HERITAGE INTERPRETATION AS A TOOL FOR BLENDING NATURE AND CULTURE FOR A MORE DIVERSE AND ATTRACTIVE TOURISM PRODUCT

(A Case-Study of a Nature Park in Southwest Bulgaria)

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Abstract

Interpretation of the natural and cultural heritage is gaining growing importance in both the efforts for heritage preservation and the planning of tourism development. In an inter-related and globally informed world, the supply of attractive services which answer the needs of tourists is challenging. The instrument set of heritage interpretation might be a solution to this problem. The present paper aims to demonstrate this opportunity in a practical setting. It uses the method of the case study to explore one such example in the southwest corner of Bulgaria where the Nature Park of Belasitsa is located. The analysis covers interpretive trails developed in that area, blending nature with culture, and shows as a result the feasibility of the heritage interpretation approach for a number of local development goals.

1. Introduction

The use of interpretation of the natural and cultural heritage for tourist and educational purposes exists since the early 20th century. Its foundations were laid by environmentalists and guides in the national parks of USA, followed by their colleagues in Canada and Great Britain. It wasn't until 1957 when Freeman Tilden, an American writer and admirer of nature, published his *Interpreting our Heritage.* That publication is still considered the primer of heritage interpretation worldwide.

The set of instruments of heritage interpretation has been successfully applied to both natural and cultural sites since those early days, adding value to

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the tourist perception and experience of a destination. It makes a tourist visit memorable and inspires recognition and respect to the region's values which, in its turn, helps the preservation of local natural and cultural heritage. In fact, there is a process of transposition and connection of the environment sustainability to human needs (Amoiradi & Stankova, 2020).

As a basis for modern and attractive tourism services, heritage interpretation was introduced to Southwest Bulgaria some 15 years ago. The first interpretive nature trails and exhibitions were developed for the two national parks of the area – Pirin and Rila. These included the Capercaillie and Rila Primrose Trails with a visitor center dedicated to these two globally significant species in the vicinity of the village of Dobarsko, Rila NP. In Pirin, a family of nature trails were developed around some villages with rural tourism potential – the Bear Trail, the Herbs Trail, Guests from the Past Trail and Forest Tale Trail.

Since then, heritage interpretation has been applied to a number of tourist initiatives in Southwest Bulgaria, including ones that link natural and cultural heritage. This paper presents interpretive trails developed in the Nature Park of Belasitsa.

2. Literature review

There are many definitions of heritage interpretation circling the public space in the present day, and all of them can be valid. This reflects the very nature of the term, as it involves personalization, attitudes, perceptions and emotions, allowing different *interpretations* of the definition.

The 'father' of this phenomenon, Freeman Tilden, describes heritage interpretation as an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information (Tilden, 2008, p. 16). According to many authors, including Sam H. Ham, interpretation must be seen mainly as an approach to communication which makes it personal and meaningful (Ham, 1992, p. 3). The first examples of its application come from the nature conservation sector which is why many definitions are strongly related to natural heritage. For example, Aldrige quotes interpretation as a tool to promote nature conservation (Aldrige, 1975, p. 6). In the meantime, the principles and instruments of interpretation have spread to the cultural sector where we find the definition of ICOMOS referring to a range of activities aiming to heighten public awareness and enhance understanding of cultural heritage site (ICOMOS, 2008, p. 4).

All authors and organizations work, more or less, with the first six principles of interpretation introduced by Tilden (Tilden, 2008, p.18):

1. Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.

2. Information, as such, is not Interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However all interpretation includes information.

3. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.

4. The chief aim of Interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.

5. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.

6. Interpretation addressed to children (say up to the age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate program.

