







## Article

# Stakeholders' Attitudes toward Protected Areas: The Case of Tara National Park (Serbia)

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**Abstract:** This paper represents a case study examining attitudes of various stakeholders about Tara National Park (NP) (Serbia), identifying also the factors that shape these attitudes. The survey method was applied to a sample of 405 respondents (197 community members and 208 visitors). In addition, 15 interviews with specific key actors (NP executives and local key persons) were performed. The research confirmed the presence of different types of conflicts among stakeholders, mostly between the NP and the local population (primarily farmers) associated with land use in agriculture and the ban on the construction of facilities. The community recognizes tourism as the highest priority, unlike the NP leaders and visitors, who emphasize protection and conservation (especially biodiversity) as the primary goals of future NP development. The opinions of the local population are divided concerning support for the existence of the NP and the importance of it as a part of the national heritage. Most of them do not recognize the economic benefits resulting from the proclamation of the NP and do not see themselves as participants in the decision-making process. The findings also reveal that visitors strongly support tourism development and activities following the principles of nature protection. This category of respondents is only partly affected by the fact that this area has been declared a NP. The analysis shows that certain socioeconomic factors considerably influence the opinions of both community and visitors. Results suggest that future actions should be aimed at improving the coordination of various stakeholders, especially the NP and the community, through different social mobilization activities. Stimulating small businesses and providing incentives for agriculture and nature tourism development could be a useful step forward.

**Keywords:** stakeholders' attitudes; community; visitors; key actors; tourism; Tara NP; Serbia



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## 1. Introduction

Protected areas (PAs) in their numerous forms have affected societies worldwide and represent the basis of efforts to sustain the Earth's biodiversity and ecosystems [1]. The prosperous integration of PAs and their surrounding space relies on interactions between different stakeholders, including policymakers, practitioners, local communities, and visitors [2–4]. PAs can be affected by these stakeholders directly or indirectly, mostly through the decision-making process and utilization of resources. In order to improve conservation practices and sustainable use of resources in these areas, as well as to provide effective stakeholder engagement, successful coordination between various actors is necessary [5]. This particularly means considering the most prominent stakeholders' issues that affect their quality of life [6]. If these problems are not addressed, they could lead to a lack

of support from local communities and other users of space who may feel their living, working, or leisure conditions have deteriorated and who will consequently oppose any PA initiative, directly subverting the institution of the PAs and the health of biodiversity [7–9].

Declaration of national parks (NPs) is globally the most adopted method of conserving natural ecosystems and cultural heritage for a broad scope of human activities [10]. As the highest category of PA systems in most countries, NPs provide a diversity of benefits (preservation of biodiversity, wildlife habitat, wilderness, and recreational possibilities.), that allow numerous users to meet their needs [11]. Recently, the significance of identifying stakeholders' diverse interests and knowledge about NPs has been widely emphasized in the academic literature [12–15]. Researchers highlight that discovering modes to cope with the worries of the local population and including them in the decision-making procedure is vital for the sustainability of NPs and for maximizing benefits to the community [16–18]. Similarly, the role of visitors is enhanced, whose influences are numerous and well-documented [2,15,19,20]. They represent a significant resource for acquiring data on the level of present tourism impacts, adaptability to changes in NPs, and the consequences of various management operations [21].

NPs in Serbia represent territories with the highest degree of spatial integration of various natural and cultural components of the environment. Nowadays, they are the highest-level PA category in the country and the most significant natural tourist attractions [22]. Over the decades, the planning and management of these areas have regularly been characterized by a top-down approach [23]. According to the Law on National Parks [24], the management of these PAs is entrusted to special state institutions, the so-called public enterprises. Considering the various problems these institutions have faced over time, including insufficient financial and human resources and management capacity [25], there is a need to involve other stakeholders in the NP management process, which has been so far largely neglected. This is especially true for the local communities, which have been ranked as the most marginalized social group when it comes to the management of PAs in Serbia [26]. On the other hand, NPs have been fully accessible to tourists for decades, and their impacts were present in areas long before their establishment, so there is an essential requirement to monitor visitors' activities, motivation, and attitudes in order to define development policies and identify potential harmful effects on the ecosystem [27].

Even though the literature emphasizes the great importance of successful coordination between various actors in the process of NP's management, this topic is still insufficiently covered in the case of Serbian NPs. This type of PA cooperation is usually analyzed from the local populations' [18,23,28–32] or the visitors' perspectives [33–38]. To fill this gap, the aims of the research are (1) to identify attitudes of different interest groups (community, visitors, management authorities, and key local persons) in Tara NP in western Serbia, which was proclaimed in 1981 and is one of the five NPs in the country, and (2) to identify specific factors that shape these attitudes. This study also seeks to recognize emerging conflicts and offer guidelines to improve the relations between stakeholders.

## 2. Theoretical Background and Research Hypotheses

The conceptual framework for this study is based on a stakeholder theory that has been extensively used as a technique to recognize and assess the significance of key actors, groups, institutions, and people that may affect the success of an idea [39]. According to [40] (p. 46) a stakeholder is "any group or individual who can affect, or is affected by, the achievement of an organization's objectives". This approach creates knowledge about individuals and organizations, intending to understand their behavior, interrelations, and interests, and evaluate the influence and resources they bring to the implementation process [41]. The theory is built on the premise that the accomplishment of goals involves various actors at all times whose resoluteness is based on their legitimacy in having a stake in the business, as well as the level of power in decision-making [42]. If the engagement of stakeholders is present from the initial stage, it empowers them and affects their ability to resolve various issues [43].

The initial implementation of stakeholder theory comes from the field of business management [44], and later it was effectively adopted in other disciplines such as natural resource management [45–48], and tourism planning and management [12,15,49,50]. This approach is especially valuable in the context of NP management, where compound and interdependent relationships of groups relying on common resources (forests, land and others) typically dominate. In these circumstances, government authorities, small-scale farmers, conservation groups and visitors may all have a stake and conflicting interests in the use and management of specific resources [17,44]. Analyses dealing with this topic very often highlight communication gaps and divergent attitudes between key decision-makers and the community [2,12,51]. In the context of Serbia's NPs, state public enterprises were identified as the most prominent stakeholders and their poor cooperation with other important actors in the area was highlighted [52]. In the light of the foregoing considerations, seven hypotheses are presented:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1).** *There are differences between subjective opinions of stakeholders regarding the general issues on NP management and development.*

**Hypothesis 2 (H2).** *Divergent interests of stakeholders are manifested in the appearance of conflicts, primarily in the NP-community relationship.*

There is increasing recognition that the progress of NPs is highly dependent on the presence of the local community, their continued support of available resources, and cooperation in the governance of the area [53,54]. An affirmative public attitude is one of the key signals for the success of NPs and can remarkably facilitate measures aimed at conservation and sustainable management [55]. Over time, an extensive range of attitudes toward NPs has been presented by different researchers. Nestorová Dická et al. [56] reported divided attitudes of the community toward the Slovak Karst NP (45% positive views), with a significant percentage of negative and neutral views. At the same time, these authors highlighted that the community mostly had a positive perception of tourism in the park, although NP as a tourism benchmark was not deeply rooted in the thinking of the local population. Zawilińska [57] pointed to a positive attitude of the majority of respondents (57.4%) about the Ojców NP (Poland), with a certain percentage having a negative opinion (22.5%). The community believes that this NP has made the area more attractive for tourists and has generally expressed a supportive attitude toward this activity and the creation of more accommodation facilities. Dewu and Røskaft [58] found that local communities were mildly positive toward two NPs in Ghana, and conservation in general, since NPs neither improved their living conditions considerably nor brought any major development to the communities. Belkayali et al. [59] reported very high support for Kure Mountains NP in Turkey and tourism development in the area, which was positively associated with the impact of this NP on the residents' living conditions. Considering this discussion, it is suggested that:

**Hypothesis 3 (H3).** *The local population has divided attitudes toward the Tara NP, with socio-economic variables significantly shaping these attitudes.*

**Hypothesis 4 (H4).** *There is no significant economic change for the community due to the NP and the local population does not influence the functioning of the NP and decision-making process.*

**Hypothesis 5 (H5).** *The majority of the local population supports tourism development in the area.*

Visitors' experiences in NPs affect their overall support and are of great importance to resource managers [60]. Therefore, research of this kind could be useful when defining maintenance priorities for allocating funds and resources and for separating visitor types for future managerial actions [61]. Daily [62] asserted that the entire management of recreational ecosystem services depends on how they are cognized by people.

