well-established terms that have often been used loosely and interchangeably in the tourism literature [Liu 2003]. Therefore, sustainable tourism requires not only a low environmental impact on natural resources, but also fair stakeholder benefits and participation rights [Zhang et al. 2022]. Precisely, sustainable tourism, especially within national parks and other high-protection zones, provides a framework for balancing the ecological, economic, and social dimensions of development [Matović et al. 2025]. Tourism in protected areas has unique characteristics that make it a potentially positive force for conservation. Tourism, recreation, and visitor use have been intricately linked to many protected areas since their conception [Leung et al. 2018].

Protected areas play a critical role in protecting the planet's biodiversity and promoting human well-being. An important way for PAs to provide cultural ecosystem services is through tourism; World Heritage Sites and biosphere reserves are also important tourist destinations [Zhang et al. 2022]. Nevertheless, in the context of PAs, tourism can also have

harmful effects, including environmental degradation, pressure on natural resources, and disruptions caused by over-tourism or the cumulative ecological footprint of tourism-related activities. These risks underscore the need to integrate sustainability principles into tourism practices within PAs [Matović et al. 2025]. Incorporating the sustainability context enables a more representative evaluation of the actual condition of a protected area and facilitates appropriate actions to improve management effectiveness [Lee and Abdullah 2024]. Indicators of sustainable tourism development are evaluated over a specific period (yearly, monthly) or refer to a particular type of destination (official administrative unit, protected area). Indicators follow the concept of sustainability and its tools, involving a set of variables that provide information to understand the relationship between the impact of tourism on the cultural and natural resources on which tourism depends [Gúčík and Marciš 2020]. Sustainability indicators can be subjective or objective; both are useful in sustainable tourism planning and management [Zhang et al. 2022]. The World Trade Organization (WTO) has developed baseline “universal” tourism indicators that can be applied to all tourism destinations and has suggested indicators for specific destination areas [White et al. 2006]. Thus, developing, implementing, and interpreting indicators can be a way for all stakeholders to actively engage with the concept of sustainable tourism and what it means for their destination. Indicators are a concrete demonstration of the moral and political choices made in the quest to achieve sustainable tourism [Blackstock et al. 2014]. However, it is important to choose indicators that are useful at the national and regional levels to provide the baseline framework in which PA designation can be framed. By doing so, we can provide meaningful assessments of whether or not biodiversity targets are met [El-Hajj et al. 2017]. The expansion of the PA network needs to be accompanied by strategies and plans for the empowerment of PA management and the involvement of local communities in PAs’ decision-making processes [Gatiso et al. 2022].

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

### Protected area in the Gjirokastra Region

The Gjirokastra Region includes seven protected areas and 82 natural monuments (Fig. 1). Their categorization and surface area are presented in Table 1 [ESPID 4 Vjosa 2024]. National Park Fir of Hotova-Dangëlli is the largest in the country and stands out for its high biodiversity value. It forms a vast green crown and, due to its size, represents the only major forest massif in the southern part of Albania. For this reason, it can be described as the “natural lung” of Southern Albania. National Park Vjosa River is one of the last wild rivers in Europe, becoming the first national park of a wild river in Europe. The Vjosa River and its main tributaries flow freely for over 400 km from the Pindus Mountains in Greece, where it is known as Aoös, to the Adriatic coast in Albania. The river and its surrounding areas are ecosystems of significant biodiversity and are home to over 1,100 species, including 13 animal species and two plant species classified as globally threatened by the IUCN. Natural Park Fir of Kardhiqi-Rzëzomë encompasses all phytoclimatic zones and harmoniously blends landscapes and ecosystems – rivers, shrublands, and forests – ranging from virgin or near-virgin forests to pastures and rocky terrains. Natural Park Fir of Zhulati is where all phytoclimatic zones converge, and landscapes and ecosystems – riverine, shrubland, and forest – intertwine harmoniously. These extend to virgin or near-virgin natural and semi-natural forests, pastures, and rocky terrains. This unique composition makes it a rare natural site. This park is distinguished by its high biodiversity of habitats and species: Natural Park Blue Eye. The most fascinating features of this park are its numerous karst springs and the surrounding forest ecosystem. Encircled by evergreen vegetation and centuries-old plane trees, the Blue Eye spring offers a mesmerizing view where colors blend and harmonize so seamlessly that it becomes difficult to distinguish the boundary between water and plants. Natural Park Fir of Sotira