One comprehensible definition of interpretation sets it as the translation of factual and/or scientific information about the natural and cultural heritage to a language that is interesting and understandable to the public (Pirin Tourism Forum, 2020, p. 65). This is achieved by telling stories each of which has a beginning, a plot, development, culmination and a finale. Each story has a precise topic related to heritage and a message which visitors will take away. The narrative is cleared of all terminology and where this is not possible – the content is explained and re-told. Informal behavior and language are applied; the sense of humor helps a lot. Group dynamics are monitored and managed non-intrusively; the public takes part in the presentation. The instrument set of interpretation is applied to planning and implementation.

The instrument set of interpretation can include, as an example: questions & answers, competitions, treasure hunts, games, quizzes, puzzles, charades, dramatizations and puppet theatres. The *Questions and answers* instrument can be applied to every visitor individually, to the whole group; it can raise a challenge of who will be the first to give the right answer or as many answers as possible. *Competitions* (individual and in groups) can involve who will be the first to see one element of the general picture; who will find the biggest number of parameters set in advance. The *Treasure hunt* is a specific type of competition which can be used in a huge variety of forms – from children's games of searching for hidden objects in a room or the mobile app of WORDZ, to the recognizing of

specific architectural elements in old houses or churches. *Games* also come in various forms – from adaptations of children's games to specially developed such; be it physical or intellectual. The q*uizzes and puzzles* can be solved or invented by the public. *Dramatization* instruments include roleplay games, development of scripts, shows, including personifications of objects, plants and animals. And finally, *Puppet theatres* are the same as dramatizations but with the use of preliminary prepared 'characters'.

3. Methodology

The method used for this research is the case study as described and analyzed by Starman (2013), i.e. as an examination of complexity in a real-life situation, with two phases – of description and analysis. Each research has a subject – the individual case or a small group of cases that will be studied and an object or research area – the wider context in which the case evolves. The application of the method starts with the selection of such an object (person, family, organization or community) where a problem of interest to the researcher exists. Then the subject / the case is selected not as a representative sample but because it is outstanding, contrasting or unique and may bring substantial changes to the research area.

The method has been selected as it proposes a number of advantages, relevant to the problem of interest (Starman, 2013, p. 36). It has a higher conceptual validity over quantitative methods, evading the risk of combining different cases in one sample just to make that sample representative. It can assess qualitatively complex events and numerous variables, at the same time deriving new hypotheses. During the process, the method can detect and examine the operation of causal mechanisms with their complex causal relations. The fact that the method is based on real-life events and phenomena is often considered its main advantage for researchers.

4. Applied interpretation issues - the case of Belasitsa

Belasitsa is the youngest nature park in Bulgaria, established in 2007 at the initiative of environmentalists and local communities. It covers the northern slopes of Belasitsa Mountain which runs from east to west along the Bulgarian-Greek border before entering North Macedonia. Its highest peak is Mt. Radomir at 2029 m. above sea level but the best known is Mt. Toumba (1880 m. a.s.l.) where the borders of the three countries meet.

The total territory of the Belasitsa NP is 11,732 ha and it includes the lands of eight villages located at the foot of the mountain (Directorate of Belasitsa

Nature Park, n.d.). One of those is the village of Kolarovo where the Directorate of Belasitsa NP is located, together with its Visitor Center. The main reason for designating this protected territory is the preservation of valuable habitats and centuries-old forests, including the largest source of sweet chestnut on the Balkans. The latter is the symbol of the Park and the subject of the annual Chestnut Festival which is organized here every second week-end of October.

Since its very establishment, Belasitsa NP started working with the local communities of the eight adjacent villages and also the municipal center of Petrich Town, for the joint development of sustainable forms of tourism. It promoted broadly the use of heritage interpretation to shape quality tourism services, and that is also one of the priorities in the Management Plan of the Park developed in 2013 (Ministry of Environment and Waters, n.d., p. 224). The Directorate initiated and secured funding for the first in Bulgaria 'family' of interpretive tourist trails in the vicinity of the villages.

