Creating models of integrated development of ecotourism in Russian protected areas

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Abstract. The topic of ecotourism is now more relevant than ever, both in Russia and around the world. Despite the existence of well-known world practices of creating a variety of ecotourism products and services compatible with the goals of conservation of natural territories, Russia still has a long way to go to turn ecotourism into alternative form of recreation that contributes to the environmental and socio-economic development in the Russian regions. The article discusses the methodological approaches, experiences, and results of the All-Russian competition organized to identify pilot ecotourism areas, where tourist and recreational clusters (TRCs) may be developed through implementation of the combined potential of nature protection areas and adjacent territories. The research database includes the competition documents and regional projects published on the website https://priroda.life. The paper presents the goals, objectives, stages and features of the competition, regional strategies for participation in the competition, and the best projects. Moreover, the study identifies the key challenges for the development of ecotourism in natural areas. It shows that the process of involving Russian protected areas (PAs) in ecotourism is more than one-step action, that requires a systematic approach to advancement of tourism-and-recreational clusters jointly with the development of natural and adjacent territories.

1. Introduction

In the Russian Federation, ecotourism is one of the priority types of tourism. The main focus of the ecotourism policy is on people visiting natural areas for educational and/or recreational and therapeutic purposes [1]. However, the lack of quality tourism infrastructure, weak entrepreneurial environment, lack of package tours, poor service, poor level of transport services for tourists, and immaturity of marketing actions do not allow to create a comfortable tourist environment in PAs for different categories of tourists, resulting in a low number of visits to those areas [2].

From 2019, the national project “Ecology” aims to eliminate these obstacles, and in particular develop the infrastructure in national parks. By 2024, it will increase the number of PAs by 8%, the area of PAs by almost 4 times, and the number of visitors to national parks by 2.2 times compared to 2018 [3]. The achievement of the latter indicator is associated with the setting up of effective commercial activities of national parks [4], including through public-private partnerships [5]. Researchers believe that the partnership between government and business could ensure the effective development of the tourism industry in compliance with all environmental requirements and guarantee both the strengthening of public support for conservation activities and the further expansion of the system of PAs [6].
The first All-Russian competition held in 2020 to identify pilot areas for creating tourism and recreation clusters as part of the integrated development of PAs and adjacent territories (the Competition) has catalysed a surge of interest in the search for and generation of new models for the integrated development of ecotourism. This article discusses methodological approaches, best practices in organizing, and the results of the Competition. This Competition is considered to be a non-standard tool of state support for integrated solutions for creating tourism and recreation clusters in PAs and adjacent territories by encouraging partnerships and team building; defining a set of joint actions that can be taken at the national, regional, and local levels; and methodological support and training for the participants of the Competition.

2. Models and Methods
This study is based on theoretical and practical works, legislative and regulatory documents in the field of conservation and ecotourism, as well as the documents of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation related to the ecotourism development projects that are in the public domain. We used the Competition documents and materials published on the portal https://priroda.life as an information base.

3. Discussion
Protected areas around the world make a significant contribution to nature protection and are the basis for the development of ecotourism, which is recognized as one of the fastest growing segments of the global tourism industry [7]. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the various approaches to defining the concept of ecotourism, which are to some extent related or interrelated. We will only emphasize that the long-standing terminological debate shows an unabated interest in studying different aspects of ecotourism. The advantages and characteristics of ecotourism are that it stimulates and satisfies the desire to communicate with nature, prevents negative impacts on nature and culture, and encourages participants in tourism activities to contribute to environmental conservation, ecological education, compliance with the interests of local communities, and socio-economic development of territories [8-10].

Relying on international recommendations for the sustainable development of ecotourism and based on their own traditions, public policies, accumulated experience, and the specifics of PAs, many countries use a diverse set of concepts, models, and tools to develop ecotourism in PAs [11, 12].

Russia is no exception, as the country has 11,822 PAs, of which 295 are federal, 10,446 are regional, and 1081 are local. The All-Russian competition to develop transparent mechanisms for selecting pilot areas for the integrated development of ecotourism was held for the first time in 2020. It was organized by the Agency for Strategic Initiatives to Promote New Projects (ASI), an autonomous non-profit organization, with the support of the Ministry of Natural Resources of the Russian Federation, the Federal Agency for Tourism, the Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, and the Ministry of Development of the Russian Far East.

The Competition was held in two stages: selection and acceleration (Figure 1).

![Figure 1](https://priroda.life)
At the first stage of the selection process, all applications were technically checked for completeness of the documents submitted. The applications that successfully passed this check were sent to the members of the Competition’s expert panel for review. The key criteria for the expert evaluation of the applications were as follows:

- Presence of unique sites of international, national, or regional importance in the protected area;
- The area’s attractiveness for investors in terms of implementation of integrated solutions for ecotourism development and potential socio-economic effect of the project implementation;
- Originality and feasibility of the key idea, taking into account the results of the SWOT-analysis;
- Balanced team composition and the team’s track record.