Fig. 1. Protected area in the Gjirokastra Region

Source: AKZM (n.d.).

is located in the southern part of the country, in rugged terrain where Mediterranean and mountain climates intertwine. Set far from the national road, this park offers a tranquil environment with high biodiversity in both habitats and species. Natural Park Zagori features a karst landscape represented by a variety of formations, with the Çajupi Plateau (2.5 km<sup>2</sup>) standing out for its tectonic-karstic origin. This mountainous plateau is renowned for its scenic beauty and healthy climate.

## AIM AND METHODS

This study was survey-based. The aim of this study was to examine selected indicators of sustainable tourism development in the protected areas of the Gjirokastra Region in Albania, which is among the most attractive tourist destinations in the country, attracting a considerable number of domestic and international visitors. The data used in this study were collected through mixed methods

**Table 1.** Protected areas of the Gjirokastra Region

Site	Area [ha]	Category by IUCN classification
National Park Fir of Hotova-Dangëlli	36,004	II
National Park Vjosa River	12,727 (50.47% is part of Gjirokastra District)	II
National Park Fir of Kardhiqi-Rrëzomë	4,304	IV
Natural Park Fir of Zhulati	936.2	IV
Natural Park Blue Eye	293.3	IV
Natural Park Fir of Sotira	4,928	IV
Natural Park Zagori	24,608	IV

Source: own work based on AKZM (n.d.) and ESPID 4 Vjosa (2024).

to provide sufficient evidence regarding the sustainability indicators of tourism in the PAs of the Gjirokastra Region. Detailed interviews were conducted with representatives of local institutions, and field data was gathered through semi-structured questionnaires addressed to the local community and visitors in the PAs. The working group conducted open interviews with representatives from the seven municipalities in the district, RAPA Gjirokastër. These interviews aimed to gather information regarding institutional support, the legal framework, the PA management plans, and inter-institutional cooperation. According to Baker et al. [2012, p. 15], “One interview is sometimes quite sufficient to establish that something is possible.” Subsequently, this information was used to design the questionnaires. Quantitative data was also collected from local institutions and the Albanian Ministry of Tourism and Environment (MTM). The working group continued with the design and extraction of sustainable tourism indicators along with socio-economic, infrastructural, environmental, and institutional dimensions. The indicators were selected based on a literature review, focusing on those most commonly used in measuring the sustainable devel-

opment of tourism [White et al. 2006, Blackstock et al. 2014, Latip et al. 2015, Gúčík and Marciš 2020, Sobhani et al. 2022, Zhang et al. 2022, Matović et al. 2025]. Indicators were selected by taking into account the specific characteristics of the destination, as well as their relevance, measurability, adaptability, comparability, territorial representation, sensitivity, and communicability. Additionally, the selection process considered challenges and shortcomings in collecting and cross-referencing official data, the presence of informality, and the difficulty of detailing the activities of local businesses, particularly regarding the types of services offered. For the measurement of certain indicators, primary data was required. Elements such as attractions, service quality, investments, tourism infrastructure, and tourism activities were assessed through the perceptions of the local community and visitors. The indicators can simplify, clarify, and, with aggregated information, help integrate economic, natural, and social effects into decision-making, measure, and refine progress in sustainable development [Gúčík and Marciš 2020]. The indicators used are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Indicators of sustainability in protected areas

Category	Indicator
Socio-economic	Direct income from tourism
	Standard of living
	Creating new jobs
	Employing young people
	Employing women
	Abandonment of the area
	Sustainability of local businesses
	Number of visitors
	Level of prices
	Promoting private investments
	Number of services related to tourism
	Number of tourism activities
	Culture and lifestyle
	Preserving cultural traditions
	Level of security
Environmental	Protecting the environment
	Awareness of the local community
	Environmental authenticity
	Biodiversity
	Extensive development of tourism
Infrastructure	Intensive development of tourism
	Public investments
	Improving infrastructure
	Telecommunication and related services
Institutional	Water supply network
	Community involvement
	Community information

Source: own work.