Reinius and Freedman [63] reported that a clear majority (81%) of the respondents agreed that Fulufjället NP increased the value for tourists, to whom the protection status of the area was mostly known (76%) before the visit. Many respondents (44%) are affected by the protection status of a NP in their decision to visit the area. Regarding the organizational conditions of NPs, Papageorgiou and Kasioumis [10] experienced skeptical attitudes among the visitors to three NPs in Greece. They mostly perceived existing information and recreation facilities, as well as the tourist infrastructure, as inadequate. At the same time, they supported development in line with the protected status of the NP—environmental education, ecotourism, and simple recreational activities (walking, picnicking, enjoying the view, among others). Tretiakova and associates [64] reported a high level of visitor satisfaction in Taganay NP (Russia) with the existing tourist infrastructure and opportunities for visitors. Perera and associates [65] analyzed visitors' attitudes toward two NPs in Sri Lanka and found that the development of basic infrastructure facilities to support tourism is necessary since existing elements are unsatisfactory or insufficient to support the current demand. Visitors, in general, had very positive attitudes toward ecotourism activities in the NPs (such as observing the wildlife), which were rated as very desirable, while having negative attitudes toward commercial development of tourism, recreation, and using these areas as places for socialization. Therefore, the hypotheses are as follows:

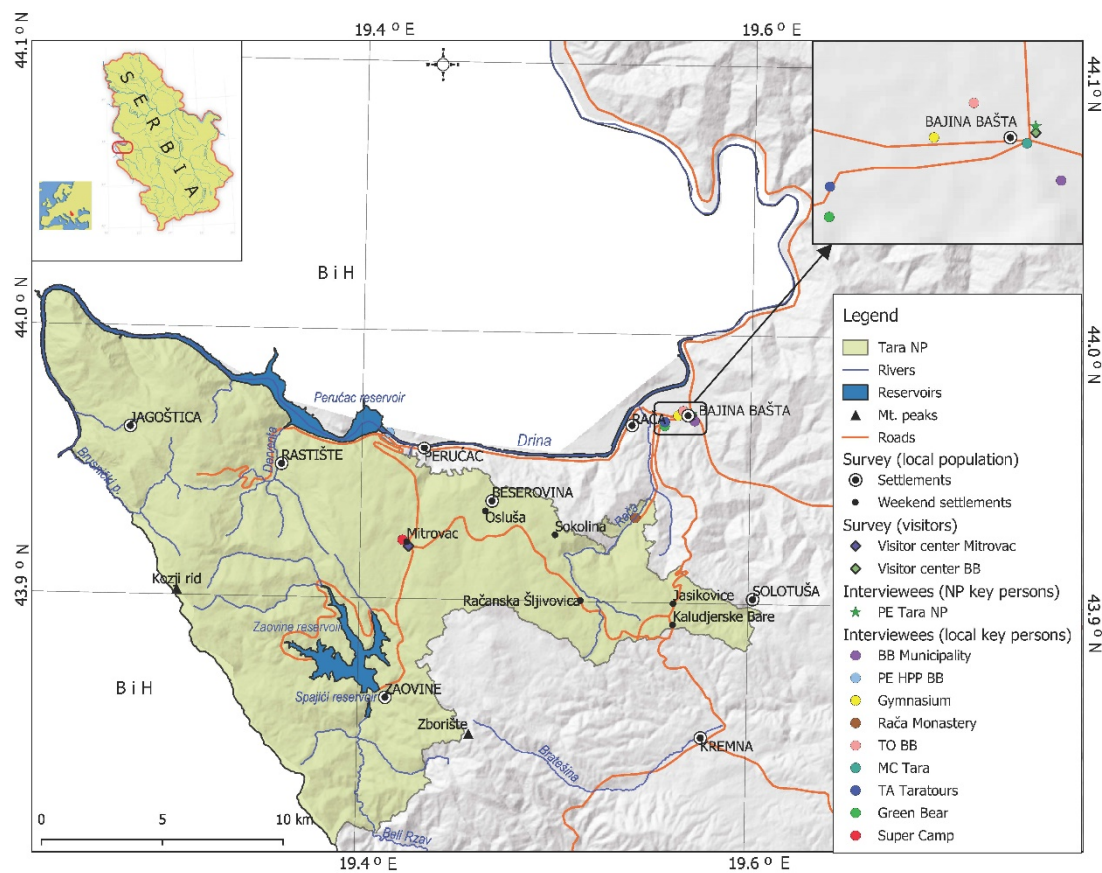
**Hypothesis 6 (H6).** *The protection status of the area is important to the majority of the visitors and this opinion is influenced by sociodemographic factors and specific patterns of behavior during traveling.*

**Hypothesis 7 (H7).** *The visitors are satisfied with the current tourist possibilities in the NP and support tourism development plans that are in line with nature protection.*

### 3. Study Area

Tara NP is situated in the western part of Serbia, encompassing most of Mount Tara with Zvijezda. The northern and western borders of the NP coincide with the administrative border of Serbia toward Bosnia and Herzegovina, along the Drina River, which represents the natural border between these two countries (Figure 1). The eastern border mostly follows the valley of the Solotuška River and the Ponikve Plateau, while the southeastern border is represented by the basins of Kremanska Kotlina and Mokrogorska Kotlina, which separate it from the Zlatibor area [24]. Although the first study proposing that Tara should be protected as a NP was conducted in 1951, the proclamation was made on 13 July 1981, when an area of 19,175 ha became protected [66]. With the adoption of the new *Law on NP*, the existing borders were expanded, and today it covers an area of 24,991.82 ha (13,588.51 ha in state ownership and 11,403.36 ha in private and other forms of ownership). The NP is located in the municipality of Bajina Bašta and includes 10 settlements (Beserovina, Zaovine, Zaugline, Konjska Reka, Mala Reka, Perućac, Rastište, Rača, and Solotuša). The basis for the proclamation of the NP was the significant features of geographical, natural, and cultural heritage [24].

In terms of geological structure, Mt. Tara is generally an anticlinal fold fractured by faults. It belongs to the range of the Internal Dinarides, tectonically following their typical NW–SE strike. Regarding the lithological composition, apart from the dominant Triassic limestones, other components are peridotites (including harzburgites), gabbro-diabase, ophiolitic mélange, as well as marls and similar sedimentary rocks. The average elevation of Tara is 1000–1200 m, with the highest peak being Kozji Rid (1591 m a.s.l.). Karstic landforms dominate in the limestone areas, with mostly surface forms—dolines, dry valleys, and a few uvalas on the plateau—as well as significant fluviokarstic canyons and gorges contributing to significant vertical dissection. The epic scenery of Tara and its surrounding areas is highly attractive for tourists. Consequently, in their pioneering study on the geotourism potential of Tara, Banjac and Rundić [67] considered opportunities for developing this new form of tourism.



**Figure 1.** Location of the study area.

Tara NP is characterized by rich forest complexes. The most dominant are mixed forests of beech, spruce, and fir (85%). It represents the autochthonous habitat of Pančić's spruce (*Picea omorika*), which is both an endemic and relict species. This area is also abundant in fauna, among which the brown bear population stands out, as well as the endemic and relict Pančić grasshopper (*Pyrgomorphulla serbica*) [68]. It is important to mention its cultural heritage, especially Stećci Medieval Tombstone Graveyards. They are cemeteries dating from the 12th to the 16th century and are located in the settlements of Rastište and Perućac. Together with the sites in BiH, Croatia, and Montenegro, the stećak tombstones were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2016 under number 1504 [69]. The Tara NP is also recognized as an Important Plant Area (IPA), and as an Important Bird Area (IBA), as well as one of the Prime Butterfly Areas in Serbia (PBA). It is also one of 61 sites of Areas of Special Conservation Interest (ASCI) within the EMERALD network [70].

Tara has attracted a large number of admirers and nature lovers for a long time and, in recent years, it has become increasingly recognized by a different group of tourists. It is reachable to outbound visitors from most of the city centers of Serbia, which according to estimates make up about 90% of the total tourist traffic.

In the structure of Tara accommodation capacities, private facilities are dominant (over 50%). Basic accommodation capacities make up 36%, and it is especially necessary to emphasize the lack of hotels of higher categorization (with four and five stars). The hotels that belong to the Military Institution "Tara" (Hotel Omorika with Javor annex and Hotel Beli Bor) were built in the 1980s, so they are already outdated and need reconstruction work. Among the newer ones is the garni hotel "Tara" in Kaludjerske Bare. A special attraction is the Children's Resort "Mitrovac on Tara", which belongs to the Center for Children's Resorts Belgrade. It consists of a central building (renovated in 2020) and six

pavilions. Thanks to the initiative and construction of this facility, Tara has been a center of children and youth tourism for decades [70].