A rating of regional applications was created based on the results of the expert evaluation. According to this rating, the operator of the Competition presented a qualification analysis of the applications and proposed 30 best regional projects, or the Top-30 finalists of the selection stage for consideration by the Competition commission.

In 2020, 115 applications from 68 regions of the Russian Federation and 8 Federal Districts were submitted for the Competition (Table 1).

| Indicator                        | Registered for the Competition | Submitted for the Competition | Proportion, % |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------|
| Number of applications           | 219                            | 115                           | 52%           |
| Number of Russian regions        | 81                             | 68                            | 84%           |
| Area of territories, ha          | 112                            | 58                            | 52%           |
| Number of team members           | 1,075                          | 926                           | 86%           |
| Number of PAs in the projects    | 523                            | 231                           | 44%           |

Table 1. Summary of regional applications submitted for the Competition in 2020a.

a Source: based on the data retrieved from https://priroda.life.

A distinctive feature of the Competition is the possibility to prepare an unlimited number of applications from one region. The analysis of the number of registered applications for the Competition identified three main strategies for their preparation:

1. Preparation of four or more applications. The regions that used this strategy included the Republics of Karelia and Tatarstan, Kaluga, Leningrad, and Moscow Regions, and Krasnodar and Krasnoyarsk Territories.
2. Preparation of two strong applications. Two regions (Sakhalin Region and the Republic of Bashkiria) followed this strategy. On the whole, this approach can be considered the most successful in terms of resources expended and results achieved.
3. Preparation of one strong application is quite reasonable, but also the riskiest strategy in a highly competitive environment.

The total number of PAs represented in the applications was 231 including 63 federal, and 168 regional ones.

At the second stage of the Competition, according to the Competition Regulations, the selected 30 regional teams took part in the acceleration programme. It included a cycle of training and expert consultations on creating framework concepts for the development of tourism and recreation clusters in 2020-2025, developing a competitive product, attracting investments and financing at all stages of development.
The programme consisted of a preparatory phase, which was open for all participants of the Competition, and three training modules. The first and second training modules were offered to all Top-30 teams. The objective of the second stage was to identify at least 10 pilot areas with the best projects developed during the acceleration programme. The third training module was offered only to the teams that developed these winning pilot areas, which included the preparation of investment proposals, participation in Corporate Social Responsibility pitching (demonstration of CSR programmes), GR-pitching (presentations to line ministries and departments), and investment pitching (presentations of investment projects) sessions, as well as presentation of tourism and recreation cluster projects to the tourism community.

The evaluation of regional projects to identify the best 10 pilot areas was carried out using a point system with the following criteria:

- Feasibility of the model of territorial functioning (PA and adjacent territory) for the development of ecotourism;
- Quality of the functional and planning solutions for the area;
- Quality of architectural, stylistic, and functional proposals for the tourism infrastructure projects;
- Degree and variety of forms of participation of target audiences in project preparation; the social and cultural programming of the area;
- Attractiveness of the proposed solutions for investors and the possibility of obtaining extra-budgetary funding;
- Effectiveness of the financial and economic model of development;
- Assessment of the socio-economic efficiency of the project implementation.

In 2020, 36 projects from 32 Russian regions successfully passed the second acceleration stage covering 97 PAs (33 federal and 64 regional ones). Leading experts in conservation, design of natural areas, tourism business administration, marketing, and promotion were involved in the activities of the acceleration programme. Each team was assigned a mentor whose functions included organizational and methodological assistance in the development and adjustment of the project to create a tourism and recreation cluster. Given the multidimensionality of the considered topics and the professional level of the experts involved, it is possible to assert that the acceleration programme allowed to provide an instantaneous increase in the competencies of 1000 people who will develop projects in the field of ecotourism, regardless of the results of the Competition. Based on the results of the acceleration programme, 17 winners of the Competition were identified:

1. TOP-10 pilot areas:
   - Republic of Khakassia, “TRC Gornaya Khakassia”, Khakassky Reserve;
   - Novgorod Oblast, TRC “Bolshaya Valdai trail”, Valdai National Park;
   - Republic of Bashkortostan, TRC “Heart of Bashkiria”, Bashkiria National Park;
   - Republic of Tatarstan, TRC “Kamskoe Ustye”;
   - Samara Oblast, TRC “Samarskaya Luka”, National Park “Samarskaya Luka”;
   - Republic of Buryatia, TRC “Tunkinskaya Dolina”, Tunkinsky National Park;
   - Kamchatka Krai, TRC “Zapovednaya Kamchatka: Land of People, Volcanoes and Salmon”, Kronotsky State Reserve;
   - Primorsky Krai, TRC “Land of the Leopard”, Land of the Leopard National Park;
   - Sakhalin Oblast, TRC “Laguna Busse”;
   - Tula Oblast, TRC “Romantsevskie Gory”.