Two questionnaires were developed. The first was addressed to the local community in the PA, where data was collected regarding their opinions and perceptions about the benefits of tourism, its impact, community participation in decision-making, and development policies. The second questionnaire targeted visitors, gathering data on their opinions and perceptions related to the PA. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and took place during group work in the field from April to May 2025, in the region's PA, following a pre-established schedule. A total of 120 questionnaires were completed

on-site by community members, of which 112 were deemed valid, and 180 questionnaires were completed by visitors, of which 168 were valid. Respondents were asked to rate their viewpoints and level of agreement regarding tourism sustainability in the studied areas using a Likert scale ("strongly disagree = 1", "disagree = 2", "neutral = 3", "agree = 4", and "strongly agree = 5").

## RESULTS

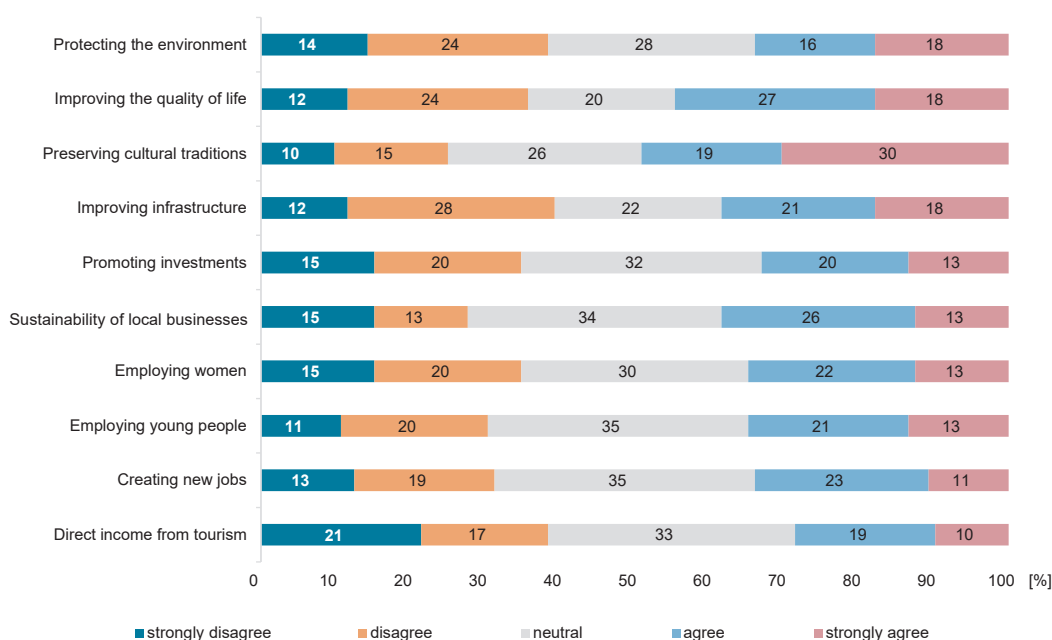
### Community opinion

From the analysis of the community questionnaire data, it was found that 68.8% of respondents benefit from tourism, while 29.5% have family members directly employed in the tourism sector. Of the respondents, 45.5% were male, and 54.5% were female.

Respondents were asked to evaluate the community benefits resulting from tourism development. A summary of the results is presented in Figure 2. Regarding "improving infrastructure", the majority of respondents rated this as "disagree" at 24%. For the indicators "protecting the environment", "promoting investments", "sustainability of local businesses", "employing women", "employing young people", "creating new jobs", and "direct income from tourism", the majority of respondents rated them as "neutral" at 28%, 32%, 34%, 30%, 35%, 35%, and 33%, respectively. For the indicator "improving quality of life", the majority of respondents rated it as "agree" at 27%, while for "preserving cultural traditions", the majority, at 30%, rated it as "strongly agree". Respondents were also asked to share their opinions regarding the impact of tourism development in the study area by classifying the indicators into socio-economic, environmental, infrastructural, and institutional dimensions. Regarding the socio-economic dimension, the majority expressed a "neutral" stance on the statements "the culture and lifestyle of the community have not changed with the development of tourism", "the number of tourists in your area is higher compared to other rural areas that are not part of the PA", and "income and the standard of living in rural areas have generally increased in recent years due to the development of tourism in PA", with 38%, 31%, and 40%. In contrast, for the statements "the development of tourism will help reduce the abandonment of the area", "the awareness of the local