#### 4. Materials and Methods

The research involved a case study dealing with the attitudes of different stakeholders: the local population, visitors, and key actors in Tara NP in Serbia. Survey and interviews were used as data collection methods; the research was conducted from March 2019 to January 2021.

To examine the attitudes of community members, multiple modes of survey research were applied during a field visit to the NP. The data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire that the interviewer brought to the households. The face-to-face questionnaire was used for a specific segment of the population, i.e., those who are not familiar with this methodology, usually older people. In these cases, the interviewer read the questions at a slow pace and filled in the questionnaire after receiving oral answers from the community members. Only one person from every household partook in the research to avoid similar attitudes and opinions that family members often have [71]. In total, 197 usable questionnaires were collected. The basic idea regarding the survey sample was to include settlements with the largest population within the NP or along its boundaries, with various tourist offers and extensive contact between the community and visitors. For this reason, the survey was conducted in the municipality center (Bajina Bašta) that is also home to the NP headquarters, as well as in different settlements within the NP or its immediate vicinity—Solotuša, Jagoštica, Rastište, Zaovine, Kaludjerske Bare, Sokolina, Mitrovac, Osluša, Beserovina, Perućac, Rača, and Kremna.

Similar to the previous stakeholder group, the data collection procedure involved the application of a structured self-administered questionnaire for visitors. The randomly selected sample included 208 respondents of different socio-demographic structures. The research was conducted in the form of an intercept study, which implies personal contact, in this case in the Tourist Information Center in Mitrovac. At this location, employees randomly approached visitors, regardless of personal characteristics, and invited them to participate in the research. The purpose of the survey was briefly explained to the respondents, and they were asked to complete a questionnaire independently. Due to the impossibility of completing the research in the field during the pandemic in 2020, about one-third of tourist questionnaires were acquired using a web survey that was posted on the NP's website. In this way, all previous visitors to the NP were invited to participate in the research. To make profiles of the respondents, different socio-demographic variables were considered in the study (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Socio-demographic profile of the respondents.

Demographics		Local Population (%)	Visitors (%)
Gender	Male	56.3	44.7
	Female	43.7	54.3
Age	14–18	8.6	3.8
	19–30	28.4	18.7
	31–50	40.6	63.5
	51–65	17.8	11.1
	Over 65	4.6	2.4
	No answer	–	0.5
Education	Elementary education	9.1	1.4
	Secondary education	52.8	12.5
	University degree	38.1	85.1
	No answer	–	1

In addition to survey research, interviews with specific key actors were performed. The semi-structured interviews were conducted mostly in the offices of the Public Enterprise

“National Park Tara.” A total of 15 interviews were collected—five with NP executives and 10 with local key persons (Table 2). Four of the latter are members of The User Council of the Tara NP, which was established by the *Law on National Parks* [24].

**Table 2.** Structure of the interview participants.

NP executives	Director of the NP
	Assistant Director for the General and Legal Affairs
	Assistant Director for the Planning, Protection, and Development Sector
	Head of the Sector of Presentation and Tourism Information
Local key persons	Head of the Sector of Planning, Design, Protection, and Arrangement
	Municipality of Bajina Bašta, Urban Planning Service, employee
	Tourist Organization “Tara-Drina”, employee
	Bajina Bašta Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP), civil engineer
	Tourist Agency “Taratours”, tour guide
	Tara Mountaineering Club, project coordinator
	“Green Bear”—Association for Sports in the Nature, board member
	“Super Tours” Agency, director
	Gymnasium “Josif Pančić”, Bajina Bašta, biology teacher
Gymnasium “Josif Pančić”, Bajina Bašta, geography teacher	
Rača Monastery, prior	

Based on a review of the literature dealing with residents’ attitudes to PAs [72–75] a survey instrument was developed for this part of the study. The first section of the questionnaire referred to the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. The second group of questions concerned opinions on the personal/settlement economic situation and specifically the economic impact of the NP, while the third section concerned tourism, and the last part was related to connection to NP and residents’ knowledge about PAs.

Contemporary literature on visitors’ attitudes to PAs was consulted when the second questionnaire was created [10,63,76–78]. Visitors were asked for basic demographic data, as well as for habits of traveling, motives for coming, and activities during the stay. A specific section of the questionnaire was related to awareness and knowledge about the NP, and the last part of the survey referred to the visitors’ satisfaction and tourism development in the NP. The survey was closed with a group of questions related to the attitudes of both the local population and visitors about potential development directions.

Furthermore, these questionnaires served as the basis for the interview structuring. The semi-structured interview schedule was divided into five sections. In the opening section, the interviewees were asked about the potential development directions of the NP. The second was related to conservation and protection, while the third was designed to analyze the opinions on a park-community relationship. The closing section dealt with tourism and regional development issues. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, after which the answers were grouped into categories within predetermined topics.

Various research techniques were used for data analysis. First, descriptive statistics were performed together with combining information in tables and graphs using Excel for Windows 2016. This was followed by a series of *t*-tests that were applied to compare the results obtained on two independent groups of people (in this case visitors and the local population) regarding the attitude on future development tasks of the NP. Finally, to evaluate the results of the descriptive analysis in a multivariate setting, binary logistic regression models were created to measure the likelihood (interpreted by the odds ratio) that respondents would express a positive feeling towards the NP. Specifically, these models were created to identify the defining variables for the attitude regarding the NP as a part of the national heritage (for the local population) and for the attitude regarding the importance of declaring this area an NP (for visitors). The descriptive statistics, bivariate and multivariate analysis were performed using SPSS 20.0 for Windows to recognize and interpret factors that affect the specific outcomes [79–81].

## 5. Results

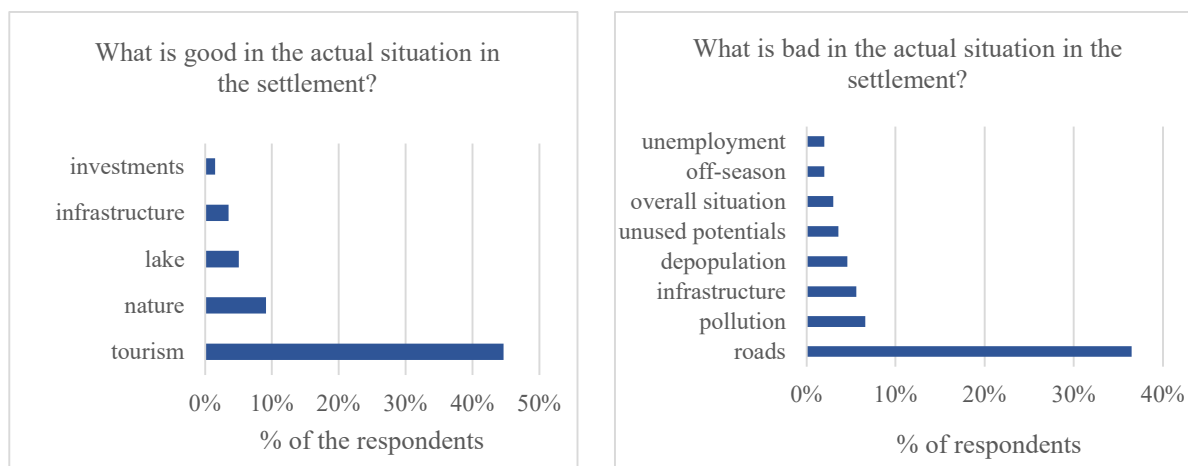
### 5.1. Attitudes of the Local Population

The socio-demographic profile of the respondents showed that men dominate to a certain extent (56.3%), as do the age categories 31–50 (40.6%) and 19–30 (28.4%) years. The share of the respondents with secondary education was 52.8%, while those with a university degree accounted for 38.1%, and those with just primary school made up 9.1% of the sample.

To analyze the attitudes of the local population regarding the personal and overall economic situation, the respondents were offered a series of statements along with open-ended questions. The majority considered their economic situation to be rather good (61.9%), while a specific percentage of the population (25.9%) chose the “rather bad” answer. Considering the economic situation in the settlement, opinions were completely divided, 39.1% of respondents thinking that it is rather good, while 46.2% claim that it is rather bad. Regardless, most of the respondents (64%) answered that they would not move away even if it were possible.

More than half of the respondents reported that the economic situation has slightly changed for the better during the last 10 years (57.4%) and the majority believe that there has been no economic change due to the declaration of the NP (66.5%). However, a certain segment of respondents (33.5%) confirmed that the formation of the NP has resulted in economic changes, primarily positive in the field of tourism (increase in the number of visitors), general investment, legislation, and infrastructure.