The first trails to be developed were the result of a project entitled *Conservation of Globally Significant Biodiversity of the Belasitsa Mountains through Involvement of Local Communities in Ecotourism Development* (Pashova, 2018, p. 529), funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Global Environmental Facility through the Small Grants Programme. It was implemented by the Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation in the period 2008-2009 and included the development and promotion of four thematic trails. The Friends Trail starts at Belaitsa Hut, about 7 km up in the mountain from the town of Petrich. It is dedicated to the forests of Belasitsa which are the best friends of local people. The Ants Trail is located a little higher up in the mountain, starting at Kongur Hut, 16 km from Petrich. Dedicated to the unique social structure and biology of the red wood ants. The Life of the Chestnut Trail is centered around the symbol of the mountain, the sweet chestnut and starts from the village of Kolarovo. The neighbouring village of Yavornitsa is the starting point for the fourth trail, the Butterflies and Flowers of Belasitsa Trail which presents the huge diversity of species of butterflies in the Nature Park.

Two more interpretive trails were funded in the period 2011-2013 by a project entitled *En-Act: Environmental Actions for the Promotion of Alternative Forms of Tourism* under the 1st Call of the European Territorial Cooperation Programme Greece - Bulgaria 2007-2013 (Directorate of Belasitsa Nature Park, n.d.). They were implemented by the Directorate of Belasitsa Nature Park in partnership with the Municipality of Vissaltia (ex- Municipality of Nigrita) acting as Lead Partner, the Greek Mountaineering Club of Nigrita, the Centre for the Development of Rhodopes (located at Smolyan) and the Serres Chamber of

Commerce and Industry. One of the trails - Secrets of Water Trail - was located close to Samouilovo Village, with possible alternative route starting from Kamena Village. It was dedicated to water as a source of life, not only for local people but for all humanity. The other one - Travel through History Trail – had its starting point at the village of Kolarovo.

At about the same time, the Directorate of the Nature Park managed the development of its two latest interpretive trails, within the frame of the project *Implementation of Activities for the Management of Belasitsa Nature Park,* funded by the European Regional Development Fund and the Bulgarian Government through the Environment 2007 – 2013 Operational Programme (Directorate of Belasitsa Nature Park, n.d.). The Colorful Tale Trail, starting at Samouilovo Village, was dedicated to the great diversity of flowers in the mountain of Belasitsa. The last trail, entitled Woodpeckers – Keepers of the Forest Trail, near Gabrene Village, was focused on this quite interesting bird species which is often under-rated.

There are also two specialized cycling trails in the adjacent territories of Belasitsa NP and marked paths to all the waterfalls of Belasitsa Mountain which are especially attractive in late spring and the summer. The main long hiking route along the ridge starts from the town of Petrich and leads to Mt. Toumba, with several cross-cuts to the villages below.

All nature trails make references to the anthropogenic activities in the region and local cultural heritage. However, it is the Travel through History Trail that has been selected to form the core of this case study (the case itself) since it is the one where nature and culture really blend together with the means of interpretation.

The trail follows the route from the village of Kolarovo to Demir Kapiya Pass which is extremely suitable for presenting the topic about cultural and historical heritage of the region and its connection to the natural setting. First of all, the village of Kolarovo is one of the oldest settlements in the region. Furthermore, the trail partly covers the cart road through the mountains used in the past. The end point of the trail is the pass Demir Kapiya, a historical place where important events happened in the past. Historically, it was the main artery connecting Bulgarian and Greek territories, later an important section of the Iron Curtain, and now a point of connection between two friendly nations again.

The trail takes between 8 and 9 hours in both directions and the recommended time for visits is between June 1st and September 30th. It is aimed at visitors who are aged 18+ and have relatively good physical status as Belasitsa is a steep and challenging mountain. The programme includes information

presented on boards, visualization and some games. Information is structured in sections, connected to special stops along the route. The starting point introduces the region, its history and nature, and the route itself.