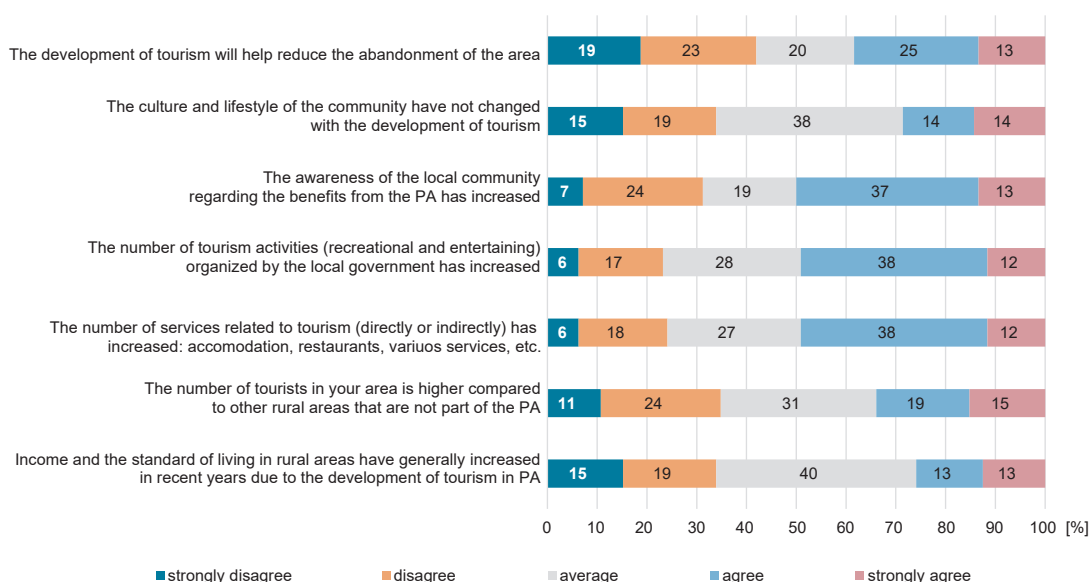
community regarding the benefits from the PA has increased”, “the number of tourism activities (recreational and entertaining) organized by the local government has increased”, and “the number of services

related to tourism (directly or indirectly) has increased: accommodation, restaurants, various services, etc.”, the majority expressed “agree”, with 25%, 37%, 38%, and 38%, respectively (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 2.** Benefits from tourism – community opinions

Source: own research from 2025.



**Fig. 3.** Socio-economic dimension – community opinions

Source: own research from 2025.

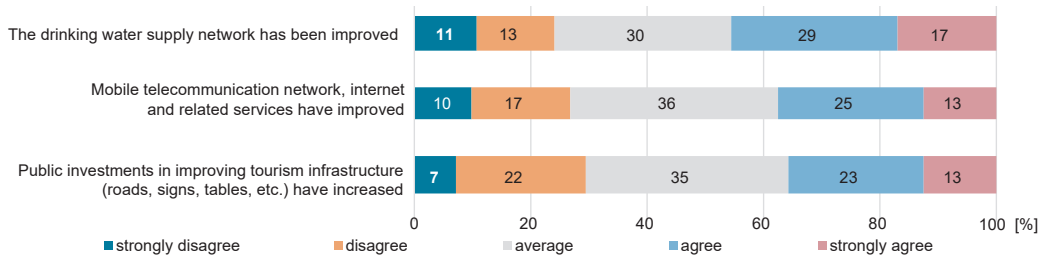


Regarding the infrastructural dimension, the majority expressed a “neutral” stance on the following: “the drinking water supply network has been improved”, “mobile telecommunication network, internet and related services have improved”, and “public investments in improving tourism infrastructure (roads, signs, tables etc.) have increased”, with 30%, 36%, and 35%, respectively (Fig. 4).

