**COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE CREATION OF NATURE PARKS TROUGH DIFFERENTIATION**

**ABSTRACT**

Differentiation is a way for gaining sustainable competitive advantage or achieving market position which enables companies to satisfy customers’ needs better than competition. Differentiation can manifest through four dimensions: product, services, personnel and image.

Nature parks, national parks, strict reserves and special reserves are categories of protected areas of national importance. Nevertheless, nature parks and national parks, have potential in visiting system development. There are numerous nature protection restrictions arising from legislation and management documents. Main purpose is to protect and preserve natural and landscape values and ecological characteristics.

Creating and realizing visiting activities as a part of touristic services supplied trough Public institution is also specific. These services must be differentiated on the market related to competition. Income generated from touristic services in income structure of nature parks, will be even more important in the future, because of self-financing development and central budget dependency reduction. It has to be emphasized that nature parks help larger community trough development of complementary economic activities.

This paper is based on market research conducted in period from May 16th to June 10th year 2016. in Nature Park Kopački rit, which is one of the most visited nature parks in Republic Croatia. Poll survey was carried out among randomly selected 300 visitors. Research results may be used for policy suggestions how to create adequate products, services and promotional activities, insure quality education for visitors about natural, historical and cultural protected area values and minimize visitors influence on natural resources.

**Keywords:** Competitive advantage, nature parks, differentiation, positioning

1. **Introduction**

Competitive advantage is when “company possess abilities and capabilities to satisfy consumers’ needs better than competition” (Renko, 2009: 99). Ansoff is regarded to be the first author which introduced the term competitive advantage. Porter (1985) introduces competitive advantage which is characterized as long term achievement of above average profits and uniqueness that can be very difficult to copy and overtake. Two basic ways of achieving competitive advantage are low product price with acceptable quality and product differentiation based on creation of additional product values such as higher price followed by higher quality and protected by strong brand.

Usually, there is only one company on the market capable of establishing and holding low cost strategy. Therefore, other companies must differentiate their product by adding to product dimensions attractive to customers. According to Porter (1990) generic business strategies concept is based on a fact that selection of way how to achieve competitive advantage for each strategic business unit or part of the company is the essence of business strategy. Buble et al. (1997) claim that is possible to achieve competitive advantage through lower costs than competitors or through differentiation on the market. If these two dimensions are combined with companies’ market width, three basic business strategies originate. That are cost keeping strategy, differentiation strategy and focusing strategy. Sources of competitive advantage are high efficiency in addition to unique differentiated value for customer.

There are three new ways of achieving competitive advantage. First one includes excellence in operating activities in a way where company through focusing on operating activities efficiency aims to gain production cost and product price reduction. Second is product leadership in which company focuses on technology and product development. Last one is being close to consumer, which demands better knowlidge of consumers’ needs than competition and adaption to that specific consumers’ needs which has as a result close relationship with consumers (Renko, 2009: 190). Basically, competitive advantage is gained through asset management, special skills and abilities and information regarding consumers and competition. When implementing differentiation strategy company must create and add to its product or service, features which consumers regard useful and important but different from ones offered by competitors. The most common mistakes in implementation of this strategy are uniqueness that is not evaluated, excessive differentiation, too high final price, focus on product instead of whole value chain and oversight in market segmentation. Basic differentiation types are product differentiation, service differentiation, personnel differentiation and image differentiation. Differentiation through services is lately becoming one of the main trends because of significant growth in this sector (Kotler et al., 2006: 624).

According to the official Protected Areas Register kept by the Nature Protection Directorate of the Ministry of Environmental and Nature Protection „a total of 409 areas have been protected in the Republic of Croatia in various categories. Today, protected areas account for 8.56% of the total area of the Republic of Croatia, which makes 12.24% of the terrestrial territory and 1.94% of the territorial sea. Nature parks account for the largest share of all protected areas (4.56% of the total national territory)”[[1]](#endnote-1). The Republic of Croatia has declared eight national parks and eleven nature parks till now, which are regarded as protected areas of national significance together with strict and special reserves.

