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# 16 Certification of Protected Areas: the Case of PAN Parks in Europe

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## Chapter Profile

This chapter reflects on the ability of PAN (Protected Area Network) Parks to deliver the expected benefits of certification to both national parks and stakeholder tourism businesses in Europe. The anticipated benefits included an improvement of the product through better management and an increased volume of business from certification branding and marketing. There is some evidence of increased performance in the field but little evidence of additional trade. This is unfortunate as the expected increase in business was a key pull factor for applicants. PAN Parks promotes and certifies stakeholder partnerships for continuous improvement towards sustainability. The challenges arise from certifying not one firm but a partnership, which makes it harder to locate responsibilities and identify budgets and mandates. The costs of implementing the certification programme are high because of different languages, cultures and geographical constraints, and PAN Parks is presently only reaching the low-hanging fruit. A period of consolidation and capacity building needs to occur so that economies of scale reduce the costs of getting new parks to meet the standards and appropriate marketing benefits are provided for certified parks.

## Introduction

Little research has been undertaken on the benefits that certification brings to the Pan Parks applicant. This chapter reviews the perception of national park managers and local partner tourism firms that are either certified or are candidates of PAN Parks (see Fig. 16.1), the certification programme for European protected areas initiated in 1997 by the World Wide Fund for Nature (or, in the USA, World Wildlife Fund – WWF) and the Dutch Leisure Company Molecaten. The Protected Area Network (PAN) of Parks has four aims: first, to create an European network of wilderness protected areas; secondly, to improve nature protection by sustainable tourism development; thirdly,



Fig. 16.1. Certified and candidate PAN Parks.

to provide a reliable trademark that guarantees nature protection and is recognized by all Europeans; and, finally, to involve local businesses in the development of a sustainable tourism strategy that forms part of the verification process itself. As such, this new trademark is awarded to parks with outstanding nature and high-quality tourism facilities that are balanced with wilderness protection, and to the tourism business partners who contribute to make this happen. The PAN Parks trademark aims to communicate to tourists that their visit contributes to the protection of the natural area. In this manner, tourism provides a unique chance to raise people's awareness of their environment and to communicate conservation messages.

WWF developed the PAN Parks programme as a sustainable development tool to promote conservation by emphasizing the benefits of sustainable production and consumption through a partnership approach. The key element of this partnership is assigning intrinsic economic value to nature preservation long-term, rather than consumption of resources within protected areas. Among the management tools applied by parks and their business partners to meet nature management and quality requirements are those based on protection of ecosystem dynamics, as well as systems to meet key performance indicators on visitor management, tourism strategy and contribution of business partners (Font and Brassler, 2002). Critical to the vision of PAN Parks is the belief that local communities immediately adjacent to the parks should benefit economically in a way that is sustainable and in keeping with the natural values of the area. The initiative aims to put economic value into European nature, as a means of affording greater protection. By so doing, it aims to create a form of tourism that is not a threat but an opportunity. Partnerships with nature conservation organizations, travel agencies, the business community and other interest groups on a local, national and international level are set up to try and ensure the effectiveness of the process PAN Parks envisions for itself. This vision is a brand bringing together parks with natural heritage and model management practices that enables visitors to enjoy wilderness, in the form of ancient forests and wild mountain ranges, peatlands and unspoiled rivers. PAN Parks documentation (Kun, 1999) cites specific benefits that are conveyed to applicants who are interested in starting the process of verification. The concept provides a nature conservation-based response to the growing market for nature-oriented tourism. The brand uses the bylines 'people, respect, nature' and 'preserve, support and enjoy Europe's wilderness' to convey a message linking people and economic benefit directly with the preservation of nature and the wilderness concept. The unique selling proposition is that the parks are the natural treasures of Europe where visitors are welcome and their visit can help protect the area. The programme aims to bring four benefits:

1. Independent verification aiming at improving the quality of management and the wilderness experience for visitors in European protected areas.
2. Strong marketing of the concept and certified parks in cooperation with tourism businesses, especially tour operators.
3. Developing a common communications approach towards people interested in green tourism.

4. Creating partnerships with local communities and local/small-scale businesses in order to implement a sustainable tourism development strategy on a regional scale.

