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Title:

The Economic Impact of Hiking Tourism in the Peaks of the Balkans Region

Abstract:

Hiking tourism is often seen as a powerful tool for economic development in rural areas, and several attempts to harvest this potential have been undertaken in the Western Balkans. To quantify the actual impact, however, remains a challenge. This pilot study unveils a framework for measuring economic effects of the 192-kilometer Peaks of the Balkans (PoB) trail, weaving through Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro. Adapting Hubert Job's Value-Added Analysis (2005), the study employed a double-pronged approach consisting of a hikers count by both sensors and surveys and a comprehensive quantitative survey of 222 hikers during the 2023 season. Extrapolating the data collected during limited time frames to the entire hiking season of 2023, the study suggests roughly 20,000 annual hikers traversing the PoB trail. The survey revealed a high standard deviation in daily expenditure, averaging at a total of 70-75€ per hiker per day, with a breakdown favoring accommodation costs over those for food and beverages, guiding services, and other expenses, during an average 8 days on the trail. Although several socio-demographic groups were observed, a main target group of individual travelers between the ages of 26 and 40 with a middle-class annual income was identified. Despite some methodological limitations, this study introduces an integrated methodology for measuring expenditures, target group specifics, and behavioral patterns of hikers on the trail, allowing for assessments of the economic impact on the region; an approach that may well be transferred to studying the economic impact of other long-distance hiking trails, especially in emerging destinations.

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Keywords:

long-distance hiking trail; economic impact; emerging destinations; Western Balkans; outdoor and adventure tourism