Kopački rit area classifies as Nature Park, and it represents one of the most valuable and preserved alluvial wetland plains in Europe. It is distinguished by its ecological values, rich biodiversity and impressive landscape esthetics. It was formed through history by a river work of Danaube and Drava as well as their flood waters. Location of Kopački rit Nature Park is in the northeastern Croatia and it extends fully on territory of Osječko-baranjska County. In proximity of Kopački rit Nature Park lies the city of Osijek, which represents macro regional center of eastern Croatia. Borders of Kopački rit Nature Park are determined by the "**Act on the Kopački rit Nature Park"**  
(Official Gazette 45/1999)[[2]](#endnote-2). Distinctive look of Kopački rit is conditioned by specific layout of ponds, canals and so-called "grede" (beams), and its territory is especially famous for its phenomenon of inner delta created by river Danube with the assistance of river Drava. "A phenomenon like this is not notable for other European rivers in this form and therewith gives this area a global significance"[[3]](#endnote-3). Kopački rit is also designated as a part of the Natura 2000 Network.

The aim of this paper is to point out possibilities coming out from active approach in process of creation services and contents offered in nature parks. Our intension was to emphasize more active role of self-financing in future through this activities using Kopački rit as an example. Trough differentiation in segment of services, personnel and image, nature parks such as Kopački rit, can achieve competitive advantage among similar destinations.

1. **Methodology**

Information used in this paper are primary and secondary data. Secondary data include statistical data from publications of State Bureau of Statistics, legal acts, international agreements and conventions (UNESCO MaB, RAMSAR and GGN), regulation and EU directives regarding nature protection and **Strategy and Action Plan for the Protection of Biological and Landscape Diversity of the Republic of Croatia** (Official Gazette 143/08)[[4]](#endnote-4). Based on this data, by using method of analysis, specificity of creating offers and differentiation of nature parks was studied.

Primary data are collected through market research conducted in Kopački rit Nature Park, which is one of the most visited nature parks in Republic of Croatia. Poll survey was carried out among randomly selected 300 visitors in period from May 16th to June 10th year 2016. Majority of respondents (95.6%) was from Republic of Croatia. Following table shows respondents structure according to counties they coming from.

Table 1 Respondents structure according counties they coming from

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| County | Respondents |
| Zagrebačka | 43 |
| Grad Zagreb | 47 |
| Osječko baranjska | 40 |
| Vukovarsko srijemska | 24 |
| Varaždinska | 68 |
| Brodsko posavska | 11 |
| Međimurska | 7 |
| Primorsko goranska | 10 |
| Other | 50 |
| Total | 300 |

Source: Authors

Share of female respondents is higher (67.2%) than share of mail respondents (32.8%). Majority has faculty education (68.3%) and mainly are not members of associations for nature protection or associations involved in recreation activities in nature.

Respondents’ age structure is represented in Table 2. Almost half of respondents is in the age between 25 and 44 years.

Table 2 Respondents’ age structure

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Age | Respondents |
| 18 – 24 | 8 |
| 25 – 44 | 143 |
| 45 – 64 | 110 |
| 65 and more | 39 |

Source: Authors

Themes covered by research were respondents’ motive for visiting Kopački rit Nature Park, activities selected and consumed during their stay in Nature Park, length of respondents stay, image of Nature Park, price and quality ratio, source of information about Nature Park, etc. Respondents were giving marks on the scale from one to five regarding availability of information materials about the Kopački rit Nature Park, personnel professionalism, arrangement of infrastructure for visitors and quality of selected program.

1. **Nature parks as protected areas of national importance**

Republic of Croatia's national wealth, among other indices also presents particularly attractive and preserved nature, which constitutes one of the fundamental values of the country and enjoys particular protection. Although it streches on merely 88,073 km² (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2015: 46)[[5]](#endnote-5) of surface, because of its geographical location and specific biogeographical impact, Republic of Croatia’s territory is distinguished by exceptional biological and landscape diversity. There are numerous protected areas of national importance on its territory, which demonstrate preserved natural heritage and it’s potential. Republic of Croatia preserves it’s nature and this is mentioned even in Constitution where is stated that „The sea, seashore, islands, waters, air space, mineral resources, and other natural assets, as well as land, forests, flora and fauna, other components of the natural environment, real estate and items of particular cultural, historical, economic or ecological significance which are specified by law to be of interest to the Republic of Croatia shall enjoy its special protection“ (Official Gazette 85/10)[[6]](#endnote-6).

Nature protection of the Republic of Croatia is carried out on the basis of national legislative framework as well as the implementation of numerous international treaties, conventions, regulation and guidelines of the EU in the nature protection field. The basic documents of nature protection in accordance with the Nature Protection Act (Official Gazette 80/13)[[7]](#endnote-7) is Strategy and Action Plan for the nature protection of Republic of Croatia that determine the long-term objectives and guidelines for the conservation of biodiversity and geodiversity and implementation methods. They are made on the basis of the Nature Status Report of Republic of Croatia. The main legislation regulating the issues of protection of nature is the Nature Protection Act, which defines the protected area as„clearly defined geographical space that is intended to protect nature and which is operated for long-term conservation of nature and associated ecosystem services” (Official Gazette 80/13). According to International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) a protected area is „a clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values” (IUCN Definition 2008)[[8]](#endnote-8).