PAN Parks aims to be the 'flag carrier' for key sites of European nature and wilderness areas, the guardian of Europe's iconic natural heritage sites. The network is proposed to expand throughout Europe and to include protected areas reflecting the natural diversity of the whole region. Within this vision are inherent problems relating to the reality of protected area status in much of Europe. Many protected areas are not managed effectively for biodiversity, with logging, mining and hunting continuing to be pursued as everyday activities. WWF believes in the need for a greater number of effectively managed protected areas linked by corridors, protected by buffer zones and designed to maximize resilience to threats. When WWF surveyed some 3000 protected areas in 39 European countries, only 134 (fewer than 1% of Europe's total protected areas) meet the conservation organization's criteria for well-managed parks that could allow them to eventually meet the requirements needed to achieve the PAN Parks trademark (Kun, 2002).

For a park to pre-qualify as a potential PAN Park it requires 20,000 hectares of protected land, with at least 10,000 hectares of protected core zone – the minimum deemed necessary to provide a wilderness experience by restoring and/or maintaining natural processes in ecosystems, a tall order for much of Europe. This essentially means that only the most peripheral and/or economically depressed regions in Europe will qualify, with most of these located in Central and Eastern Europe and Scandinavian countries. The report by Kun (2002) identifies protected areas in relatively good condition and with good potential for achieving the PAN Parks trademark in Scandinavia, Russia, Central Europe and the east Mediterranean. However, the findings also show that most protected areas in Western Europe, on the Atlantic coast and in the west Mediterranean are in a relatively bad condition. Lack of protection in supposedly protected ecosystems and natural processes in eight Baltic and Adriatic coast regions is alarming (Kun, 2002).

Problems already exist in relation to appropriate tourism development within those areas designated as having high potential to become certified by PAN Parks. For example, most Central and Eastern European countries have existing tourist destinations, usually catering to regional and domestic visitors. Bulgaria has a rapidly developing coastal tourism product, which is attracting an increasing number of international mass tourists, drawn by the low cost. Inland, the Central Balkan National Park attracts mostly Bulgarians travelling from Sofia, though there are some examples of specialist small-scale tour operators focusing on the park and its activities. Poland's national parks already receive quite high levels of visitation, mostly from domestic tourists or those from bordering countries. Otherwise the country is not particularly renowned for its tourism product apart from historic cities such as Krakow.

Despite the different nature of their tourism products and levels of development, these countries face similar challenges in developing international tourism. First, they must develop the infrastructure necessary for quick

access beyond the gateway points to diversify tourism products and spread economic benefits geographically. In Bulgaria, for example, the problem of poor roads is compounded by poor signposting, which is mostly in Cyrillic script, posing another barrier to the international tourist. In most countries, international tourism concentrates on the capital cities (TTI, 1999), while in the Adriatic and parts of the Mediterranean it is locked in coastal resorts (Hall, 2003). Secondly, in Bieszczady and the Central Balkans, there have been problems with poor-quality accommodation. However, in the course of research for this chapter, it was found that many local businesses are trying hard to create high-quality accommodation and attractions. The problem is compounded by difficulties in both communication and levels of service quality. This relates to the third point that staff training, particularly at supervisory and management levels, is critical to meet international standards of service delivery without destroying the integrity of local culture. Fourthly, most countries have inadequate facilities for hiking and adventure activities, particularly for independent tourists but also for groups (Nowaczek and Fennell, 2002; Hall, 2003). These needs express themselves in a shortage of marked trails, poor interpretation, a lack of proper guiding and inadequate equipment for many of the activities that are offered.

Scandinavian countries also have the natural characteristics that make them suitable for establishing PAN Parks, but share only some of the challenges of their Central and Eastern European counterparts in so far as their most suitable sites are on the periphery of Europe (see Brown and Hall, 2000, for a review of the challenges and opportunities of tourism in peripheral areas). The latitude, high prices and healthy economies mean that the majority of tourism will be domestic, relying on unique selling propositions to attract international niche tourist markets (Andersson and Huse, 1998). Oulanka National Park in Finland, for example, is relatively well promoted to both domestic and overseas markets and receives significant numbers of Dutch tourists, drawn by winter tourism, 'Lapland' and the tranquillity of the area.