Regarding the environmental dimension, the majority expressed a “neutral” stance on the following: “the local community has become aware and takes

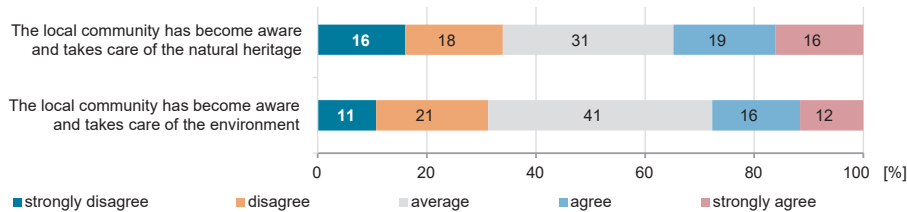
care of the environment” and “the local community has become aware and takes care of the natural heritage”, with 41% and 31%, respectively (Fig. 5).

As for the institutional dimension, the majority, 28%, expressed “disagree” with the statement “the local community living in PA is informed about management planning laws, rights, and other relevant aspects”, while 21% expressed “neutral” regarding the statement “the local community living in PA is involved in the planning and management of the PA” (Fig. 6).



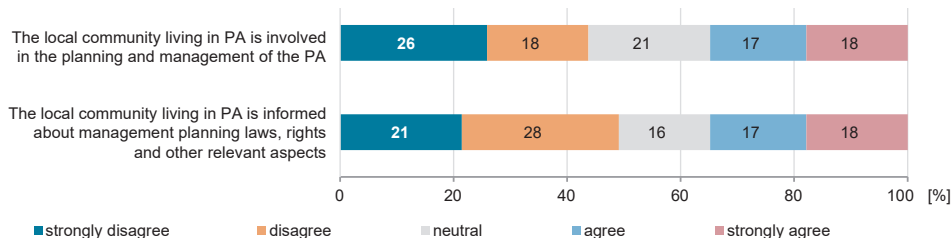
**Fig. 4.** Infrastructural dimension – community opinions

Source: own research from 2025.



**Fig. 5.** Environmental dimension – community opinions

Source: own research from 2025.



**Fig. 6.** Institutional dimension – community opinions

Source: own research from 2025.

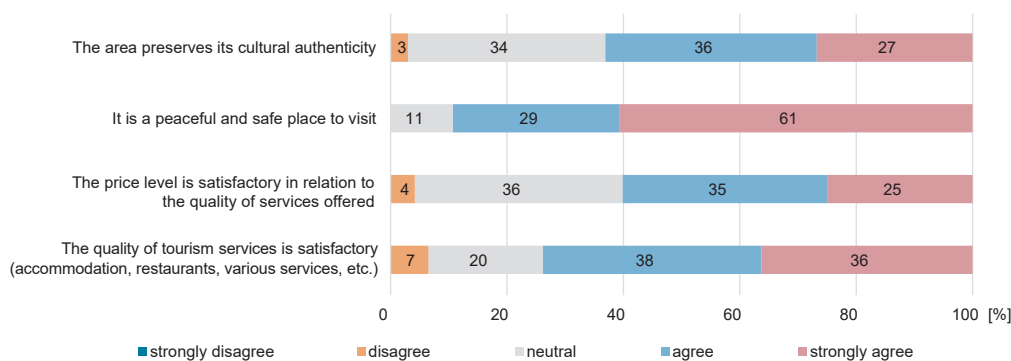


## Visitors' opinion

According to the analysis of visitor survey data, it was found that 44.64% of the visitors were male and 55.36% were female. Among them, 72.65% were visiting the study area for the first time, while 83.30% stated they would visit it again, and 69.64% had a multi-day visit to the area. Respondents were asked to share their opinions regarding their visit to the area by classifying indicators into socio-economic, environmental, and infrastructural dimensions.