The Nature Protection Act (Official Gazette 80/13) stipulates nine different protected areas: strict reserve, national park, special reserve, nature park, regional park, nature monument, significant landscape, park forest and horticultural monument. Stated protected areas are distributed in classes of state or local importance, in which strict reserve, national park, special reserve and nature park are areas of state importance, while the rest of protected areas are of local importance. Some of those areas protected under the national legislation are also protected in accoradce with International Conventions and Agrements.

Based on the Nature Protection Act protected areas are managed by public institutions. Each national park and nature park is managed by a separate public institution established by the Government of the Republic of Croatia. Nature Protection Act has foreseen the possibilities of unified management of National Parks and Nature Parks (two or more areas), but also the possibility of establishing a public institution for the management of all protected areas of national importance, which is not currently in practice. The primary activities of public institutions concern the protection, maintenance and promotion of the protected area with the aim of protecting and preserving the authenticity of nature, ensuring an undisturbed course of natural processes and sustainable use of natural resources. Public institutions in the area administered are obliged to supervisie and implement the conditions and measures for the protection of nature and to participate in collection of data for the purpose of monitoring the state of conservation of nature.

Based on the Nature Protection Act protected areas are also intended for the visitation. Those activities has to be implemented in such way that they do not jeopardize their fundamental values, nor the nature protection. Visiting protected areas is permitted to everyone under the same conditions, but it can be limited of even forbidden if the visitation can jeopardize nature conservation as well as visitor safety.

Financial assets for the work of public institutions are provided from the state budget, budgets of local and regional governments, revenues from the use of protected natural areas, as well as income from fees and other sources identified by the Nature Protection Act and special regulations.

Table 3 The total amount of funds allocated for the protection of nature in the state budget in the currency kuna (the expenses for the employees of the competent ministry are not included)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Year | Nature protection Total | Financing source | | |
| **State budget funds** | **Subventions and grants** | **Loans** |
| 2008 | 82,690,770.35 | 62,503,541.57 | 20,187,228.78 | 0.00 |
| 2009 | 76,537,586.18 | 59,356,487.74 | 17,181,098.44 | 0.00 |
| 2010 | 63,763,946.86 | 58,878,489.18 | 4,885,457.68 | 0.00 |
| 2011 | 62,272,807.97 | 56,907,990.36 | 0.00 | 5,364,817.61 |
| 2012 | 67,607,295.00 | 46,272,882.54 | 3,160,935.52 | 18,173,476.94 |

Source: State Institute for Nature Protection (2014), “Analysis of the state of nature in the Republic

of Croatia for the period 2008-2012”, p. 417, available at:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/1gktiq2c7r3n4mz/AADOGmz4-eAes5xex9Xnbb_-a?dl=0> (Accessed on: June 27, 2016)[[9]](#endnote-9)

Financing nature protection in the Republic of Croatia is largely reliant on the State budget funds. A smaller portion of funding for nature protection comes from subventions and grants and loans as well as the budgets of regional and local governments. In the previous period, the protection of nature was actively funded by instruments of pre-accession funds and other international sources of funding, which were granted for the implementation of various program activities and projects. As can be seen from the Table 3 total funds for the protection of nature, which are separate from the state budget, in the period from 2008 to 2012 have declining trend. The decreasing trend was related to the proceeds of donations and financial assistance while the financing of nature protection increased only in the segment of financial loans. This trend indicates the increasing importance of the share of self-financing through visits to protected areas and the development of ancillary services while performing basic activities relating to the protection, maintenance and promotion of the protected area with the aim of protecting and preserving nature's origin, ensuring the smooth running of natural processes and sustainable use of natural resources.

**3.1 Visiting of the protected area**

Protected areas with its rich nature and beauty of the landscape, usually attract many visitors so they can be categorised as important tourist attractor which affects the overall tourism potential of a country. The protected areas in the categories of National Parks and Nature Parks strongly contribute to country's tourist score. Table 4 shows the number of tickets sold in National Parks and Nature Parks in the period from 2008 to 2012.