## Methodology

This chapter reviews the ability of the PAN Parks certification programme to deliver benefits to applicants, and considers the challenges confronting this organization in doing so, including expectations and perceived benefits under the headings of improved management and marketing. The challenges and costs relating to the management of the expectations created and the actual achievement of these benefits are then discussed, with an emphasis on meeting the criteria and the verification requirements. In a series of interviews, relevant stakeholders in PAN Parks were asked to comment on their views of the potential benefits of PAN Parks, and these were compared with the aims of the PAN Parks Foundation and the literature. Open-ended face-to-face interviews were held with stakeholders involved in each of the currently verified PAN Parks. These stakeholders included national park staff at all levels, local business people, community representatives and in

some cases local and regional government officials. The interview questions were informed by the outcomes of the consultation undertaken during the International Year of Ecotourism for the World Ecotourism Summit regional preparatory meetings, which highlighted a range of benefits and costs, summarized in Table 16.1 (Sallows and Font, 2004).

Between April and October 2004, interviews were carried out in four certified national parks: Central Balkans (Bulgaria), Fulufjället (Sweden), Oulanka (Finland) and Bieszczady (Poland), as well as candidate parks Monte Sibillini and Abruzzo (Italy) and Duna Drava (Hungary). It should be noted that the

**Table 16.1.** Park managers' perceived benefits and costs of certification as a sustainability tool: International Year of Ecotourism results (adapted from Sallows and Font, 2004).

Benefits	Challenges and costs
<p>Management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Source of criteria for sustainability and quality (manuals, advice)</li> <li>● Environmental and social improvement</li> <li>● Improved efficiency</li> <li>● Developing product goodwill through marketing of certification</li> <li>● Improved sustainability – social, environmental and economic</li> </ul> <p>Marketing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Method does differentiate quality of service/product</li> <li>● Expected that it will increase competitiveness in the marketplace</li> <li>● Expected increased access to government incentives/benefits (marketing, grants)</li> <li>● Access to better markets of tourism</li> <li>● The development of consumer-friendly products</li> </ul> <p>Credibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Consumers benefit by having a sustainable product offering</li> <li>● It represents the development of a new tourism market segment</li> <li>● Fosters a good reputation for a business</li> <li>● Effective for branding tourism products</li> <li>● Promotes a higher-value clientele</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Not an effective tool to generate demand, market is not present</li> <li>● When known, the market perceives that certification increases prices</li> <li>● No regulatory systems or legislation to support implementation</li> <li>● Challenge of implementing monitoring system</li> <li>● There are no accepted ecotourism criteria</li> <li>● Inequitable access to certification</li> <li>● Certification could legitimize larger companies and disenfranchise local communities and small firms</li> <li>● Expensive tool</li> <li>● Low feasibility of implementation in developing countries</li> <li>● Perception it could become part of the political favours and corruption</li> <li>● Cost of developing reliable, effective baseline data</li> <li>● The benefits derived from current certification programmes come at too high a cost</li> <li>● Lengthy development and application in terms of training, process, systems, facilities, promotion and capacity building</li> <li>● Enormous financial costs in terms of technology and technical expertise</li> <li>● The need for capacity building</li> <li>● The establishment of an auditing framework</li> <li>● Limitations to the size of the ventures, reducing the amount of revenue from certification</li> <li>● Time required for implementation</li> </ul>

parks are in countries with widely different cultures and levels of economic and tourist development. However, what was most notable was that many of the issues pertinent to local communities were in fact very similar whether, for example, in Finland or Bulgaria. What these communities have in common is more than what divides them for the purpose of providing quality ecotourism: that is, being remote rural areas with relatively high unemployment and low incomes was found to be a more significant factor than the relative wealth of their respective countries. Although all areas are relatively poor in terms of comparison with national and European standards, the problems of 'real rural poverty' are much higher in Bulgaria and Poland than in Sweden and Finland, both of which have well-structured social benefit systems. And yet the interviewees repeatedly mentioned a number of common problems for their poor-quality product, such as rural economic deprivation, ageing populations as young people leave to explore urban opportunities, relatively low levels of business experience, lack of contact with foreigners and poor language skills. These reasons may have been mentioned because parks that have applied to PAN Parks for verification are primarily located in areas within Europe that are less well known and are seeking to increase their profile with tourists or as a mechanism to lobby for the maintenance of protected areas by governments. In general, the most popular European parks have not applied for PAN Parks status because they either do not possess the necessary criteria or, as in the case of Mercantour (France), they became nervous about the potential influx of tourists if they became a PAN Park, or because they perceive PAN Parks to have insufficient benefits for the effort required.