2. Territory of Prospective Development:
   - Sverdlovsk Oblast, TC “Gora Belaya”;
   - Ryazan Oblast, ETC “Paustovsky”, National Park “Meshera”;
   - Smolensk Oblast, TRC “Smolenskoe Poozerie. Origins of Russia”, Smolenskoye Poozerye National Park;
Kemerovo Oblast, “Tourist and recreational cluster of prospective development – Mezhdurechensk”;
Republic of Karelia, TRC “Cluster Muromsky”;
Republic of Kalmykia, TRC “Chernye Zemli”, Chernye Zemli Nature Reserve.

3. Winner of the popular vote: Republic of Tatarstan, TRC “Vysokogorskiy”.

In summary, it should be noted that the Competition allowed to (a) obtain a spatial cross-section of ecotourism initiatives and models; (b) improve the quality and level of preparation of regional projects; (c) stimulate motivation and unite the efforts of stakeholders in the integrated development of tourist areas and increase responsibility for nature conservation; and (d) ramp up the awareness raising activities of organizers and participants of the Competition.

4. Results

The analysis of materials and results of the Competition demonstrates new approaches to the development of ecotourism through the selection of pilot areas for tourism and recreation clusters as part of the integrated development of PAs and adjacent territories. The key components for selection success, according to the authors, include the following:

- The formation of an interdisciplinary regional team, the core of which is formed by representatives of the administrations of PAs. The teams supported by the governors of the Russian regions included representatives of regional and municipal authorities, entrepreneurs, environmental experts, scientists, teachers, architects, designers, farmers, etc. The Republic of Buryatia presented the largest number of members of the interdisciplinary team (more than 100 people).
- Implementation of the acceleration programme along with the competitive component of the Competition, which is an original and effective way to instantaneously improve the competence of regional teams and introduce a modern approach to organizing ecotourism in PAs.
- Use of a unique crowdsourcing methodology employing online and offline services for all competition procedures.
- Involvement of highly qualified specialists and experts in the methodological support of the development of regional projects.
- Active awareness raising campaigns of the organizers and participants of the Competition. Throughout all competition procedures, special attention was paid to the problematic issues of combining environmental and recreational functions of PAs, social and economic development of territories, fostering a culture of recreation and responsible entrepreneurship, and other relevant issues of creating and promoting ecotourism products and services in PAs using modern digital tools. The number of page views on the Competition’s website exceeded 1.2 million, and the number of unique users on the website – 300 thousand, all without using advertising budgets to promote the website.

At the same time, the Competition showed that, despite the growing interest in the topic of ecotourism, priorities of its development in the Russian regions are formulated differently. The experts pointed to the need to form a unified meaningful interpretation of the term “ecotourism” for potential organizers of services and products in this segment of the tourism market.

Moreover, in the course of the Competition, it has become possible to recognize the emerging new challenges that require further study and evaluation of their impact, development of proactive measures, updating strategic and programme documents, and much more. The big challenge is the so-called “overtourism”, which can aggravate the problem of exceeding the maximum allowable tourist load on PAs during an active promotion campaign. Another challenge is the aggressive commercialization of PAs.
Not all proposals for tourism products and services, nor the list of infrastructure projects needed to provide services in PAs and adjacent territories, were developed as compatible with the goals of nature conservation.

Many projects presented “world-class ski resorts” and other expensive infrastructure facilities that do not give the projects a competitive advantage in terms of ecotourism. Therefore, the infrastructure “hype” should go hand in hand with the separation of government and business areas of responsibility for using natural areas. For adequate infrastructure development of natural sites, addressing safety issues, and setting up services, it is necessary to clearly distinguish specific types of recreational and tourist activities allowed in PAs. Another important challenge is the low level of competence of the authorities and investors, which is inadequate for implementing projects in PAs.

A study of the composition and competencies of the teams, the conditions and results of their activities demonstrates a lack of specialists with various competencies and experience in working with PAs, which significantly limited their ability to prepare high-quality documentation for the Competition. An undeniable challenge is the infringement of the rights and interests of local communities. The analysis showed that the issues of respecting the interests and rights of the local population living in PAs were very poorly addressed. A new challenge, according to the authors, is the gap between the value of natural sites and the validity of regional ecotourism initiatives in terms of their compliance with the specific characteristics and principles of ecotourism.

5. Conclusion
In general, the results of the study indicate that the 2020 All-Russian competition for the creation of tourism and recreation clusters and ecotourism development has demonstrated new approaches to increasing the link between PAs’ conservation, recreational and educational activities, promoting their integration into the social and economic development of regions. However, the process of involving Russian PAs into the development of ecotourism is not a one-step procedure and requires a systematic approach to the creation of tourism and recreation clusters in conjunction with the development of PAs and adjacent territories. Therefore, the practice of holding such competitions can serve as an effective tool not only to stimulate Russian regions to create conditions for the organization and development of ecotourism in federal, regional, and local PAs, but also to find solutions to improve the sustainability of cooperation between PAs, visitors, and local communities.

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