Table 4 Number of tickets sold/registrated visitors in National Parks and Nature Parks in period from 2008 to 2012

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Protected area** | **Year** | | | | | **Total** |
| **2008** | **2009** | **2010** | **2011** | **2012** |
| **NP Brijuni** | 180,276 | 162,644 | 145,152 | 156,549 | 150,943 | 795,584 |
| **NP Krka** | 694,785 | 650,423 | 668,027 | 683,739 | 732,999 | 3,429,973 |
| **NP Mljet** | 91,788 | 88,475 | 96,391 | 95,498 | 97,148 | 469,300 |
| **NP Plitvička jezera** | 948,891 | 939,747 | 962,322 | 1,083,451 | 1,157,019 | 5,091,430 |
| **NP Risnjak** | 18,308 | 17,846 | 13,356 | 15,864 | 16,359 | 81,733 |
| **NP Sjeverni Velebit** | 13,739 | 15,920 | 15,416 | 19,336 | 16,620 | 81,031 |
| **NP Paklenica** | 115,943 | 110,350 | 112,665 | 118,288 | 114,321 | 571,567 |
| **NP Kornati\*** | 10,811\* | 12,550\* | 13,622\* | 14,096\* | 13,641\* | 64,720\* |
| **Total NP** | **2,063,730** | **1,985,425** | **2,013,329** | **2,172,725** | **2,285,409** | **10,520,618** |
| **PP Biokovo** | 37,803 | 36,984 | 40,773 | 44,299 | 42,350 | 202,209 |
| **PP Kopački rit** | 36,814 | 34,850 | 30,195 | 32,599 | 28,756 | 163,214 |
| **PP Lastovsko otočje** | 20,694 | 26,346 | 28,130 | 32,730 | 31,196 | 139,096 |
| **PP Lonjsko polje** | 17,500 | 15,500 | 14,650 | 14,700 | 15,600 | 77,950 |
| **PP Papuk** | 7,166 | 6,615 | 6,244 | 5,627 | 6,508 | 32,160 |
| **PP Telaščica** | 107,959 | 97,149 | 97,277 | 105,497 | 97,565 | 505,447 |
| **PP Učka** | 1,913 | 1,435 | 1,563 | 2,654 | 2,173 | 9,738 |
| **PP Velebit** | 30,831 | 27,451 | 27,743 | 29,820 | 33,471 | 149,316 |
| **PP Vransko jezero** | 5,504 | 5,671 | 12,882 | 14,507 | 11,347 | 49,911 |
| **PP Žumberak-Samoborsko gorje** | 2,356 | 2,231 | 1,037 | 2,696 | 3,016 | 11,336 |
| **PP Medvednica** | 14,252 | 11,308 | 17,124 | 21,806 | 21,620 | 86,110 |
| **Total PP** | **282,792** | **265,540** | **277,618** | **306,935** | **293,602** | **1,426,487** |
| \* The visit is charged per boat/tourist vessel, not per person. | | | | | | |

Source: State Institute for Nature Protection (2014), “Analysis of the state of nature in the Republic

of Croatia for the period 2008-2012”, p. 328, available at:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/1gktiq2c7r3n4mz/AADOGmz4-eAes5xex9Xnbb_-a?dl=0> (Accessed on: June 27, 2016)

It can be seen that Kopački rit Nature Park is one of the most visited areas in the category of nature parks in the continental part of the Republic of Croatia. Lonjsko polje Nature Park and Papuk Nature Park as potential competitive destinations, have far less visitors than Kopački rit Nature Park.

Usually linked terminology to protected areas are nature base tourism and ecotourism. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) definition, ecotourism has some specific characteristics. Trips that are included under the term ecotourism are motivated by the desire for observation and enjoyment of nature, traditional and cultural values of a particular area of nature. Also, ecotourism is characterized by educational and interpretation features.

Eco-tourist services usually provide specialized tour operators who prefer to work with smaller groups of visitors, while their partners at the destination are mostly local businesses and small entrepreneurs. An important feature of ecotourism is that it supports the maintenance of nature areas because it consciously generated benefits to local residents through employment and the creation of new revenue.

Ecotourism supports organizations and managers of areas with the primary intention of supporting the protection of nature and its values, as well as enabling economic benefits to local communities. Ecotourism strongly contributes to increasing awareness of the need to preserve natural and cultural assets, both among locals and tourists. It also minimizes negative impacts on the natural, social and cultural environment (The British Ecotourism Market, UNWTO 2002)[[10]](#endnote-10).

Wetlands are also a part of the tourism experience. They represent one of the most productive world’s ecosystems, providing varies „ecosystem services“, as well as important opportunities for tourism and recreation. Tourism and recreation are also defined as ‘ecosystem services’ and has a great potential for local and national economy. People are usually attracted to wetlands because of their unique ecological values, aesthetic appeal and specific beauty of nature.