### **Benefits of PAN Parks**

The benefits mentioned by the interviewees coincide closely with the aims set out by PAN Parks and those identified in the literature (Font and Buckley, 2001; Honey, 2002; WTO, 2002; Sallows and Font, 2004). Two categories of benefits were mentioned: management benefits, which will help improve the sustainability and quality of the tourism product; and marketing benefits, usually in the form of additional business from increased exposure to international markets. This categorization may seem artificial at first; however, it allows comparison in future research against other policy tools that might contribute only either to product development or to marketing. The four key management benefits mentioned were increased quality of tourism product, conservation benefits, stakeholder collaboration and training, while the dominant marketing benefits are branding, tourist demand and political and public support for conservation.

### **Management of PAN Parks**

PAN Parks applicants expect that this programme will improve the quality of the tourism product, both in the parks and in the adjacent communities, as

pride of place is maintained or restored. Partners focus on the management of the visitor experience within the context of expectations derived from a branded product. However, currently there are no data available to confirm that visitor satisfaction has increased as a result of service improvements derived from being certified, and, as the first PAN Parks were only verified in 2002, such data will not be available for some time.

Nevertheless, PAN Parks can claim to have supported increased protection of nature. Two of the first certified parks, Fulufjället and Central Balkans, became national parks at the same time as they were certified by PAN Parks. Certification has created a particular dynamic within the local communities adjacent to the parks: that is, people living around both new parks perceive that they have lost economic benefits through the loss of traditional activities such as hunting and forestry. Yet PAN Parks is at pains to compensate for such losses to the local communities involved through the introduction of new activities, such as tourism, by placing an intrinsic economic benefit and value on conservation.

PAN Parks has become an important vehicle for stakeholder relationships, addressing many institutional constraints in the development of tourism, and the expectations of many interviewees is that certification can become a tool to increase efficiency of business communications. PAN Parks cooperates with national parks, local communities and businesses, international organizations and business partners for the benefit of both nature conservation and the local economy. 'The establishment of partnerships helps the sustainable development of visitor services, promotes the area's tourist potential, and helps provide employment for local people', said Zbigniew Niewiadomski, Deputy Director of Bieszczady National Park (personal communication, September 2003).

Applying for PAN Parks certification has meant that the park and local firms have had to develop joint plans and programmes of action in a way that had not happened previously. These partnerships increase the planning and the development of local opportunities that can create a platform for sound ecotourism product development (WTO, 2003). In Fulufjället, Oulanka and Central Balkans, local PAN Park groups are operating and, by 2005, it is hoped that they will be established in Bieszczady and Retezat also. The format of the local group varies between countries and reflects local law and situations, as a key part of their activity is to develop a sustainable tourism development strategy that is acceptable to partners and appropriate to the region.

The challenge is to use certification as an enabling process, and yet this approach conflicts with the trend in Eastern Europe to move away from regulating growth, as this is reminiscent of old communist ways, and many are suspicious of further intervention. Self-regulation is likely to bring its own share of complexities, starting with the challenge of educating both the public and private sector on its meaning, benefits and implementation. In Eastern European countries there is a lack of coordination between public-sector agencies, as well as no tradition of entrepreneurial public-private-sector partnerships (Nowaczek and Fennell, 2002). It is unrealistic to expect the creation of stakeholder partnerships in the short term, as experienced in donor-funded



projects that required local partnerships in Romania and Bulgaria (Roberts and Simpson, 1999). The experience of the Pirin Tourism Forum is similar to that of the local PAN Parks groups (the networks set up around parks to manage the process of writing and implementing a sustainable tourism development strategy) in developing local capacity and supporting and ensuring quality tourism products. This forum has faced considerable inter-municipality competition for breaking away from joint strategies (Roberts and Simpson, 1999). In this context it is understandable that the most challenging of the PAN Parks criteria have been those that require public-private-sector partnership. The PAN Parks verification team had to accept a two-stage certification process, first focusing on environmental criteria, and leaving as second stage the social/tourism management-related criteria that require partnerships.

Bieszczady's local PAN Parks coordinator, Gregory Sitko (personal communication, 8 October 2004), explained that initially they thought PAN Parks would be like surgery that would solve their problems and start bringing tourists in immediately. Since then, they realize that what it has done is give them the understanding and capacity to take control, and from here to take decisions that they follow through.

There are expectations from the parks and local communities of certification being a vehicle for training. Glion Institute of Higher Education (Switzerland) carried out a training needs assessment during 2004 to prioritize the needs of both park staff and local businesses. The results of this exercise reveal a striking commonality of needs (Clark and Hoseason, 2005), indicating that foreign languages, marketing, interpretation of nature and visitor management are of primary importance to all parks. Parks have also struggled with the preparation and application of sustainable tourism development strategies. The training will be delivered by PAN Parks' own network meetings, focusing on the identification of training needs. It is hoped that external funding will allow further specific training at the local level.

