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# Determinants of Conflict Management Effectiveness in Protected Area Tourism: A Governance-Based Framework from the Balkans

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## Abstract:

*Tourism development in protected areas represents a complex governance challenge, as it simultaneously aims to support conservation objectives, stimulate local economies, and improve community well-being. These multiple and often competing goals frequently generate conflicts among key stakeholders, particularly between protected area authorities, tourism operators, and local communities. This paper examines conflict management in tourism destinations located within protected areas, with a specific focus on the Balkan region as a post-socialist and rapidly developing tourism context. The study adopts a qualitative research design based on an extensive review of academic literature and a comparative discussion of selected case studies from Serbia, Albania, and Montenegro. The analysis identifies the main drivers of conflict, including centralized governance structures, unequal distribution of tourism benefits, limited stakeholder participation, and weak regulatory enforcement. The findings suggest that conflicts in protected area tourism are primarily governance-related rather than tourism-induced. The paper argues that community-based tourism, environmental justice principles, and collaborative governance mechanisms play a critical role in preventing and managing conflicts. By integrating theoretical perspectives with qualitative case evidence, the study contributes to the literature on sustainable tourism and destination management and provides practical implications for policymakers and protected area managers in emerging tourism regions.*

**Keywords:** Community participation, Conflict management, Protected areas, Stakeholder governance, Sustainable tourism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Protected areas have become central to global tourism development strategies due to their high ecological, cultural, and landscape value. National parks, nature reserves, and conservation areas increasingly attract tourists seeking nature-based and experiential travel, positioning protected areas as key drivers of regional economic development. However, tourism in protected areas is inherently conflict-prone. Conservation objectives often impose restrictions on land use and resource access, while tourism development introduces new economic actors, infrastructure pressures, and environmental impacts. These dynamics frequently place local communities, protected area authorities, and tourism investors in competing and sometimes adversarial positions. Conflicts in protected area tourism are not a recent phenomenon. Historically, many protected areas were established through top-down approaches that excluded or marginalized local populations, generating long-term social tensions. In recent decades, the shift toward

sustainable tourism has highlighted the importance of stakeholder participation, equity, and governance as essential conditions for balancing conservation and development goals. Nevertheless, empirical evidence suggests that conflicts persist, particularly in regions undergoing economic transition, institutional reform, and rapid tourism growth. The Balkan region represents a particularly relevant context for examining tourism-related conflicts in protected areas. As a post-socialist region, the Balkans are characterized by centralized governance legacies, evolving property rights, limited institutional capacity, and increasing pressure to develop tourism as a tool for economic growth and European integration. Protected areas in countries such as Serbia, Albania, and Montenegro have experienced rising tourism demand, often without adequate participatory planning or conflict management mechanisms. This has resulted in tensions over land use, benefit distribution, infrastructure development, and the role of local communities in decision-making processes. Despite a growing body of international literature on tourism conflicts and protected area governance, there is a notable gap in region-specific analyses that integrate theoretical frameworks with qualitative case evidence from the Balkans. Existing studies often focus either on global case comparisons or on isolated national experiences, limiting their ability to capture shared structural challenges across the region. Moreover, conflicts are frequently treated as isolated problems rather than as symptoms of broader governance failures. The aim of this paper is to address this gap by analyzing conflict management in tourism destinations located within protected areas, with a specific focus on the Balkan region. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How does governance quality influence conflict management effectiveness in protected area tourism destinations?

RQ2. To what extent does stakeholder participation contribute to conflict reduction?

RQ3. How does benefit-sharing equity affect conflict management outcomes?

RQ4. What role does regulatory effectiveness play in improving conflict management effectiveness?

RQ5. How does conflict management effectiveness contribute to sustainable tourism development?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to tourism governance literature through the development of an integrated conceptual model capable of supporting both theoretical advancement and practical policy implementation.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Tourism Development and Conflict in Protected Areas**