One of the most significant wetland area in Republic of Croatia is Kopački rit Nature Park, which is characterized by unique beauty and exceptional ecological values. The area of Kopački rit „also called the European Amazon, is situated in the central part of the Danube floodplain, between two important European rivers, the Drava and the Danube"[[11]](#endnote-11). Many populations of endangered and rare species inhabit its territory, and it is known for its rich ornithofauna in national and international circles. It is also seen as the most important fish hatchery in the middle Danaube.

Due to the exceptional natural values Kopački rit was in year 1993 included on the List of Wetlands of International Importance, under the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar)[[12]](#endnote-12). Also, due to the importance as a wetland habitat and habitat of a large number of birds, in 1986 it was included in the inventory of Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBA)[[13]](#endnote-13) in Europe.

Number of visitors in the Kopački rit Nature Park records a decreasing tendency that was recently stopped. It is important to note that the attendance by months is satisfactory because visitors come to the park in the period from April to October, which can provide a continuous source of income for most of the year.

Table 5 Number of visitors to Kopački rit Nature Park from 2009 to 2015 by quarters

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Year** | **I quarter** | **II quarter** | **III quarter** | **IV quarter** | **Total year** |
| **2009** | 524 | 20,587 | 8,231 | 5,508 | 34,850 |
| **2010** | 875 | 16,293 | 7,785 | 5,242 | 30,195 |
| **2011** | 964 | 18,007 | 9,103 | 4,525 | 32,599 |
| **2012** | 703 | 15,540 | 8,660 | 3,853 | 28,756 |
| **2013** | 543 | 12,294 | 9,819 | 3,938 | 26,594 |
| **2014** | 1,443 | 14,488 | 6,153 | 2,903 | 24,987 |
| **2015** | 947 | 14,836 | 9,202 | 4,851 | 29,836 |
| **Total:** | 5,999 | 112,045 | 58,953 | 30,820 | 207,817 |

Source: Archive of the Public Institution “Kopački rit Nature Park” – data for 2016.[[14]](#endnote-14)

1. **Research results**
   1. **Services differentiation**

Range of services offered in Kopački rit Nature Park consists of several combinations of different services such as panoramic view of Kopački rit, video presentation, multimedia exhibition, walk over the new boardwalk, transfer with the tourist train from the Visitor Centre to the quay, guided boat tour through the wetland, transfer with the tourist train back to the Visitor Centre and individual visit to Tikveš Castle Complex. It is also possible to take a train tour, amphibian tour or walks on bridges of Kopački rit. There are also several canoe tours, bird watching program, photo safari program and ranger junior program.

The mostly quoted motive for visiting Kopački rit Nature Park by respondents was enjoyment in landscape beauty and nature richness. They are slightly less interested in education about protected areas. Recreation in nature is mainly not motive for visiting. Following table presents respondents’ motive for visiting Kopački rit Nature Park. Respondents had opportunity to choose several answers.

Table 6 Respondents motive for visiting Kopački rit Nature Park

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Respondents motive for visiting | Respondents |
| Enjoyment in landscape beauty and nature richness | 255 |
| Education about protected areas | 91 |
| Recreation in nature | 29 |
| Something else | 45 |

Source: Authors

Consumed activities during respondents stay in Kopački rit Nature Park are mostly in accordance with visiting motives. Respondents have interest in taking a boat tour, walk over boardwalks and photographing nature, plants and animals.

Table 7 Respondents’ activities during their stay in Kopački rit Nature Park

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Respondents’ activities during their stay | Respondents |
| Boat tour | 269 |
| Walk over boardwalks | 249 |
| Visiting reception center Mali Sakadaš | 143 |
| Visiting castle Tikveš | 90 |
| Photographing nature, plants and animals | 156 |
| Recreation in nature (walking, running, driving bicycles) | 41 |
| Consumption in restaurants and café bars | 112 |
| Souvenirs shopping | 117 |

Source: Authors

According to that, creation of services offered in Nature Park should be focused on contents which will enable visitors to enjoy in beauty of nature and observe the landscape from water, air and land. That would enable visitors to experience beauty of special and unique environment that can be seen only in wetland such as Kopački rit which differs this nature park from majority of other protected areas in Republic of Croatia.

Respondents rated with high marks quality of selected and consumed programs during they stay in Kopački rit Nature Park (average 4.39).