PAN Parks is aiming for a change from consumptive to non-consumptive use of these protected areas. This means reducing, and in the core zones forbidding, activities such as hunting, fishing and grazing, as well as motorized transport such as snowmobiles. The loss of these activities is perceived as a serious disadvantage by many people and there are real difficulties for some domestic markets to appreciate the concept of ecotourism and to behave accordingly in protected areas (Nowaczek and Fennell, 2002). In Oulanka in Finland, there have been problems with semi-domestic reindeer entering the park and, in both Oulanka and Fulufjället, the traditional 'rights of everyman' for free access to all public lands have created issues concerning the zoning of highly fragile areas. In addition, around the Central Balkan Park, many traditional local accommodation providers claim to have suffered a significant decrease in visitors since hunting was prohibited. These restrictions on activities are accepted by the local stakeholders because there is an expectation that these activities will be replaced by lower-impacting tourism. The financial benefits arising from efficiency-based cost cuts, for example in hotels through water-waste-energy management, are not available to national

parks and will not offset the costs of participating in a certification programme. PAN Parks is therefore expected to be a vehicle to realizing expectations of an economic turnaround and creating economic benefits that can substitute for any loss of traditional activities and can retain younger people. The implications of these points are reviewed below in the marketing section.

## Marketing of PAN Parks

Over two-thirds of the benefits stated by the interviewees related to marketing, in terms of both expectations and concerns about the inability to deliver: in particular, issues related to PAN Parks providing the potential for being part of an internationally known and recognized quality brand. Business stakeholders viewed marketing as essentially connected with promotion, rather than product development, which is more a management benefit, while park authorities usually had difficulties in coming to terms with marketing in relation to their own activities.

PAN Parks sees its trademark as a new opportunity for green tourism development, which will attract tourists who want to enjoy true wilderness, in the knowledge that their visit does little harm to the environment. The organization expects that it will also open economic opportunities to local businesses who are invited to become PAN Parks partners. PAN Parks aims to improve the management of protected areas, using sustainable tourism as a tool. PAN Parks partners can use PAN Parks international communications and marketing channels to gain support in effectively combining sustainable tourism development and nature protection. The current certified PAN Parks, however, are not the most spectacular nature sites in Europe, though they are some of the most valuable and endangered. However, the two things are not the same and the tourist does not get the 'wow factor' from these parks. Their remoteness is partly the reason why they are less developed, and yet it does not necessarily add value to the tourist experience. The concept of PAN Parks is quite difficult for consumers to understand, and much more needs to be done to clarify the nature of the brand and what it stands for before the public can become supporters of PAN Parks. A similar example, if not a original concept but an effective promotional tool, is the World Heritage brand. These sites as designated by UNESCO and have a high level of brand recognition, and yet concerns have been expressed that this brand has become overstretched and its credibility could start to wane. PAN Parks has to be aware of the same phenomenon in the long term. That said, World Heritage Site (WHS) designation was not devised with marketing in mind, and yet it was found that WHS branding has a significant impact on international tourism visitation, as tour operators advertise the fact that their trips include WH sites, and park managers use this status in lobbying stakeholders (Buckley, 2004).

As the PAN Parks brand is not only applied to the parks themselves but also to participating tourism businesses, it is critical to see brand marketing as important beyond the promotion of managing nature and wilderness alone.

Instead, in order for the local communities to optimize their benefits, they must understand that local hospitality and other offerings to tourists must also be of a high standard. During the annual PAN Parks conference in the Central Balkans (October 2004), several local entrepreneurs said this was usually equated to 'international-style hotels and restaurants'. This might be seen to contradict the ethos of ecotourism and locally sustainable tourism, which favour local distinctiveness and uniqueness as part of the tourism product. What is needed is high-quality, small-scale accommodation (some large enough for specialist tour operators with small groups), excellent local guiding and quality activities for tourists, for example hiking and canoeing, local retailing and local food. Where possible, PAN Parks should strive to highlight and promote local culture, food and retailing to optimize economic benefits and match tourists' expectations. If the PAN Parks brand is to be taken seriously by tourists, local products must be high-quality.