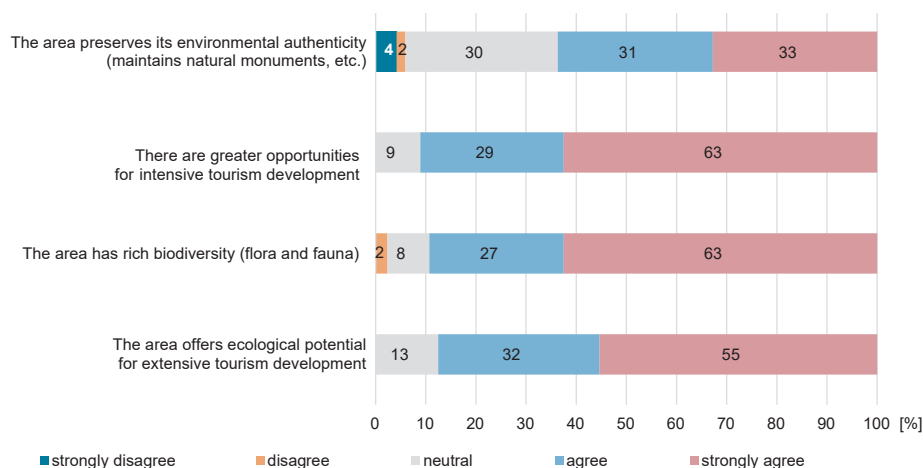
Regarding the socio-economic dimension, 36% expressed “neutral” regarding the statement “the price level is satisfactory in relation to the quality of services offered”. For the statements “the area preserves its cultural authenticity” and “the quality of tourism services is satisfactory (accommodation, restaurants, various services, etc.)”, the majority rated them as “agree”, with 36% and 38%, respectively. The majority (61%) expressed “strongly agree” with the statement “it is a peaceful and safe place to visit” (Fig. 7).

Regarding the environmental dimension, the majority expressed “strongly agree” with the statement “the area



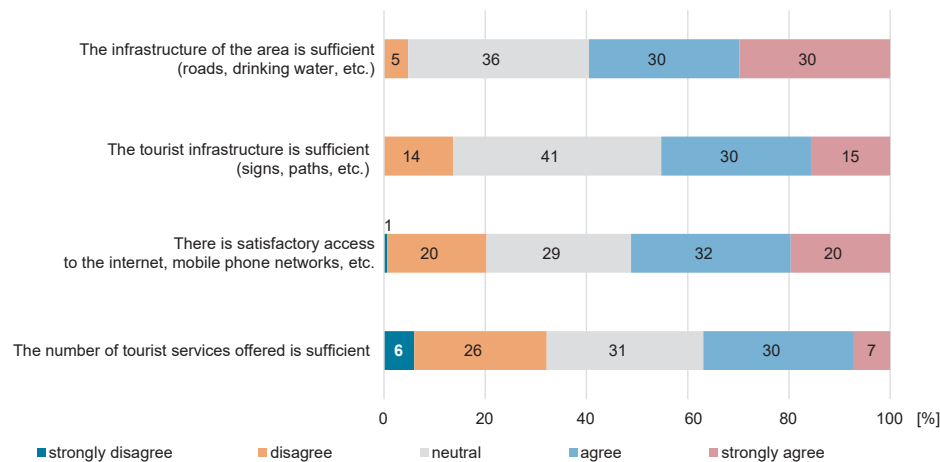
**Fig. 7.** Socio-economic dimension – visitors' opinions

Source: own research from 2025.



**Fig. 8.** Environmental dimension – visitors' opinions

Source: own research from 2025.



**Fig. 9.** Infrastructural dimension – visitors’ opinions

Source: own research from 2025.

preserves its environmental authenticity (maintains natural monuments etc.)”, “there are greater opportunities for intensive tourism development”, “the area has rich biodiversity (flora and fauna)”, and “the area offers ecological potential for extensive tourism development”, with 33%, 63%, 63%, and 55%, respectively (Fig. 8).

Regarding the infrastructural dimension, the majority expressed a “neutral” stance on the statements “the infrastructure of the area is sufficient”, “the tourist infrastructure is sufficient”, and “the number of tourist services offered is sufficient”, with respective percentages of 36%, 41%, and 31%. The majority, 32%, expressed “agree” with the statement “there is satisfactory access to the internet, mobile phone networks, etc.” (Fig. 9).