Table 8 Respondents’ mark regarding quality of selected program in Kopački rit Nature Park

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Mark | Respondents |
| 5 | 149 |
| 4 | 96 |
| 3 | 29 |
| 2 | 2 |
| 1 | 2 |
| Without answer | 22 |
| Average mark: 4.39 | |

Source: Authors

Price and quality ratio is mostly satisfactory for majority of respondents. Nevertheless, 17.6% (53 respondents) regards that price and quality ratio is not adequate which shoud not be neglected and we suggest additional research regarding this subject.

Table 9 Price and quality ratio of selected program in Kopački rit Nature Park

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Price and quality ratio | Respondents |
| Optimal | 221 |
| Price is too high for that program quality | 41 |
| Price is not adequate for that program quality | 12 |
| Without answer | 26 |
| Total | 300 |

Source: Authors

Majority of respondents stay in Kopački rit Nature Park half day (54.4%) or one day (34.6%) which points out lack of content for longer stay and visitor’s perception of this nature park as destination for short excursions. This problem should definitely be a part of particular research which would emphasize it because that is definitely market potential for developing new range of services.

Arrangement of infrastructure for visitors (boardwalks, info center, parking etc.) respondents rated with rather high mark which is in average 4.62.

Table 10 Respondents mark of infrastructure arrangement for visitors in Kopački rit Nature Park

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Mark | Respondents |
| 5 | 200 |
| 4 | 74 |
| 3 | 12 |
| 2 | 2 |
| 1 | 1 |
| Without answer | 11 |
| Average mark: 4.62 | |

Source: Authors

Objections regarding range of services stated by respondents in open questions are lack of translation for foreigners, length of boat tour, differences in range of services offered in Kopački rit Nature Park during the week and in weekends, lack of mobile application which can be used as tour guide in nature park and insufficiency of directions on highway and city of Osijek for directing visitors towards Kopački rit.

* 1. **Personnel differentiation**

Personnel differentiation means that companies can gain a strong competitive advantage through having better-trained people. Kotler et al. (2006: 427) state that personnel differentiation demands careful personnel selection process and high quality education, especially for personnel which is in direct contact with customers.

Respondents rated personnel professionalism with high marks (average 4.73). Although, in open questions there are suggestions for improving several positions especially in reception center.

Table 11 Personnel professionalism in Kopački rit Nature Park

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Mark | Respondents |
| 5 | 231 |
| 4 | 45 |
| 3 | 12 |
| 2 | 0 |
| 1 | 2 |
| Without answer | 10 |
| Average mark: 4.73 | |

Source: Authors

* 1. **Image differentiation**

Kotler et al. (2006: 428) defines image differentiation as buyers’ different respond to company and brand images. Identity comprises the ways that a company aims to identify or position itself or its product, whereas image is the way the public perceives the company or its products. Image is affected by many factors beyond the company’s control. An effective image establishes the product’s character and value proposition; it conveys this character in a distinctive way; and it delivers emotional power beyond a mental image. Companies image cannot be established trough one campaign in a short period of time. It is long term process which demands commitment and consistence in all communication vehicles.

Table 12 Source of information about Kopački rit Nature Park

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Source of information | Respondents |
| Internet | 139 |
| Printing media | 76 |
| Radio orTV | 90 |
| Brochures | 70 |
| Friends recommendations | 167 |

Source: Authors

Internet and recommendation from friends were mostly stated by respondents as information source about Kopački rit Nature Park. They had possibility to choose several answers offered. We can conclude from respondents’ answers that is crucial to have satisfied visitors because they are one of the major information sources for potential visitors in future. Internet is second important source of information so web page must be accurate, precise and if possible, interactive.

Availability of information materials is rated with marks so we may conclude that it is on adequate level.

Table 13 Availability of information materials about the Kopački rit Nature Park

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Mark | Respondents |
| 5 | 162 |
| 4 | 80 |
| 3 | 29 |
| 2 | 6 |
| 1 | 1 |
| Without answer | 22 |
| Average mark: 4.42 | |

Source: Authors

Respondents also answered on question about their intensions to put their impressions on one of the social networks. Almost half of them (48.5%) answered positively on that question and stated that it will be Facebook. This is important information because of friend’s recommendation as information source for potential visitors in the future.

According to Kotler et al. (2006: 428) a difference selected for communication to public is worth establishing if satisﬁes several important criteria. It must be important meaning that difference delivers a highly valued beneﬁt to a sufﬁcient number of buyers, distinctive, superior, preemptive which means that difference cannot be copied easily by competitors, affordable and proﬁtable.