The designation of a quality brand to a national park, to a tour operator or to a local business partner may raise the expectations of the tourists. Currently, one of the key issues that PAN Parks faces is that these expectations of high quality may not be met. From the conservationist's point of view, there is no doubt that the quality of the natural environment is the key concern. However, tourists want quality in terms of scenery and/or flora and fauna. PAN Parks must be aware of the competition it faces, especially in Northern Europe; for example, reaching Oulanka (Finland) takes as long and can cost as much as reaching some of the African game parks or some United States national parks.

From a marketing perspective, the challenge is creating a message that raises appropriate expectations that can be met satisfactorily. At the moment, this message is lacking or at best confusing. More research should be done (and is planned) on what the PAN Parks brand means to people, particularly in relation to wilderness. Wilderness as a concept is difficult to define and in fact is rather hard to translate in some European languages. Main entrances to at least two of the parks, Oulanka and Fulufjället, are often crowded and sometimes littered, thereby negating the feeling of the wilderness experience. Certified PAN Parks have actually only existed since 2002 and therefore perhaps it is not surprising that their visibility has been limited. To assist marketing, PAN Parks has given each of the parks a small grant to create a visibility package for the brand. In Fulufjället a map was created, in Oulanka a tourist trail, and in Bieszczady each entrance ticket to the park has the PAN Parks logo on it.

Marketing benefits need to be understood more broadly than attracting additional visitors; namely in the context of wider public and political support for protected areas through changing attitudes and stimulating their economic value. These benefits are the main interest of the park authorities. PAN Parks has managed to attract support from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and officials in each of the countries where it has certified a park. For example, WWF recognized the three first PAN Parks in Sweden, Finland and Poland as model parks for nature tourism and effective park management on 17 September 2002, with an international launch of the new

trademark for tourism and nature protection. The following year, Central Balkan National Park was opened as a national park and received its certificate from the Prime Minister of Bulgaria. The Bulgarian government used this event to promote themselves as ready to join the European Union and were obviously proud of joining a new venture like PAN Parks. However, it remains to be seen if the high level of political support evident at the opening fanfare of all these parks will translate into long-term support for management and conservation issues. On a more positive note, in 2005 WWF International reported to PAN Parks that the Swedish Ministry of Environment had indicated a requirement that in future all Swedish national parks should strive to achieve the standards set by PAN Parks.

### **Certification's Ability to Meet Expectations**

While both certified and applicant PAN Parks report a range of benefits, there is an equally long list of challenges and costs that parks face both to behave in a more sustainable way and to prove this to PAN Parks for verification purposes. Many of these were raised in the context of improved management and marketing of the certified parks in previous sections. This section will discuss the feasibility of providing benefits through working towards the set of criteria, and the ability of the verification procedures to ensure standards.

There are few attempts to certify tourist destinations as a whole, with the Green Globe 21 destination standard and the European Federation of Parks (EUROPARC) Charter for Sustainable Tourism being the exceptions. This is because of the complexity of setting meaningful and measurable indicators, coupled with the challenges of setting implementable plans for action that identify responsibilities. The most challenging part of the PAN Parks requirement is the need for a sustainable tourism development strategy based on public-private dialogue and partnership. The benefits of such partnerships in managing national parks are well established in a variety of contexts (Eagles *et al.*, 2002; Tourism Competitive Australia, 2003), and stakeholder collaboration is key to the certification of destinations through programmes such as Green Globe 21. Fulufjället's PAN Parks coordinator Janet Jander said the main benefit of PAN Parks certification was to use this opportunity to look beyond their geographical boundaries and to acknowledge they have a role to play in the livelihoods of neighbouring communities. She said this should have been done earlier, but the opportunity had not arisen until PAN Parks was presented as a vehicle (personal communication, 8 October 2004). What makes PAN Parks different is the way in which partnerships are embedded in the criteria. Each park is required to have its own local group responsible for local verification, coordination of activities and management of the park and its partners. In recognition of local cultural differences, the local groups have been given freedom to adopt a format that best suits their specific requirements. This contributes to ecotourism quality because one of the principal characteristics of ecotourism is the involvement and

agreement of the local community in setting the agenda for its own tourism development.