The respondents were also asked two open-ended questions on positive and negative aspects of the actual situation in their settlement. A total of 70.6% of participants answered the question about positive aspects of the actual situation in their settlement, with the following categories of answers as the most common: tourism (44.7%), nature (9.1%), Lake Perućac (5.1%), and improved infrastructure (3.6%). In terms of disadvantages, 77.2% of the locals responded, and they mostly emphasized poor roads, followed by pollution of various kinds, infrastructure, depopulation, unused potentials, and overall situation (Figure 2).



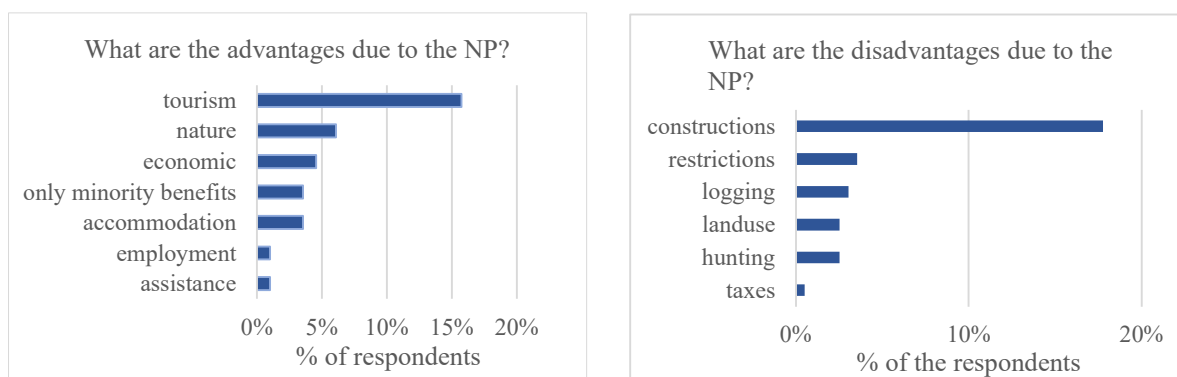
**Figure 2.** Local population attitudes toward the current situation in the settlement.

A specific segment of the survey referred to attitudes about tourism. Most of the participants did not take part in this activity, while one-third of the community members (35.5%) were personally involved in tourism through accommodation offerings, local products trade, and other activities. Considering the frequency of tourist arrivals, 58.4% of respondents answered their settlement was crowded due to visitor arrivals, while others reported a small number of visitors (20.8%) or claimed that visitors were just passing through the settlement (20.8%). When asked if it would be good for more tourists to visit their settlement, most respondents gave an affirmative answer (79.7%).



The last part of the questionnaire referred to knowledge and attitudes about the NP. The majority of the inhabitants (91.9%) were aware of the level of protection. The survey confirmed that half of the respondents had a personal connection with NP employees (usually a friend or a family member) and to a much lesser extent professional connections. Half of the respondents confirmed that information about the NP is present in school programs, so the children can get acquainted with nature protection. A significant percentage of negative answers to this question (36%) could indicate a potential lack of knowledge on this topic.

No advantages due to the NP for the community were observed by 52.8% of people. The others generally highlighted economic benefits such as tourism and overall economic advantages. They also singled out an important non-economic benefit (nature) (Figure 3). On the other hand, the largest number of respondents (63.5%) considered there are no restrictions due to the NP for the community members. Those who think otherwise emphasized restrictions on construction (17.8%), restrictions in general (3.6%), logging (3%), land use (2.5%), and hunting (2.5%) as the main constraints. The prevailing attitude among the local population is that they do not influence the functioning of the NP and decision-making process (78.7%).



**Figure 3.** Local population attitudes toward the NP.

Most respondents (69.5%) supported the possibility of the proclamation of a trans-boundary biosphere reserve, together with the Drina NP (BiH). In general, the local community members mostly considered the existence of the NP as being good for their settlement (40.1%), or expressed a neutral attitude (36%). Just over half the surveyed population think of the NP as a part of our national heritage that people can be proud of.

*Support for the National Park.* To identify which factors predict the probability that respondents would express positive feelings toward the NP as a part of national heritage, a binary logistic regression analysis was applied. An analysis of the overall attitude towards the NP included one dependent variable: V1 (*“Do you think of NP as a part of our national heritage that we can be proud of?”*) as well as different independent variables. In this way, a regression model for predicting the level of community support to the NP was created.

The model was statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) and accurately classified 88.4% of the cases. Table 3 shows that education, employment, and personal connection with tourism are individual characteristics that affect attitudes about the NP. The strength of the prediction of each variable is shown in the last column of the table, which represents the odds ratio (Exp.(B)). It is concluded that the strongest predictive power among the personal characteristics is employment status (odds ratio of 20.833), which means that unemployed respondents had 20.833 times the odds of giving a positive answer compared to the employed population. Respondents with a university degree, and those who do not have a personal connection with tourism, are more prone to express positive feelings toward the NP, as opposed to those with a lower degree of education and connected to tourism.

**Table 3.** The selected variables predicting the probability of the answers to V1.

Variables	B	Wald	Sig. ( <i>p</i> *)	Exp (B)
Education (university)	1.866	7.918	0.005	6.461
Employment (employed)	−3.041 **	14.418	0.000	20.833
Personal relation to tourism (yes)	−1.880 **	6.821	0.009	6.536
Willingness to migrate (yes)	−1.705 **	5.228	0.022	5.494
Opinion on density of tourism (crowds come) (yes)	2.152	9.690	0.002	8.602
Advantages due to NP (yes)	2.974	13.332	0.000	19.563
Drawbacks due to NP (yes)	2.252	9.855	0.002	9.508
NP is good for the settlement	2.417	23.910	0.000	11.212
Creation of transboundary reserve (yes)	1.493	4.895	0.027	4.449
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup> = 0.768				

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* in the cases of a negative value of the coefficient B, the reciprocal Exp (B) values are given in the table.

When it comes to variables reflecting attitudes, the strongest predictive power has the opinion on the existence of advantages due to the NP, with an odds ratio of 19.563. The attitude on whether the existence of NP is good for the settlement also has significant predictive power (odds ratio of 11.212), so the respondents with a positive opinion on this issue tended to answer affirmatively. The respondents who do not want to migrate, and those who consider their settlement is characterized by the arrival of crowds, also supported the NP. The community members who believe that there are certain drawbacks due to the NP, tend to answer positively about Tara NP as a part of the national heritage. The respondents who support the creation of transboundary biosphere reserve also tend to answer affirmatively.

Additional variables (age, gender, personal relations to NP employees, opinion on personal economic situation, opinion on settlement economic situation, change due to the NP, opinion on the number of tourists in the future and local influence on NP business) were tested but were excluded from the model because they were not statistically significant.

## 5.2. Attitudes of the Visitors

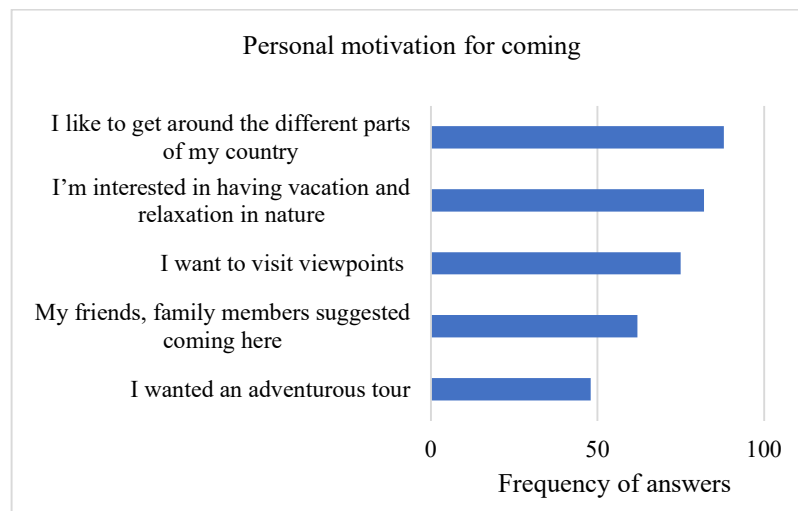
In this part of the research, females slightly dominated within the sample (54.3%). As in the previously examined group, middle-aged respondents (31–50 years) were the biggest group (63.5%). Around 85% of respondents have a university degree that is in line with other studies, which emphasized that hikers and participants in nature tourism and especially its specific forms (e.g., ecotourism, geotourism) are generally more educated and economically stronger [10,76,77,82]. A proportion of the visitors filled the questionnaires online, and the research confirmed that female respondents with higher education generally prevailed in samples collected using online platforms [83].