Figure 1 Kopački rit Nature Park logo

logo1

Source: Kopački rit Nature Park, available at: http://pp-kopacki-rit.hr/mediaen.html (Accessed on: July 19, 2016)[[15]](#endnote-15)

Kopački rit Nature Park has image of white-tailed eagle on logo which is their trademark and symbol. Same motive is on promotional materials which ensures consistency in image application through which is Kopački rit Nature Park building its image.

During whole calendar year, numerous events are being organized, especially on important dates related to nature protection. Nevertheless, except on Open day for visitors, there are no significant events which attract higher number of visitors in Kopački rit Nature Park.The number of visitors in Kopački rit Nature Park has no significant seasonal oscillations, except winter period. Visiting season is rather long compared to destinations on the cost. Therefore, more events should be organized and adequately promoted during whole year in Kopački rit Nature Park which would position this nature park as attractive destination with wide range of services offered to visitors.

1. **. Discussion and conclusion**

Tourism as economic activity and its income, significantly contributes to economy of Republic Croatia in total. Therefore is important to understand that all participants in process of creation tourist services have to act in a way which will preserve and increase achieved tourist results. Global trends are pointing out that tourism in spite of problems and recession, finds ways of keeping growth figures. Today tourists are looking for new destinations and spend more time outside exploring different and beautiful landscapes. Tourists’ habits and expectations are changing, so therefore tourist services providers have to redesign range of services and constantly coordinate business policies according to actual changes in touristic demand.

Basic questions are what Republic of Croatia can do to maintain present position on the market of touristic services, which are its competitive advantages and what are the areas that may provide opportunities for potential growth. The answer lays, among other things, in abundance of national natural heritage which already to a certain extent, participate in achieved touristic results.

According to Nature Protection Act, protected areas are managed by public institutions. The primary activities of public institutions concern the protection, maintenance and promotion of the protected area with the aim of protecting and preserving the authenticity of nature, ensuring an undisturbed course of natural processes and sustainable use of natural resources. Among other principal activities there is controling the implementation of the nature protection conditions and measures in the area administered and participation in data collection in order to monitor the state of nature conservation (monitoring).

One of the activities, which public institutions deal with, relates to development of the visiting system. That implies the possibility of generating direct and indirect income from visiting system, for both them and the local community. It needs to be noted that management structures of protected areas need to respect certain limitation regarding using space.Their decision must be consistent with the nature protection objectives and must not be subordinated to the pressure of making a profit at the expense of preserving the fundamental phenomena and values of protected areas, nor adversely affect them. Despite certain limitations, there is still scope for more active contribution of protected areas in overall tourist result, especially by efficient usage of modern technology and better application of marketing knowledge. That can offer an alternative, as well as completely new solutions.

Differentiation as a way of achieving competitive advantage is already present in all protected areas as touristic destinations. Nature parks are differentiated by elements and specific landscape that characterize each nature park and makes it different from similar touristic destinations. Creating range of services according to specific features of Nature Park and visitors’ motives and expectations is of great importance. Range of services offered in Nature Park must be adequately promoted and communicated to gain recognisability and appropriate image.

Kopački rit Nature Park has image of specific wetland area. In continental part of Republic Croatia Lonjsko polje Nature Park and Papuk Nature Park are potential competitive destinations. Currently, this two destinations does not have significant number of visitors in past several years.

Basic elements of differentiation strategy for Kopački rit Nature Park should be further investments in boardwalks, boat tours and canoe tours. That will differentiate this nature park from protected areas in nearby as touristic destination and complete range of services provided according to visitors’ motives and expectations. It can also have positive impact on price and quality ratio offering more for the same price.

There is one important issue that has to be pointed out as potential problem. Kopački rit Nature Park is perceived as destination for half day or one day excursions so we recommend further research regarding that issue.

**References**

1. Ansoff, J. (1965). Corporate Strategy. New York: McGraw-Hill.

2. Buble, M. et al. (1997). Strategijski management. Split: Faculty of Economics.

3. Kotler, P. (2001). Upravljanje marketingom – analiza, planiranje, primjena i kontrola. Zagreb: MATE.

4. Kotler, P., Wong, V., Saunders, J., Armstrong, G. (2006). Osnove marketinga. Zagreb: Zagreb School of Economics and Management, MATE.

5. Pearce II, A. J., Robinson, Jr., B. R. (2000). Formulation, Implementation and Control of Competitive Strategy. 7th edition. Boston, MA: Irwin McGraw-Hill.

6. Porter, E. M. (1985). Competitive Advantage. New York: The Free Press.

7. Porter, E. M. (1990). Competitive strategy: Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors. New York: The Free Press.