Three aspects of the verification process undertaken by PAN Parks ensure that local communities are empowered to prescribe the kind of tourism development that is most relevant and appropriate to them. The first aspect is the Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy. PAN Parks has developed a manual that provides guidelines for the preparation of such a strategy. However, each park is free to develop a strategy that is relevant to local conditions and the existing level of tourism development. Secondly, each of the local PAN Parks groups can define its own area to include those communities and attractions it deems appropriate. In the case of Fulufjället, where the local population closest to the park is about 300 people, it was considered essential to draw in communities like Sarna from slightly further afield and outside the park's buffer zone. Thirdly, the local PAN Parks groups themselves are trained for and become responsible for verifying and certifying their own local membership. In this way, an internal quality mechanism is set up, which has the potential to regulate the integrity of local tourism development and commitment to locally sustainable ecotourism. The existing groups in Fulufjället and Oulanka have adopted a fairly informal forum structure without taking a legal identity. Groups are still in the process of formation in the Central Balkans, Bieszczady and Retezat, but are expected to have a more formal legal status. However, there are challenges in running partnerships with limited mandates and no funding. How local PAN Parks groups will be funded and who will participate are repeated points of discussion at annual conferences and networking events. It is hoped the local groups will be representative of a range of tourism stakeholders and will seek and achieve consensus. The objective of PAN Parks is not only to provide for an exchange of ideas but also to promote the implementation of local projects and initiatives. To address this issue the PAN Parks Foundation established a Small Grants Fund supporting candidate PAN Parks in building the potential to contribute to the Foundation's goals, which are effective management of protected areas and sustainable tourism development. It is intended to give financial help to protected areas for the implementation of PAN Parks principles and criteria. Currently, the Small Grants Fund only accepts applications from PAN Parks and candidate PAN Parks; consequently, the cost-benefit of providing such grants has not been evaluated to date, but it is certainly instrumental in setting partnerships in motion.

The consequences of community partnerships are that PAN Parks is setting standards for larger sites, with more than one management or operating unit, and yet a key challenge comes from setting and ensuring standards for sites such as national parks where the land is owned and managed, or at least used, by more than one management unit. For those principles and criteria where the national park authority has sole responsibility and control over the management of the verification process has managed to find evidence of compliance, and the park authority has been fairly sure about the information. The greatest challenges relate to the management of collaboration and partnerships, particularly where responsibilities for improvements

are shared and where sources of impacts cannot be identified or managed. This is most obvious in implementing the Sustainable Tourism Development Strategies. As protected areas tend to be geographically the responsibility of more than one municipality, strategies for the park that include neighbouring communities need to be the result of collaboration across different municipalities and individual businesses, with separate budgets and no structures to enforce implementation of decisions taken.

There are also specific challenges in setting standards, particularly social standards, because these can be ambiguous and because the assessment methodologies are not consistent (Font and Harris, 2004). These issues are also evident in PAN Parks, where social standards relate mainly to collaboration and partnerships. Partnerships provide access for joint decision making, and PAN Parks provides a framework for this to take place. The question here is, how are the processes required by PAN Parks affected by inherent power relationships between the players? Can PAN Parks legitimize inequitable power, or does it empower in an equitable way? The measures of participation in PAN Parks are rather crude, in relation to the conceptualization of measures of partnership developed by Roberts and Simpson (1999), after Jamal and Getz (1995). The challenge is also that these basic measures of participation do not encapsulate the true meaning of partnerships, and the PAN Parks process could be legitimizing them. Additional challenges arise as a result of the expectation that each local PAN Parks group will decide its own standards for local business partners that are locally relevant. PAN Parks is training these groups in establishing procedures to set their own standards. It considers that there are benefits in incorporating bottom-up standards. The benefits are engaging local people in the debate of what sustainability means in their hometowns, as well as ensuring that the standards set are relevant. Some interviewees were concerned about the transparency and credibility of the certification system, especially when verification of local business partners is undertaken by others from the local community, and the associated conflicts of interest.

Some of the interviewees mentioned the challenges and costs of PAN Parks working across geographical, linguistic and cultural barriers: the linguistic challenges (for example, all the work is produced in English, including standards and manuals, despite the fact that it is not the first language of any of the people implementing the work in the field) but also challenges arising from misunderstandings due to linguistic and cultural barriers. There are also challenges arising from the translation needs for verification purposes, as the verifiers need a local expert to translate some documents as well as explain local conditions and this means that certain indicators may not be interpreted correctly. Geographical diversity increases the operating costs of verification because ecology and wildlife management needs are different between the north and south of Europe, and verifiers need to be aware of traditions and good practices for each location. This means that the documents setting the standards are rather generic, leaving the specific site implementation down to interpretation by individual park authorities and the verifying team. The consequence is that parks sometimes struggle to understand

what is expected from them, and there are many possible interpretations of the minimum threshold needed to verify that an indicator has been fulfilled.