Protected areas have increasingly become strategic spaces for tourism development, conservation financing, regional development and community livelihood diversification. In contemporary tourism systems, national parks, nature reserves, biosphere reserves and other protected landscapes are no longer understood only as conservation spaces, but also as socio-ecological destinations where biodiversity protection, visitor experience, local livelihoods and institutional governance interact. This dual function creates opportunities but also generates tensions, particularly when tourism growth is not accompanied by inclusive planning, transparent governance and equitable benefit distribution. Recent literature shows that tourism in protected areas produces both positive and negative socio-economic outcomes for local communities. In their systematic review, Thapa, King, Banhalmi-Zakar, and Diedrich (2022) found that nature-based tourism in protected areas can create employment, local business opportunities and

income, but it can also generate costs such as price inflation, cultural disruption, unequal access to benefits and conflict over resource use. These findings are important because they demonstrate that tourism impacts are not automatically positive; rather, their effects depend on the governance arrangements through which tourism is planned, regulated and distributed. The post-pandemic period has further increased the relevance of protected area tourism. Nature-based and outdoor tourism became more attractive after COVID-19, as visitors increasingly searched for open, low-density and environmentally meaningful destinations. However, this trend has intensified pressure on fragile ecosystems and on local communities located close to protected areas. Sharma, Thomas, and Paul (2021) argue that the recovery of tourism after COVID-19 requires more resilient and sustainable models, rather than a return to volume-driven growth. In protected areas, this means that tourism development must be evaluated not only through visitor numbers or revenue, but also through ecological limits, social acceptance and community well-being. Conflicts in protected area tourism are often connected to land-use restrictions, access to resources, unequal tourism benefits and lack of local participation. Communities living inside or near protected areas may experience restrictions on construction, grazing, farming, hunting, forest use or other traditional livelihood activities. If tourism revenues are captured mainly by external investors, park authorities or urban-based businesses, local people may perceive tourism and conservation as external projects imposed upon them. This perception can reduce support for conservation and increase resistance to tourism regulation. The literature increasingly interprets these conflicts as governance problems rather than as unavoidable outcomes of tourism. Governance quality determines whether tourism becomes a mechanism of cooperation or a source of conflict. Bichler (2021) emphasizes that residents should not be treated as passive beneficiaries of tourism governance, but as active actors whose knowledge, interests and legitimacy are essential for destination governance. Similarly, Panagiotopoulou, Stratigea, and Somarakis (2025) highlight that multi-stakeholder frameworks are central to sustainable destination development because they enable coordination, negotiation and adaptive responses to complex destination challenges. For protected areas, this governance perspective is particularly important. Tourism development is embedded in regulatory systems, conservation priorities, property rights, local expectations and institutional responsibilities. If these systems are fragmented or centralized, conflicts are more likely to intensify. Conversely, when governance systems are transparent, participatory and accountable, tourism conflicts can be transformed into negotiation processes that support both conservation and development objectives.

## **2.2 Stakeholder Governance and Participatory Planning**

Stakeholder governance has become a core concept in sustainable tourism research because tourism destinations involve multiple actors with different interests, resources and degrees of power. In protected areas, relevant stakeholders include local residents, protected area authorities, tourism operators, municipal institutions, national ministries, environmental NGOs, visitors, investors and destination management organizations. The interaction among these stakeholders determines whether tourism development is perceived as legitimate, fair and sustainable. Recent studies argue that stakeholder participation should move beyond symbolic consultation toward meaningful involvement in decision-making. Al Mahrizi (2024), in his analysis of tourism planning and stakeholder participation, shows that hierarchical planning systems often limit the real influence of communities and private actors, even when formal consultation

mechanisms exist. This is particularly relevant for post-socialist and centralized governance contexts, where policy documents may refer to participation, but decisions remain concentrated in public institutions. Participation contributes to conflict management through several mechanisms. First, it improves procedural justice because affected stakeholders are given the opportunity to express concerns and influence decisions. Second, it improves the quality of planning because local knowledge can help identify environmental risks, cultural sensitivities and livelihood needs. Third, it builds trust among stakeholders, reducing suspicion and resistance. Sarhan, Albrecht, and Ramkissoon (2025) argue that collaborative governance can strengthen community participation in tourism and conservation by combining formal institutions with informal local initiatives. Their study underlines that participation is not only a technical planning tool, but also a relational process based on trust, legitimacy and shared responsibility. In protected area tourism, participatory governance can take different forms, including advisory councils, co-management boards, public hearings, community tourism committees, participatory mapping, stakeholder forums and benefit-sharing agreements. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms depends on whether they have real decision-making influence. If stakeholder forums are merely consultative and do not affect policy outcomes, they may increase frustration rather than reduce conflict. Therefore, meaningful participation requires institutional mandates, transparency, representation and feedback mechanisms. The Balkan region provides a useful context for examining stakeholder governance because many protected areas still reflect centralized governance traditions. In such contexts, local communities may lack experience with formal participation, while public institutions may lack incentives or capacity to share decision-making power. Matović et al. (2025), comparing sustainable tourism governance in protected areas, emphasize that governance frameworks shape tourism outcomes by influencing stakeholder coordination and institutional responsiveness. This supports the argument that conflict management depends not only on the presence of stakeholders, but also on the quality of relationships among them. Stakeholder governance theory therefore provides a strong foundation for the present study. It suggests that effective conflict management in protected area tourism requires governance systems that recognize stakeholder diversity, address power asymmetries and institutionalize participation. Without such mechanisms, tourism development may intensify existing inequalities and generate resistance from local communities.