Regarding visitors' habits of traveling, those using a car dominated to a large extent (73.6%). The majority of the respondents (52.4%) visited Tara NP with their families, usually stayed for 2–4 days (48.1%), and used services in private accommodation (apartments, private houses, among others.) that dominate the NP (74.9%). When it comes to the number of visits to this area, a small number of visitors (18.3%) recorded their first visit, while those who visited the NP twice to four times made up 31%, and five or more times 50.7%.

When asked to declare whether they plan hiking during their stay, 86.8% of the visitors answered affirmatively. The most important destinations for this activity are the viewpoints (Banjska Stena, Sokolarica, Oštra Stena, Crnjeskovo, Osluša) which are easily reachable by a dense network of hiking trails and visited by 82.3% of respondents. The educational trails, usually equipped with various tourist information boards, which are a significant feature of the NP and relatively favored by visitors—56.7% of visitors confirmed they are very important.

The next section of the questionnaire was related to awareness and knowledge about Tara NP. When the respondents were asked about the personal motivation for visiting this destination, the visitors most often stated the following reasons: getting to know different

parts of the country (42.3%), vacation and relaxation in nature (39.4%), visiting viewpoints (36%), recommendation by friends or family (29.8%), and desire for an adventurous tour (23.1%) (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** The visitors' travel motivation.

Visitors mostly received information about the NP through school studies (50%) and personal relations (47.1%). Some were informed through the internet (33.2%) and to a lesser extent through television/radio (26.4%), books (21.6%), and other propaganda material (tourist brochures, etc.) (12%). They highlighted forests (86%), viewpoints (80.7%), special plant species (66.3%), lakes (59.1%), and peaceful landscape (57.2%) as the most important attributes of the landscape.

At total of 43% of visitors responded that it is extremely important that Tara is a NP. To determine to which categories of visitors the protected status is important, a binary logistic regression was applied. The dependent variable referred to the importance of the protection status for the individual: "Was it important to you that Tara is a NP?". The independent variables referred to the following characteristics: age, gender, education, place of residence, vehicle choice, who they came with, length of stay, previous visits, number of arrivals, type of accommodation, intention to walk and visit viewpoints, and attitude about hiking trails. The model was statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) and accurately classified 69.9% of the cases.

As Table 4 shows, the four variables made a unique statistically significant contribution to the model. The variables related to education (odds ratio of 4.807) and previous visits (odds ratio of 4.048) have the strongest predictive power. It follows that the odds of answering affirmatively are more than for times greater for less-educated visitors and those coming to the NP for the first time, compared to respondents with a university degree and those who had previously visited this area. Visitors whose place of residence is outside the capital, and those who recorded many visits (minimum five), are more likely to confirm the importance of protection status.

**Table 4.** The selected variables predicting the probability of the answers to V2.

Variables	B	Wald	Sig. ( $p^*$ )	Exp (B)
Education (university)	−1.568 **	8.289	0.004	4.807
Settlement (capital)	−1.028 **	8.957	0.003	2.793
Previous visits (yes)	−1.296 **	8.142	0.004	4.048
Number of visits (5 or more)	0.843	5.199	0.023	2.322
Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.244$				

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* in the cases of a negative value of the coefficient B, the reciprocal Exp (B) values are given in the table.

The last part of the survey referred to the visitors’ satisfaction and tourism development in the NP. Visitors expressed their satisfaction with the state of traffic and tourist infrastructure on a five-point scale. They were least satisfied with the access possibilities to the NP, which testifies the need to improve the traffic infrastructure. The level of satisfaction was significantly higher regarding information available to visitors, as well as accommodation and catering services within the NP. A significant proportion of respondents expressed a neutral opinion about guidance, which can be explained by the fact that domestic visitors to this NP very often do not use this type of service (Figure 5).

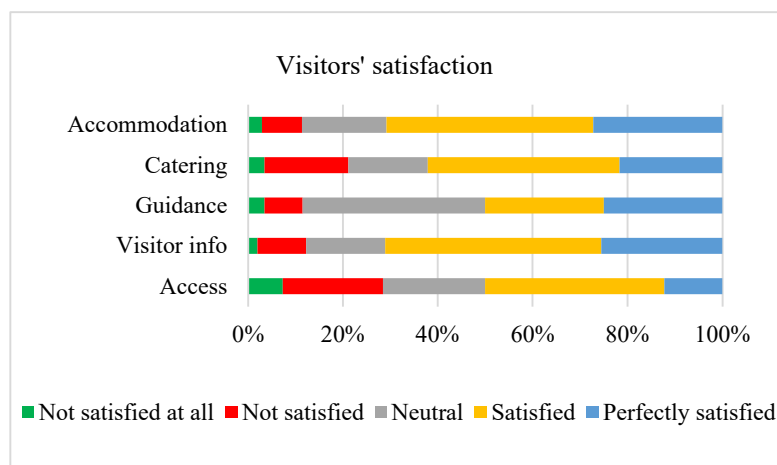


Figure 5. Visitor’s satisfaction with the current state of the services.

As for the directions of tourist development that are important for the NP, the visitors mostly appreciated the arrangement of new tourist-educational trails and viewpoints. They also supported the establishment of visitor centers, while they expressed the least supportive attitude concerning possible adventure parks (Figure 6). Considering that adventure parks often include larger outdoor recreational facilities and opportunities for zip lining, treetop walking tours, and other activities, which could harm natural resources, a less supportive visitors’ attitude in the spirit of sustainable tourism is understandable. Even though adventure parks could have elements of education, conservation, and sustainability in general, the justification for their construction is questionable in most PAs.

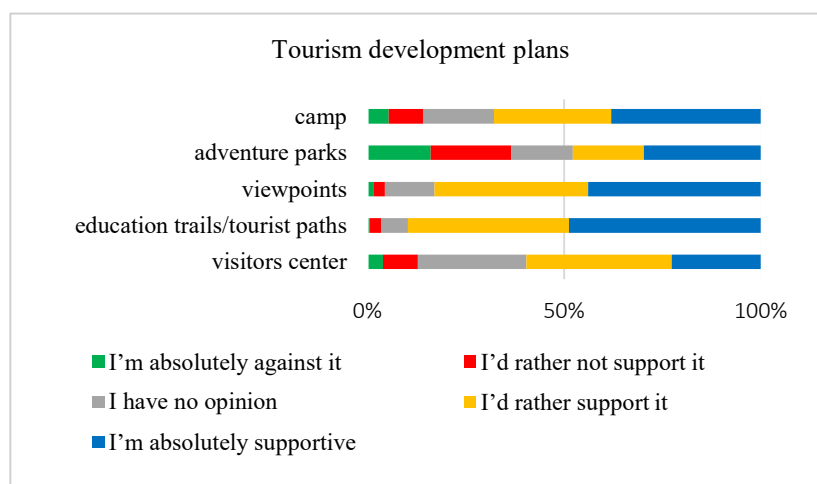


Figure 6. Visitor’s attitude toward tourism development plans in Tara NP.

To detect a connection with the local population, visitors were asked if they were familiar with any of the local products. The results show that awareness was relatively

low since only one-third (32%) of visitors could mention any of these products. The most frequently mentioned products are honey, various dairy products, and Serbian brandy (rakija).

### 5.3. Future Tasks of the NP—Comparison of the Opinions of Different Stakeholders

A series of questions related to the future tasks of the NP were included in the survey to directly compare the opinions of the local population and visitors. The significance of these tasks was evaluated on a five-point Likert scale. A series of *t*-tests were applied to compare the results obtained in two independent groups of people regarding the significance of various types of NP tasks. The differences in attitudes between these two groups of stakeholders were registered in each group of tasks, except education (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Differences in attitudes among the local population and visitors regarding future tasks of the NP.

Future Tasks	Mean		t-Value	Sig. ( <i>p</i> *)
	Local Population ( <i>n</i> = 197)	Visitors ( <i>n</i> = 208)		
Biological values	4.43	4.79	4.90	0.000
Geological values	4.34	4.68	4.40	0.000
Cultural values	4.18	4.56	4.48	0.000
Landscape	4.35	4.76	5.23	0.000
Scientific research	3.62	4.22	5.58	0.000
Education	4.13	4.26	1.30	0.195
Tourism	4.45	3.93	−5.55	0.000

\* *p* < 0.05.

The visitors generally valued the protection of biological, geological, cultural value, the entire landscape, and scientific research more than the members of the community. Tourism is a priority task of the NP, according to the local population, which is proved by the highest score concerning other types of development directions. In contrast, the visitors considered the protection of biological values to be the highest priority for the future.

### 5.4. Interview Results

The interviewees answered questions within the following categories: development directions; conservation and protection; park-community relations, and tourism and regional development.