8. Renko, N. (2009). Strategije Marketinga. Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak d.o.o.

**KREIRANJE KONKURENTSKE PREDNOSTI U PARKOVIMA PRIRODE KROZ DIFERENCIJACIJU**

**SAŽETAK**

Diferencijacija je jedan od načina stjecanja održive konkurentske prednosti odnosno ostvarivanja tržišne pozicije koja gospodarskom subjektu omogućava zadovoljiti potrebe potrošača bolje od konkurencije. Diferencijacija može biti kroz proizvod, usluge, osoblje i imidž.

Parkovi prirode su uz nacionalne parkove, stroge rezervate i posebne rezervate kategorije zaštićenih područja od državnog značenja. Parkovi prirode i nacionalni parkovi imaju izraziti potencijal u razvoju sustava posjećivanja ali imaju i obvezu održivog upavljanja ovim aktivnostima. Brojna ograničenja proizlaze iz zakonskih propisa i dokumenata upravljanja vezanih za zaštitu prirode. Osnovna zadaća je ipak zaštita i očuvanje prirodnih i krajobraznih vrijednosti te ekoloških obilježja.

Oblikovanje i provođenje aktivnosti posjećivanja koje kao dio turističkih usluga na tržištu pružaju Javne ustanove koje upravljaju zaštićenim područjima, također je specifično te se ove usluge mogu i moraju diferencirati na tržištu u odnosu na konkurenciju. Prihodi od turizma u strukturi prihoda parkova prirode će u budućnosti imati sve veći značaj kroz razvoj samofinanciranja i smanjenje ovisnosti o proračunskim sredstvima. Treba naglasiti da parkovi prirode pomažu i široj društvenoj zajednici kroz razvoj komplementarnih gospodarskih aktivnosti.

Ovaj rad se temelji na istraživanju provedenom u razdoblju od 16. 05. do 10.06.2016. u parku prirode Kopački rit koji je jedan od posjećenijih parkova prirode u Republici Hrvatskoj. U anketnom istraživanju među posjetiteljima je slučajnim odabirom anketirano 300 ispitanika. Rezultati istraživanja mogu biti korišteni kao prijedlog pri oblikovanju odgovarajućih proizvoda, usluga i promotivnih aktivnosti, osiguranja kvalitetne edukacije posjetitelja o prirodnim, povijesnim i kulturnim vrijednostima zaštićenog područja te minimiziranju utjecaja posjetitelja na prirodne resurse.

**Ključne riječi:** konkurentska prednost, parkovi prirode, diferencijacija, pozicioniranje

1. State Institute for Nature Protection (2016), “Protected areas in Croatia – national categories”, available at: http://www.dzzp.hr/eng/protected-areas/protected-areas-in-croatia/protected-areas-in-croatia-national-categories-1137.html (Accessed on: June 30, 2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Act on the Kopački rit Nature Park, Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia No. 45/99. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Kopački rit Nature Park, available at: http://pp-kopacki-rit.hr/oparku.html (Accessed on: July 05,2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Strategy and Action Plan for the Protection of Biological and Landscape Diversity of the Republic of Croatia, Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia No. 143/08. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2015), “Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Croatia” [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia No. 85/10, available at http://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2010\_07\_85\_2422.html (Accessed on: July 27, 2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The Nature Protection Act, Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia No. 80/13 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. International Union for Conservation of Nature (2008), “Definition of protected areas”, available at: http://www.iucn.org/theme/protected-areas/about (Accessed on: June 27, 2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. State Institute for Nature Protection (2014), “Analysis of the state of nature in the Republic of Croatia for the period 2008-2012”, p. 417, available at: https://www.dropbox.com/sh/1gktiq2c7r3n4mz/AADOGmz4-eAes5xex9Xnbb\_-a?dl=0 (Accessed on: June 27, 2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. UNWTO (2002), “The British Ecotourism Market”, available at: http://sdt.unwto.org/content/ecotourism-and-protected-areas (Accessed on: July 01, 2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Kopački rit Nature Park, available at: http://pp-kopacki-rit.hr/index-en.html (Accessed on: July 05,2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ramsar Sites Information Service (2007), “Nature Park Kopački rit”, available at: https://rsis.ramsar.org/ris/583 (Accessed on: July 05,2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. BirdLife International (2016), “Important Bird and Biodiversity Area factsheet: Alluvial wetlands of the River Danube”, available at: http://www.birdlife.org (Accessed on: 05/07/2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Archive of the Public Institution “Kopački rit Nature Park” – data for 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Kopački rit Nature Park, available at: http://pp-kopacki-rit.hr/mediaen.html (Accessed on: July 19, 2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-15)