### **2.3 Environmental Justice and Benefit-Sharing**

Environmental justice has become increasingly important in protected area tourism research because it focuses on the fairness of environmental decisions, the distribution of costs and benefits, and the recognition of local rights and identities. The concept is especially relevant in protected areas, where conservation rules may restrict local livelihoods while tourism development generates revenue that may not be fairly shared. Environmental justice is commonly understood through three dimensions: distributive justice, procedural justice and recognition justice. Distributive justice refers to the fair allocation of benefits and costs. In tourism, this concerns who benefits from tourism income, employment and infrastructure, and who bears the costs of congestion, restrictions, environmental degradation and cultural change. Procedural justice concerns participation and transparency in decision-making. Recognition justice refers to the respect of local identity, traditional knowledge, cultural values and customary rights. Peng, He, Shen, Zhao, and Armatas (2023) applied an environmental justice lens to tourism-related environmental policy in the Erhai Lake Basin, China, showing that

stakeholders perceive ecological restoration and tourism regulation differently depending on whether they experience protection, loss or exclusion. Their findings demonstrate that environmental policies can produce social conflict when affected groups perceive decisions as unfair or insufficiently participatory. This is highly relevant for protected area tourism because conservation measures and tourism regulations are often experienced differently by local residents, businesses and authorities. Benefit-sharing is one of the most important practical mechanisms for addressing distributive justice. Tourism can contribute to local livelihoods through employment, entrepreneurship, local supply chains, community funds and infrastructure. However, if benefits are concentrated among external investors or a small local elite, tourism may reproduce inequalities. Thapa et al. (2022) show that although nature-based tourism can provide socio-economic benefits to local communities, these benefits are not always evenly distributed. The review emphasizes that social costs such as cultural disruption, unequal benefit access and conflict must be considered alongside economic gains. Recent studies on community-based wildlife tourism also show that tourism can contribute to equity only when local communities have meaningful control over resources and revenues. Van Megen and colleagues (2024) examine community-based wildlife tourism in South Africa through an environmental justice framework and highlight the importance of equitable land management and structural benefits for local communities. This literature is important because it shows that tourism cannot be considered sustainable if it does not address historical and structural injustices. In the context of Balkan protected areas, benefit-sharing is a central issue. Tourism may generate growth in visitor numbers and private investment, but local communities may still perceive limited benefits if they are excluded from planning, if employment opportunities are seasonal and low-paid, or if tourism infrastructure does not support local needs. For this reason, benefit-sharing should be analyzed not only as an economic mechanism but as a governance instrument. Fair benefit distribution can increase community support, reduce opposition and strengthen conservation legitimacy.

#### **2.4 Community-Based Tourism and Local Empowerment**

Community-based tourism (CBT) is widely discussed as a pathway toward more inclusive and sustainable tourism development. CBT emphasizes local participation, community ownership, cultural preservation, empowerment and benefit-sharing. In protected areas, CBT is particularly relevant because communities often live close to conservation resources and are directly affected by tourism and environmental regulation. The literature suggests that CBT can reduce conflict when it creates tangible benefits and strengthens community agency. Community involvement in tourism enterprises, guiding services, accommodation, local food production, handicrafts and cultural interpretation can connect tourism revenues directly to local livelihoods. This can increase support for conservation because communities perceive protected areas not only as spaces of restriction, but also as sources of opportunity. However, recent CBT literature also warns against romanticizing community participation. CBT initiatives may fail when communities lack capacity, when decision-making is dominated by elites, or when projects depend too heavily on external donors. In such cases, CBT can become symbolic rather than transformative. Gayo (2025), in a review of community-based conserved areas, shows that community-based approaches often produce mixed outcomes, especially when conservation goals are prioritized without adequate attention to local livelihoods. This indicates that community-based models must be carefully designed, monitored and supported by institutions. CBT is also linked to empowerment. Strzelecka (2025) argues