**CONCLUSIONS**

This paper has provided an analysis of the evaluation of tourism sustainability indicators in PAs of the Gjirokastra Region. Indicators of sustainable tourism are used for the multidimensional assessment of destination development. The application of indicators must be tailored to each destination and depends on various factors, including data availability, type of destination, stakeholders’ contributions, and tourism development objectives [Gúčík and Marciš 2020].

In this study, we evaluated sustainability indicators from the perspective of both the local community

and visitors to the area, classifying them into socio-economic, environmental, infrastructural, and institutional dimensions. The analysis revealed an increased level of awareness among the local community regarding the benefits of PAs, particularly in relation to natural and cultural heritage. Furthermore, the community primarily values the benefits of tourism in terms of job creation, encouraging investment in the sector, and improving the quality of life. Regarding visitors’ opinions, the analysis indicates a positive evaluation of socio-economic and environmental indicators, while the area’s infrastructure is rated as average. One of the key findings is the lack of information concerning planning and community involvement in the management of PAs. The main challenge is setting priorities for the sustainable development of the region. To achieve this, tourism development must be carefully planned, with a focus on environmental preservation and improving the quality of life for residents. Therefore, governments cannot continue to view tourism development as a random phenomenon; instead, a proper strategy is needed to transform tourism into an industry, according to strategic planning and management [Muça et al. 2022].

During the data collection process, the working group encountered several challenges, particularly in accessing secondary data and due to the limited empirical knowledge among stakeholders. As highlighted by Gúčík and Marciš [2020], and Matović et al. [2025],

approaches that combine quantitative and qualitative data contribute to a deeper analysis of the specific characteristics of PAs and support the identification of more suitable policies for their management and the development of strategic planning.

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## OCENA GŁÓWNYCH WSKAŹNIKÓW TURYSTYKI ZRÓWNOWAŻONEJ NA OBSZARACH CHRONIONYCH REGIONU GJIROKASTRA

### STRESZCZENIE

**Cel:** Celem badania było zbadanie wybranych wskaźników rozwoju zrównoważonego turystyki na obszarach chronionych regionu Gjirokastra w Albanii. Region Gjirokastra należy do najbardziej atrakcyjnych turystycznie obszarów kraju, przyciąga znaczną liczbę turystów krajowych i zagranicznych. Ocena wskaźników rozwoju zrównoważonego na obszarach chronionych stanowi niezbędny etap w zapewnieniu, że turystyka w tych regionach rozwija się harmonijnie i zgodnie z celami ochrony przyrody i zachowania bioróżnorodności. **Metody:** Na potrzeby badania przeprowadzono wywiady z przedstawicielami instytucji lokalnych oraz ankiety wśród społeczności lokalnej i odwiedzających obszary chronione regionu. Wybrane wskaźniki poddano analizie z perspektyw społeczno-ekonomicznej, środowiskowej, infrastrukturalnej i instytucjonalnej. Za pomocą statystyki opisowej dokonano oceny wskaźników rozwoju zrównoważonego, analizując wyniki 112 ankiet wypełnionych przez przedstawicieli społeczności lokalnej oraz 168 ankiet uzyskanych od turystów odwiedzających badane obszary. **Wyniki:** Dzięki analizie wykazano wzrost poziomu świadomości społeczności lokalnej w zakresie korzyści wynikających z funkcjonowania obszarów chronionych, szczególnie w kontekście dziedzictwa przyrodniczego i kulturowego. Ponadto odwiedzający ocenili pozytywnie wskaźniki społeczno-ekonomiczne oraz środowiskowe. Brak informacji dotyczących planowania oraz niedostateczny poziom zaangażowania społeczności lokalnej w proces zarządzania obszarami chronionymi to główne ustalenia badania. **Wnioski:** Głównym wyzwaniem dla badanego obszaru jest określenie priorytetów w zakresie rozwoju zrównoważonego regionu, co wymaga współpracy wszystkich interesariuszy. Aby osiągnąć ten cel, rozwój turystyki powinien być starannie planowany z uwzględnieniem ochrony środowiska oraz poprawy jakości życia mieszkańców.

**Słowa kluczowe:** turystyka zrównoważona, obszary chronione, Gjirokastra, Albania