*Development directions.* Similar to the other two groups of stakeholders, participants were asked to give an opinion regarding the future priorities of the NP (Figure 7). NP executives gave priority to the protection of biological values and the role of the NP in strengthening national identity. They also emphasized the protection of geological and cultural values. Important members of the community also gave the highest mark to the protection of biological values but, for them, tourism and protection of the whole landscape were also extremely important tasks. For both groups of interviewees education and dissemination of knowledge to the local population and visitors were highly valued. These answers were explained in more detail in the following segments of the interview.

*Conservation and protection.* According to the NP executives, biodiversity protection has always been a priority since the establishment of the PA and it is generally more recognizable compared to other values of the park, such as geological and cultural values. Interviewees emphasized the efforts of the NP to promote and protect all types of values, but there are certain obstacles to be overcome—“ . . . Cruising the Drina Gorge is important to show other specifics of the NP. However, most of the gorge is in the first zone of protection and is accessible to tourists only from the boat. There are no arranged caves for tourists, and the surface karst forms are not so obvious, considering that it is a covered karst” (Head of the Sector of Presentation and Tourism Information).

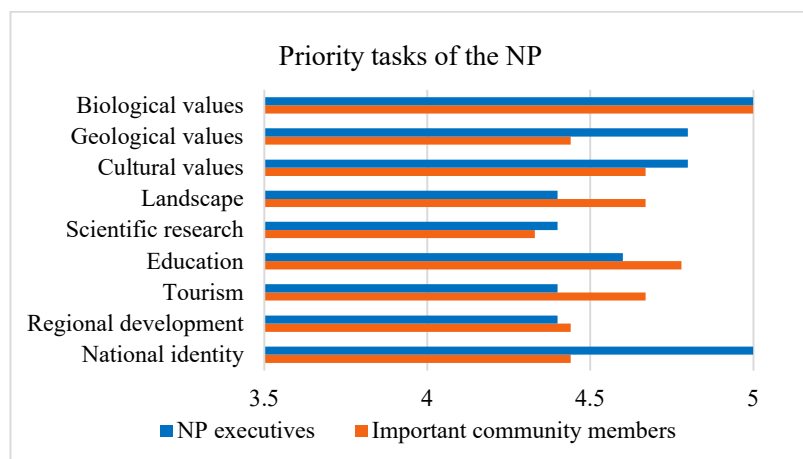


Figure 7. Future priority tasks in the Tara NP.

In recent years, there has been an increase in visitor numbers, which initiates new challenges for active protection and conservation of all fundamental values of the NP. In this regard, the NP executives underlined the existence of different types of conflicts between the NP and other users of protected space (Table 6).

Table 6. Type of conflicts regarding the protection of the main values according to NP executives.

	Biological Values	Geological Values	Cultural Values
Type of conflicts	With the local population due to damage caused by protected wild animals;	With the visitors, primarily at overcrowded viewpoints;	With the management of the Rača Monastery regarding the maintenance of hiking paths.
	With the local population due to illegal construction of objects and wastewater disposal;		
	With the visitors over the whole territory of the NP due to low environmental awareness		

According to the management of the NP, sanitary hunting, the purpose of which is population control, is allowed for certain species (e.g., wild boar), while others are excluded from this (e.g., brown bear). Long-standing conflicts with the local population refer to the destruction of crops by wild animals (primarily brown bears and deer) and compensation for damage. *“The damage done by the bear is compensated by the government authorities, and the damage from other animals is compensated by the NP. It is difficult to explain to people that these animals are protected at the level of the entire country, and it has nothing to do with the NP”* (Assistant Director for the General and Legal Affairs).

The interviewees emphasized the problem of illegal construction, which was especially present at Lake Perućac, but also in different parts of the mountain during the last decades. They reported people were protesting against the obligation to pay fees for owning facilities in a protected territory, which causes conflicts with the NP, although this issue is regulated by the government bodies. The construction of facilities within the NP is regulated by the *Law on National Parks* and *The Spatial Plan of the Special Purpose Area of the National Park Tara*. Within the NP, three protection zones have been defined, which determine the directions of use and purpose of the protected territory. The construction of facilities is allowed only within the building areas in the zone under protection III at precisely defined locations and in areas outside the NP (settlements in the vicinity of Bajina Bašta tending to merge in the coastal zone) [24,84]. All users of the land who build weekend houses and other holiday facilities in PA are obliged to pay a fee determined by the PE “Tara National Park” based on legal acts [85,86]. Buildings cause the problem of wastewater disposal, which is not adequately addressed in the NP and directly endangers biodiversity of the lake and all the values of the PA.

Viewpoints from the edges of karst plateaus are places where visitors come into direct contact with the geological values of the Park. NP executives reported a problem of overcrowding at these localities, which is clearly expressed at the most visited viewpoint—Banjska Stena. There is also a problem of garbage disposal since no trash cans have been placed on this site due to the presence of wild animals. Considering that visitors largely decide to come to this viewpoint by car, instead of hiking, parking is arranged near the Banjska Stena as a “. . . forced solution, so that the road can function at all” (Head of the Sector of Planning, Design, Protection, and Arrangement). Due to the above, the NP is considering the idea of limiting the number of visitors and opening the entrance gates at two points (Kaluderske Bare and Perućac) to control the carrying capacity of the area. In general, according to the interviewees, the environmental awareness of visitors is low, and their behavior affects all the values of the protected territory.

Regarding cultural values, NP executives claim intangible heritage has been largely lost due to depopulation and a dramatically low number of residents. They reported a minor conflict with Rača Monastery regarding the maintenance of the educational hiking paths near the monastery.

*Park–community relations.* Certain questions in the interview referred to relations between the NP and the local population. According to NP executives, one of the basic tasks of the NP is to help the local population maintain its existence on the territory of the park. As the Director of the NP explains: “At the time the park was founded (1981), there were about 3000 people in the PA, and today it is 800–900, with an average age of 65 years. A lot of projects have been done for the local population to get involved in the work and life of the NP. Many activities are aimed at them. It is difficult to find an interlocutor because there is none . . .”. An Interviewee from the NP further explains that the problem of depopulation and emigration directly affects the shortage of labor force: “Few people stay in the village, most try to send their children to other places. This causes a problem with the labor force in the field, whether it is auxiliary work or hard physical work. People come from distant regions to pull the wood out of the forest with horses, and that raises the price of firewood. The Park would help the farmer who would be willing to stay here, buy sheep, raise them, and expand the herd next year”. However, regardless of the above, the executives of the NP believe that the existence of the NP has influenced many people to stay and live in this area.

Local key persons have reported several types of positive (benefits) and negative (restrictions) effects arising from the existence of the NP (Table 7). They pointed out the financial incentive of the NP to local producers of organic products (honey, jam, cheese, and dairy products) living within the PA (Jagoštica, Sokolina) as an important positive effect. They also emphasized excellent cooperation among the NP and other users of the PA, such as local educational institutions, tourist agencies, and tourist organization of Bajina Bašta, mountaineering associations. “The most important thing is good communication. Maintaining viewpoints and trails is a problem, as the Park cannot additionally employ people to deal with it. Our club helps. We have arranged, marked and digitized hiking trails in the NP through the joint Hiking Trail Management Project (290 km)” (Project Coordinator of the Tara Mountaineering Club).

**Table 7.** Positive and negative effects of the NP for the community according to local key persons.

	Positive Effects	Negative Effects
Type of effects	Incentive assistance in branding local products and organic production. Cooperation with other users of the space (mountaineering associations, tourist agencies). Tourism;	Limitations for the construction of objects. Complicated procedure for compensation of damage caused by wild animals. Unregulated issue of garbage removal.

Disagreements and mistrust among the local population are stated as negative aspects of the existence of the NP. Local key persons underlined two main reasons for this, i.e., the complicated procedure for obtaining permits for the construction of facilities within the

PA, as well as a similar procedure for compensation of damage from wild animals. “*Special construction permits issued by the Ministry are required within the NP. The procedure is expensive and not easy. If the population living there has a weekend house and wants to build a smaller facility for their needs, they must go through the same procedure. That is why they often avoid the procedure and build objects illegally*” (employer of the Municipality of Bajina Bašta, Urban Planning Service). Interviewees also reported that the NP did not adequately regulate the removal of garbage from the PA. They reported that frequency of these works (emptying containers once a week out of the season and twice a week during the season) is not in line with the real needs, and stated that there is a lack of trash cans in certain parts of the NP.