Stop 1 is related to Prehistory. It presents the first settlements in the area of Belasitsa, based on the example of Promahon-Topolnitsa site. The interpreter uses drawings of a prehistoric house (reconstruction) and a modern clay house to make a comparison and to introduce the value of living closer to natural environment and using natural materials. A special activity is offered to visitors entitled *Pictures tell us a story* during which the guide shows the pictures of prehistoric artifacts from Promahon-Topolnitsa village (different tools, pottery, clothes) and the visitors must guess what the objects are and what were they used for in the past.

The location of Stop 2 is chosen to be at Chukata Fortress remains. It presents the history and use of the place from Thracian till Medieval times. The interpreter interacts with the group through questions and answers in order to describe the former fortification.

Stop 3 is dedicated to the so-called Dolyan Fair and gets the visitors acquainted with this huge event in the period 16th-19th century close to the village of Dolene. The visitors play a role-game entitled *Market Day at the Dolyan Fair* where some are sales-people and the others are customers supposed to find out what were the goods that were sought and supplied at that historic time, describing the peculiarities of everyday life in the region and how close to nature it was back then.

The topic of Stop 4 is *What did local people use to eat*. It presents the menu of local population historically and stresses on the fact that they actually used to eat healthy natural products, unlike us modern people today. The interpreter may challenge the group to prepare a virtual dish out of available local products.
Stop 5 introduces traditional local practices of everyday life. The interpreter speaks of some celebrations and customs which were very important in the life of local people and were again closely related to nature and natural cycles. The challenge to visitors at this point is to learn how to make a wreath, recognizing local plants and their meanings and use in practice.

The end point of the trail is located at Demir Kapiya Pass, almost on the ridge of the mountain. The interpreter tells the story of the role of this important communication and transport corridor in some important historic events. Visitors may be given some fun tasks on the way back, e.g. develop a word game for local names or treasure-hunt for edible ingredients in the forest.

Along the route, there is also a set of nine information and interpretation boards whose purpose is to enrich the experience of the visitors and reinforce the inter-connection of cultural and natural heritage of the region.

The development of the Travel through History Trail was a result a participatory process managed by the Directorate of Belasitsa Nature Park and following a model that was applied to all initiatives for sustainable tourism development in the area since the very beginning. First, an inventory was made of all local tourism resources. Collected and systemized information was analyzed and tourism potential was evaluated using independent expert assessments.

At the next phase, participatory planning was applied, involving local stakeholders – the *Chitalishta,* guesthouse owners, village mayors, folklore performers, craftspeople and others. Series of joint workshops were organized, following some targeted training for the participants in tourism, customer care, guiding and – of course – heritage interpretation. At these workshops, the local tourism initiatives were planned using various interactive methods, e.g. brain-storming, method of the three ideas, group ranking and others.

The trails were physically constructed with the help of external contractors and the funding from various projects, while marketing was accomplished in cooperation with partners such as tourism and environmental NGOs, travel agents, media, etc. Since the official 'opening' of the Travel through History Trail, almost 1/3 of the visits to the park have included it, although 90% of visitors have not gone to the final point as it is quite physically demanding. The NP Directorate is offering a shorter version which a growing number of visitors show interest of. There has been an additional benefit for local people showing greater interest to their own history and history interpretation has proven also to facilitate delicate cross-border relations with both neighbouring countries.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The selected case study shows that heritage interpretation can be successfully applied as a tool blending the natural and cultural heritage of a region. Moreover, this blend can serve as a basis for contemporary, attractive and marketable tourism services and products. In a region such as Belasitsa which was a no-visit border region for most of the 20th century, both natural and cultural

heritage have remained well-preserved and can be maintained in that status through the development of sustainable local businesses and tourism in particular.

The existence of an institution such as the Directorate of the Nature Park that can serve as a motor for local development, is a big advantage, as are the active members of the local community. However, it is the development of quality additional tourist services answering the expectations of present-day tourists that is the key to success

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