Several interviewees expressed concern over the cost of upgrading facilities. For some of the criteria, both parks and tourism businesses will have to make investments to upgrade their tourism facilities to show that negative impacts are being reduced. So far, the work done has been to record previous work, and to set systems in place to manage processes, with no evidence available from the park authorities or the tourism businesses about actual investments to improve the sustainability of their facilities. Monitoring of how business partners are certified in the near future will provide more evidence to elaborate on this point. In order to match the expectations of PAN Parks' partners with the reality of meeting the sustainability processes and standards, in the light of the many challenges mentioned, significant amounts of money and time will need to be invested. The expense of an application for PAN Parks certification does not cover the cost of operating the certification programme. As a result, applicants to many certification programmes complain about the high cost of certification (see also Table 16.1) and in many cases certification programmes have had to set membership and verification fees to only cover variable costs, without making a contribution to the fixed costs of running the programme (Toth, 2002; Font, 2005). As application and verification costs do not cover the cost of operating the programme, the funding members, WWF Netherlands and the Molecaten Groep, are still subsidizing the fixed costs of running the programme, and PAN Parks has difficulty in raising finances from elsewhere. As has been stated elsewhere in this chapter, both of these organizations envisage that their contributions will decline in the short term and finances will need to come from elsewhere for PAN Parks to become self-sufficient. This raises issues for the organization that are perhaps beyond the scope of this chapter but nevertheless present a significant challenge for the realization of the benefits for nature and the local community that PAN Parks proposes.

The consequences of these challenges are that PAN Parks, like many other certification programmes, is collecting mainly the most accessible parks. The parks that have been certified to date generally already have good conservation and visitor management systems, and the main emphasis of their work is to improve their contribution to sustainable tourism in the region. The same issue was identified repeatedly in presentations from six certification programmes on the benefits gained from certification at the World Travel Market in 2004. The Central Balkans (Bulgaria) and Retezat (Romania) have benefited from USAID funds to put the structures in place to manage their parks, and in the first case to develop a national strategy for ecotourism. Also national parks and state-owned properties that have a strong centralized management function at state level are more likely to have internal management structures that require regular reviews and reporting mechanisms, while smaller sites will not be in a position to generate these data from their current information systems operations. This raises questions on the ability to transfer practice to other programmes and the expectation on these pioneer pilot sites to transfer the lessons learned to others.

## Conclusion

The PAN Parks certification programme is a sustainable development tool being used to promote conservation by emphasizing the benefits of sustainable production and consumption through a partnership approach. It is being used to support a number of European parks in maintaining Europe's remaining wilderness and benefiting the local communities in their hinterland areas. The programme is not operated on a cost-efficient basis and for this reason can only currently survive by supporting a small number of parks. The network of parks is expanding, but at a slower pace than the funding members, WWF and Molecaten, had expected because of the need for parks to receive support from the programme. For the PAN Parks brand to be part of the public consciousness, there needs to be a critical mass of parks participating. Unfortunately the existing certified PAN Parks are not sites that are widely known by Europeans as key natural areas. Europeans are not generally aware of national parks outside their own country, and it is doubtful if many Western Europeans are aware of the high natural values of parks existing in countries like Poland and Bulgaria.

Systems to make PAN Parks more financially self-sustaining have been put in place in terms of external sponsorship. Certainly, PAN Parks cannot become self-sustaining unless all stakeholders, including the tourists and local and international businesses, are committed to the programme. Currently, in overall terms, it is impossible to state whether or not the PAN Parks certification programme has achieved any of the expected benefits. In terms of the parks, local businesses and the tourists, the benefits for all are mostly long-term and those challenges cited in this chapter will require considerable investment of both time and money. Park authorities as well as the PAN Parks Foundation hope this process will encourage wider public and political support for protected areas through changing attitudes and stimulating their economic value. Communities near PAN parks expect increased visitor numbers and employment opportunities. In contrast, to many park staff the concept of attracting more visitors to natural areas is something of an anathema; in fact, many would willingly prefer to limit rather than encourage visitation. Learning about sustainable tourism development strategies and stakeholder collaboration requires a significant sea change in attitudes and culture. Overall, PAN Parks is providing a useful tool to mobilize park authorities to consider their responsibility towards neighbouring communities and open their doors to collaborative arrangements with the tourism sector, but not without the danger of over-promising and under-delivering.

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