*Tourism and regional development.* NP executives and local key persons also expressed their attitudes about tourism and regional development (Table 8). Both stakeholder groups agreed that there has been a noticeable increase in visitor numbers in recent years. Although domestic visitors dominate, foreign tourists also arrive in growing numbers; however, the COVID-19 pandemic has stopped this trend. Local key persons pointed out that various effects of tourism are visible in their settlements, primarily the construction of accommodation facilities. The highest concentration of visitors is during the summer months (June and July), and NP employees reported a pronounced seasonality of visits, for which no solution has been found yet. According to them, the construction of indoor sports halls would be a positive step, as it would enable the training of athletes during the winter period. Local key persons underlined the joint tourist offer of the wider area, as the most effective (the “*Magic Tourist Ring*” tourist tour).

**Table 8.** Stakeholder attitudes toward tourism and regional development.

Stakeholder Attitudes	NP Executives	Local Key Persons
General impressions, effects	Increased number of both domestic and foreign visitors. Seasonality of visits. Lack of facilities for a longer stay.	Numerous effects are visible in the settlement. Increased number of foreign visitors. Joint tourist offer of the wider area.
Types of tourism to be developed	Nature tourism (primarily hiking), together with recreational tourism and adventure tourism.	Recreational tourism (primarily water tourism and children tourism). Religious cultural tourism. Adventure tourism.
Attitudes toward tourism	Whether there should be more tourists in the future?	Yes, tourism is a benefit and potentials are diverse.
	Negative effects of tourism	Negligible compared to benefits. Wild dumps in the PA.
Attitudes toward regional development	Priority investments in NP/settlement	Tourism, agriculture, road infrastructure.
	Contribution to the socio-economic development of the region/settlement	Yes, NP is the carrier of development and contributes directly and indirectly.
	Potential transboundary reserve	A positive attitude of all interviewees. Divided opinions (six interviewees gave an affirmative answer, others are skeptical).

Both groups are generally supportive of future tourist growth, but NP executives underlined control of visits as necessary. Nature tourism—primarily hiking to the viewpoints is dominant within the NP and the emphasis, should be developed in the future according to NP executives. Local key persons mostly considered that recreational tourism should be developed, for which infrastructure on Mitrovac exists, and there are various natural (especially hydrological) potentials, too. Interviewees from both stakeholder groups



encouraged the emergence and development of new forms of tourism, which are only in the initial stage within the NP and do not imply mass visits, such as adventure tourism (canyoning, kayaking, stand-up paddling). *“We are connected with WWF and NP. We have an offer of sustainable tourism, which is popular and includes: involvement of visitors in local activities (making souvenirs and checking hives), rafting early in the morning and watching bears in the NP in the evening”* (“Green Bear”—Association for Sports in the Nature, board member). For local key persons, the negative effects of tourism are negligible compared to its benefits, while the executives of the NP pointed out the irresponsible behavior of visitors at overcrowded locations.

Regarding visions of future development, both groups of respondents shared similar opinions. The NP executives emphasized investment in livestock as a form of helping the local population maintain a livelihood within the NP, while local key persons highlighted investments in agriculture which would be accompanied by state funding. According to NP executives, future investments in tourism should be implemented in a sustainable form, with the protection of natural and cultural values and finding solutions for current environmental problems (wastewater). Both groups agreed that investments in road and tourism infrastructure are needed.

All respondents from the NP, and the majority from the group of local key persons, confirmed that the NP contributes to the socio-economic development of the region. *“NP contributes directly and indirectly. The preserved nature attracts visitors and explorers, and the local population benefits because people offer accommodation and their products. NP announces projects for the preservation of tradition and heritage, where people promote their business ideas and receive funds . . . The NP also donates wood to the socially endangered population”* (Head of the Sector of Planning, Design, Protection, and Arrangement). The NP management expressed a positive attitude regarding the potential declaration of a cross-border biosphere reserve, as well as six respondents from the group of local key persons. Others expressed doubt whether this declaration would bring any benefit to the local population (Table 8).

## 6. Discussion

This study examined the attitudes of different stakeholders (community, visitors, NP executives, and local key persons) toward the Tara NP in Serbia. From a general point of view, responses revealed wide-ranging perspectives and different attitudes on priority issues for the future development of the NP. The analysis showed that for the local population, tourism is the highest priority when it comes to future activities of the NP. This is not surprising since tourism development is frequently perceived as a way that income can be quickly brought into communities without a relatively large capital investment [55]. Unlike this group, NP leaders emphasized protection and conservation (especially biodiversity) as the primary goals for future development, and the same opinion was shared by visitors. Conducting scientific research within the NP is more important for the representatives of the NP and the visitors than for the local community, which perceived it as the lowest among all priorities.

The study confirmed the presence of different types of conflicts among stakeholders, mostly between the NP and the local community (primarily farmers), associated with land use in agriculture and the ban on construction of facilities. Other studies involving PAs and their surroundings identified similar types of disagreements [4,51,87,88], indicating that they result from the different interests that various groups of stakeholders have concerning the use of the same natural assets. In this regard, NP executives emphasized the importance of the User Council, the legal body that has been established to address various locally important issues related to this NP and to enhance the cooperation of different stakeholders (representatives of the municipality, local communities, HPP, Rača Monastery, etc.), and the NP managers. The idea of community involvement in the decision-making process through the action of certain bodies, usually different types of councils, is not new and has been realized in many PAs [89–92]. The Tara NP is the first PA in Serbia to form this type of council, whose members represent different institutions, organizations, and interest

groups. The Council holds regular meetings and decides which ideas will be included in the annual Management Plan, such as tracing walking routes and adaptation of viewpoints, maintenance of meadow habitats, education of local population in terms of sustainable tourism, and mapping of households producing the typical local products. These particular ideas have been accepted, and their multi-annual realization is financially supported by the National Park. A lot of projects have been conducted for the local population to get involved in the work and life of the NP. Many activities are directed towards them.

The illegal construction of buildings and development of weekend settlements, both on the mountain itself (Kaludjerske Bare, Sokolina, Mitrovac, Osluša, Krnja Jela), and at its foothills, is also a cause of conflicts. This has even wider environmental implications since these areas are not part of the official infrastructure network. This is especially evident on the shores of Lake Perućac near the Derventa Gorge Nature Reserve where more than a hundred buildings were illegally built until 2012. This jeopardized the PA in multiple ways: by endangering natural habitats of species, through the accumulation of communal solid waste, wastewater, destruction of ambient values, and by reducing the tourist–recreational functions of the wider space [93]. In recent years, the legalization of these facilities has begun, but research has confirmed that disagreements between the NP and the community have not yet been resolved. In addition, Tara NP, in cooperation with the Municipality of Bajina Bašta and Hydro Power Plant “Bajina Bašta”, will start the implementation of the *Plan for Detailed Regulation of the Shores of Perućac Lake*, in the area from the dam in Perućac to the confluence of the Derventa and the Drina Rivers. Based on everything previously written in this section, it can be concluded that hypotheses H1 and H2 have been confirmed.

Regarding the general attitude of the local population about the NP, although a significant number of participants in the survey considered the existence of the NP as being good for their settlement, the percentage of those who expressed neutrality/negativity on this issue was also high (59.9%). Furthermore, the attitudes were divided concerning the importance of the NP as a part of the national heritage, with only half of the respondents answering affirmatively. The differences in attitudes listed above confirmed the first part of the hypothesis H3. Unlike the participants in the survey, the local key persons had mostly positive attitudes on these issues, which was not unexpected. Cihar and Stankova [2] also reported a higher level of satisfaction of the key members of the community compared to the locals regarding their views on the NPs. Ramirez [91] pointed out that in some cases community leaders do not really represent the entire community vision. In the case of the Tara NP, the attitudes of the local key persons may be affected by the achieved cooperation with the NP, which was established due to the business positions of this group of participants.

The study shows that certain demographic variables affect the residents’ perception to a great extent. The more educated population tended to answer positively, which can be explained by the fact that this category of respondents has easier access to information in the era of digital media and generally have a wider knowledge of the concept of PAs and their importance and benefits. Surprisingly, unemployed people, as well as those who have no personal connection with tourism, were also prone to give positive answers. The reason for this may be the fact that the community members who have jobs (some of whom are farmers) and personal connections with tourism have been faced with more conflicts and issues related to personal existence and hence they are more skeptical. These results are similar in many ways to other studies conducted in PAs, confirming that certain socioeconomic factors (age, education, occupation, household income, and residency) can considerably affect the opinions of local inhabitants [58,59,94,95]. Specifically, the results are also in line with previous research in Serbian PAs [23,75,96] which underlined the significance of socio-demographic characteristics for community attitudes. Considering the previous analysis, which revealed that various personal characteristics influence the attitude of the respondents, it can be concluded that the second part of the H3 is confirmed.

