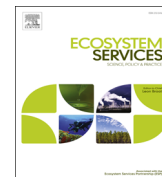




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Cultural ecosystem services and economic development: World Heritage and early efforts at tourism in Albania



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ABSTRACT

Albania actively promotes its World Heritage sites and other attributes of its cultural heritage, including local food and beverages, dance, tapestries and even its communist era, in its marketing efforts. Better information about the emergent tourism sector, particularly with regard to Albania's abundant potential in nurturing and capturing the value of its cultural ecosystem services, could help the country to better manage toward its economic development objectives. In this paper, results of a survey of international visitors to Mother Theresa International Airport, highlighting their expenditure patterns, activities, their assessment of their visit with a particular focus on natural and cultural tourism are reported. For example, the average additional willingness to pay to travel to Albania under current experiential conditions is €410. On average, respondents were willing to pay an additional €95 to the Albanian government to invest in Albanian natural and cultural ecosystem services. This potentially translates into an estimated €95 million per year to invest in Albania's cultural and natural heritage, or €42 million for culture and €53 million for nature. The results point to the very young stage of tourism development and may illuminate strategies to introduce international audiences to Albania through conferences or other business oriented travel.

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1. Introduction

Due to its seaside, its Southern European location, and its long and unique history, Albania, 'a new Mediterranean love' (Albania Tourism Ministry, 2013), has great potential as a cultural and nature-based tourism destination. Albania's 20th century history, however, was far less open and transparent than its 21st century history thus far. The country's older marketing tag line, 'The last secret' (Albanian Ministry of Tourism, 2005a, 2005b) applies equally to its former draw as a tourism destination as to the information available on the tourism sector. As a result, there is currently very little systematically collected information about visitors to Albania.

Albania tourism information gathering is complicated by a high volume of day traders arriving in the country by land, day visitors arriving by sea, and both residents and non-residents arriving by land and air. Andoni (2007) and Bordoni (2007) report the specific issues of each available data source. A 2007 article in the Economist newspaper provides a stark illustration of the data challenges involved with the tourism sector in Albania. The Economist (July 31, 2007) reported, based upon World Tourism Organization (WTO) data (which are provided to the WTO by the country), Albania's

international tourists spent \$17,500 per visitor on average, placing Albania as the world leader 3.5 times the per visitor expenditure level of second place Moldova (Holiday Money, 2007). Clearly, this cannot be true and upon further review would appear to be due to combining datasets improperly (Andoni, 2007). Andoni (2007) calculates a more plausible \$1161 per visitor for the same period despite taking a more comprehensive definition of both tourists and tourist expenditures into account.

In addition to its natural heritage, Albania actively promotes its World Heritage sites and other attributes of its cultural heritage, including local food and beverages, dance, tapestries and even its Communist era, in its marketing efforts (Albanian Ministry of Tourism, 2013) (see Map 1, Rekecewicz, p. 2006) The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA or MA) defines cultural ecosystem services as 'nonmaterial benefits people obtain from ecosystems through spiritual enrichment, cognitive development, reflection, recreation, and aesthetic experiences.' (MEA, Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA), 2003, p. 58) Cultural ecosystem services include symbolic, spiritual and historical values, scientific inquiry, educational experiences, and recreation (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA), 2003)). Albania's UNESCO sites are listed primarily under cultural criteria III and/or IV under the World Heritage Convention, which are: 'to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared; to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble

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Map 1. Protected areas and conservation hotspots in Albania. http://www.grida.no/graphicslib/detail/protected-areas-and-conservation-hotspots-in-albania_7486. Source: Rekacewicz, p. 2006.

or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history' (Albania-UNESCO World Heritage Center, 2013a, 2013b). As a result, Albania's UNESCO sites can be viewed as nurturing cultural ecosystem services of visitors and Albanians.

Cultural and nature-based tourism can be viewed as capturing a subset of the cultural ecosystem services created by Albania, providing incentives for Albania to manage scarce resources for these cultural ecosystem services (Chopra et al., 2005; TEEB, 2011). Better

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