In line with the assumptions made in H4, the findings of the study revealed that according to most community members there was no economic change due to the declaration

of the NP, and the local population does not have an influence on the functioning of the NP and decision-making process. These results appear to agree with some previous research of PAs in Serbia [75,97] and worldwide [2,12], which confirmed that communities have a marginal role in decision-making and mostly do not recognize any benefit from living in/around these areas. The most common explanations found in the literature for this situation referred to limited communication and information sharing among PA authorities and residents, lack of skills and awareness of knowledge necessary to participate, and financial resources [12,51,95]. In this case, greater involvement of the local population in NP management can be achieved by various activities such as engagement in infrastructure improvements, protection activities, maintenance, and rural tourism activities. An additional problem for the Tara NP is the process of depopulation and migration from mountain settlements, as well as the large percentage of elderly people, which was pointed out by the executives of the NP during the interviews. This is confirmed by the research of Telbisz and collaborators [98], who emphasized that settlements near the PAs in Zlatibor District benefit from tourism to a significant extent, and an adequate development could halt or turn depopulation. In line with this are the opinions of local key persons and NP executives, who agreed that the development of the wider area of the NP requires priority investments in tourism, agriculture, and road infrastructure. One of the potential courses of action for the future is incentives for farmers to stay on their land, which is currently being implemented by the NP, but it seems that this is not enough. The local governance structures should also be involved in these processes, and the importance of state funding should not be overlooked either.

The relationship to the territory of community members is relatively strong and is reflected in the fact that the majority would not move away from the area, although more than half of the respondents believe that the economic situation in the settlement is bad. They recognized tourism as a potential development driver and had a strong positive perception regarding the future presence of visitors, which confirmed the H5 assumptions. The prevailing attitude among both key community members and the local population is that the potential negative effects of tourism are negligible compared to its benefits. This attitude indicates the idealization of tourism and the absence of a broader, critical understanding of the whole activity, which is different from previous research [5,15] that suggested a greater degree of awareness of residents about the negative aspects of tourism, especially those related to environmental protection. As Brankov and associates [18] explained, the strong positive perceptions of the community about tourism development in NPs in Serbia could be considerably affected by restrictions of employment opportunities in other sectors of the local economy. According to *Regulation on the establishment of a uniform list of the development of regions and local self-government units for 2014* [99] the municipality of Bajina Bašta, in which Tara NP is located, was assigned the status of an underdeveloped area in Serbia, indicating development below the national average, accompanied with unemployment and a low gross domestic product. In such circumstances, the economic progress of the community becomes a strong trigger for the enhanced interest of the local population in tourism development [18].

Although the community recognizes only the positive impacts of tourism, NP executives point out that it is necessary to establish control of visits to ensure that the carrying capacity of the destination is not exceeded. This is a challenge that many PAs around the world are facing [55,100–102] and which calls for caution because limiting the number of visitors can cause additional problems at the same time [103]. As for the Tara NP, the pressure of domestic visitors, who have always dominated this area, has increased due to the restrictions of foreign travels during the COVID-19 pandemic [104]. To avoid endangering natural ecosystems, emphasis should be placed on the development of sustainable forms of tourism for which PAs are intended according to their status. Thus, in the NP the offer of adventure and ecotourism includes various activities, which are most often organized as joint actions between the NP and local associations and agencies. These models of cooperation have proven successful so far and should be continued in the future.

The attitudes of the visitors were in line with the previous statements. They strongly supported tourism development and activities in accordance with the principles of nature protection, such as the arrangement of new education trails and viewpoints. At the same time, they were much less supportive when it came to future activities involving mass tourism, such as building an adventure park. All of the above confirmed the assumptions made in H7. Despite the significant support for tourism, visitors consider it a much lower development priority of the NP compared to protection and conservation, which demonstrates a certain environmental awareness. This is consistent with the work of Getzner and Švajda [78] and Papageorgiou and Kassioumis [10] indicating that visitors to PAs consider this goal as a top priority. The motivation for visits is the desire to get to know different parts of the country and relax in nature. The majority of them practice hiking during their stay. Unlike the results of other studies, in which visitors expressed a lower level of satisfaction with the tourist infrastructure and services [10,65], this research showed it is generally high. All these findings should serve as the guidelines for future management activities aimed at organizing the offer of nature tourism in Tara NP.

The fact that this area has been declared an NP has influenced less than half of the visitors (43%) to travel there. This can be explained by the fact that domestic visitors (who make up most of the sample) are generally less likely to care about the status of the PA than foreigners [63]. The analysis also showed that protection status is important for less educated visitors, those inhibited outside the capital, and those coming for the first time. There are various explanations for this. The NP label is usually well-known, and these areas are often promoted as must-see attractions, which can be crucial in attracting people who generally have less knowledge about the territory they visit. Compared to repeat visitors, for the first-timers the protection itself represents something, which has positive connotations that affect their attitudes [63]. Among visitors who do not live in the capital, those who are at a greater distance from the NP predominate, and such travelers generally tend to concentrate on must-see sights, since the trip is most likely to have been planned long in advance [105]. Based on what has been previously written in this paragraph, it can be generally argued that visitors partially care about the status of the NP, with the noticeable differences when it comes to different segments of the population, i.e., H6 is only partially confirmed.

## 7. Conclusions

The main purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes of different stakeholders in the Tara NP (Serbia) and to offer specific guidelines to improve existing relationships. The research advances knowledge about the attitudes and roles of various groups for development and progress in PAs. Since the outcomes of the analyzed relationships in this study represent original findings on stakeholder attitudes toward the NPs, this research contributes notably to the literature on this issue.

In general, there are divergent opinions of stakeholders concerning issues related to Tara NP. The NP leaders underlined the protection and conservation as the primary goal for future development, emphasizing the role of the NP in strengthening national identity. Visitors expressed similar views, while the community gave preference to completely different goals, primarily tourism. Since most of the local population does not recognize the economic benefits resulting from the proclamation of the NP and does not see themselves as participants in the decision-making process, they only partially supported the existence of the NP. However, all stakeholders agreed that the situation could be improved through future investments primarily in agriculture and nature tourism. The research also showed that attitudes about NPs of both communities and visitors are influenced by different personal characteristics.

From developmental and managerial points of view, different implications can be emphasized. Future actions should be aimed at improving the coordination of various stakeholders, and especially in improving the relations between NP and the community. The managers of the NP could take the role of educators of the local population by providing

the transfer of knowledge and enabling simple access to information related to community participation. Increasing the frequency and the channels of communication could be achieved through social mobilization activities that include various capacity training and community development projects. Conflict resolution through dialogue within the User Council, as well as cooperation with local institutions, have been successful so far and should be encouraged in the future. The User Council offers great potential for conflict mitigation or resolution. Therefore, interaction and cooperation are necessary, meaning that all stakeholders should be familiar with each other's problems and help in their resolution. There is also the practice of organizing seminars in partnership with various institutions and NGOs, with an emphasis on rural development and involving the local population in the functioning of the PA.

It follows from the above that providing suitable financial incentives is a significant step toward the successful future development of the wider area. Stimulating small businesses in various spheres, and providing incentives by local governance structures, could be a useful step forward and the NP could also support these actions. One of the highlighted issues in previous research of the area of Tara NP is the lack of start-up capital among community members, due to which targeted investments by the state are needed, with particular incentives for private individuals [18,23]. Investments and credit incentives should be largely directed toward agriculture development (enhancement of livestock production), with the advance in tourism and complementary activities (construction of road and communal infrastructure, modernization of tourist capacities). Some positive developments made by the NP have been highlighted in this research, but these are initial actions that have not been implemented on a larger scale.

Studies on the stakeholders' attitudes are extremely valuable to destination managers for the creation of effective strategic plans. In accordance with this, our research represents a specific incentive to the successful progress of NPs and gives the officials the chance to act properly. This research has several limitations that should not be ignored in future research. It did not cover all stakeholders operating within the PA, and the selected participants do not necessarily represent all opinions and views within the same organization. Therefore, future research could be expanded to include additional organizations and other participants to further examine problems at the individual site level.

It is necessary to point out that this research is limited to a case study of a Serbian NP. However, the results can be particularly significant for territories where rural communities of mountain areas and protected natural areas come together. Future research could have several directions. One of the scenarios is to deepen the analysis of the impact of tourism on the quality of life of the local communities in Tara NP using standardized scales (e.g., TIAS, SWLS) that include both subjective and objective measures. The other direction is conducting research in other NPs in Serbia which also have significant elements of biodiversity and natural landscape, and drawing a parallel with the results of this study. In addition, comparative research in similar PAs in other countries would provide insights into different management practices and enable finding new solutions for issues different stakeholder groups are faced with.

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