that empowerment can shape residents' perceptions of justice in conservation policymaking. This is important because residents may support tourism and conservation when they feel that they have influence, dignity and recognition. Empowerment is not limited to income; it also includes psychological empowerment, political agency and social recognition. In protected area tourism, empowered communities are more likely to participate constructively in governance and less likely to view tourism decisions as externally imposed. Community-based tourism also contributes to cultural sustainability. Local communities can preserve and present cultural practices, traditional knowledge, food heritage and landscape meanings through tourism. However, tourism can also commodify culture if communities lack control over representation. Therefore, CBT should be embedded in governance systems that protect cultural integrity and local decision-making. For Balkan protected areas, CBT offers significant potential but also faces barriers. Mountain villages and rural communities around protected areas often possess rich cultural and natural resources, but they may lack professional tourism skills, marketing capacity, finance and institutional support. Therefore, CBT should be integrated with training, local enterprise development, participatory planning and transparent benefit-sharing. Without these supports, CBT may remain small-scale and fragmented, limiting its conflict-reduction potential.

### **2.5 Regulatory Effectiveness and Institutional Trust**

Regulatory effectiveness is another key component of protected area tourism governance. Protected areas require clear rules regarding construction, visitor management, zoning, waste management, conservation, transport and business operations. However, rules are only effective if they are consistently enforced and perceived as legitimate. Weak regulation can intensify conflict in several ways. First, unregulated construction can damage landscapes and create unfair competition between formal and informal operators. Second, inconsistent enforcement can reduce trust in public institutions. Third, regulatory ambiguity can create uncertainty for investors, residents and tourism businesses. Finally, weak enforcement can undermine conservation objectives and increase environmental degradation. Orozco-Ospino & al. (2025) emphasize that protected area governance should be assessed not only by formal institutional structures but also by effectiveness, stakeholder inclusion and outcomes. This perspective is relevant because many protected areas have formal management plans, but implementation remains weak. Regulatory effectiveness therefore requires institutional capacity, monitoring systems, coordination among authorities and accountability mechanisms. In tourism destinations, regulation must be balanced with participation. Overly restrictive regulation without community involvement may be perceived as coercive, while weak regulation may allow unsustainable development. Effective governance requires both rule enforcement and stakeholder legitimacy. This is particularly important in post-socialist contexts where trust in institutions may be fragile and where informal practices may be widespread. The Albanian case of Theth illustrates this problem clearly. Rapid tourism growth in mountain protected areas can produce accommodation expansion, road development and informal construction. If authorities fail to enforce planning rules consistently, local residents may perceive governance as selective or ineffective. This can generate conflict not only between communities and authorities, but also among local actors competing for tourism benefits. Regulatory effectiveness therefore contributes directly to conflict management effectiveness. Clear and consistently enforced rules reduce uncertainty, prevent environmental damage and protect public interests. When combined with participation and benefit-sharing,

regulation becomes part of a broader governance system that supports sustainable tourism development.

## **2.6 Post-Socialist Governance Contexts and the Balkan Region**

The Balkan region represents a distinctive context for studying tourism governance and conflict management in protected areas. Many countries in the region have experienced post-socialist transitions, institutional reforms, decentralization processes and increasing integration with European policy frameworks. At the same time, governance systems often retain centralized traditions, fragmented institutional coordination and uneven implementation capacity. Post-socialist transitions have influenced land ownership, public administration, environmental governance and tourism development. In some protected areas, unclear property rights, weak enforcement and rapid private investment create conditions for conflict. Local communities may support tourism because of its economic opportunities, but they may also resist development if they perceive it as uncontrolled, unequal or externally driven. Hall (2023) argues that tourism sustainability transitions require structural changes in governance, not merely technical improvements. This is highly relevant for the Balkans, where sustainable tourism cannot be achieved only through marketing or visitor management. It requires institutional reform, participatory planning and stronger coordination between conservation and tourism authorities. Recent studies on sustainable tourism governance also show that local residents play a central role in destination legitimacy. Bichler (2021) argues that tourism governance should be designed around the role of residents because they are directly affected by tourism and contribute to the social sustainability of destinations. In post-socialist protected areas, this insight is especially important because local communities may have limited institutional power despite being central to conservation and tourism outcomes. Regional studies also point to the importance of comparative analysis. Matović et al. (2025) show that governance frameworks can produce different sustainable tourism outcomes depending on institutional design and stakeholder involvement. This supports the need to compare protected areas such as Tara, Theth and Prokletije in order to identify governance patterns across the Balkan region. The Balkan context therefore provides an important empirical setting for developing and testing a governance-based conflict management model. It combines high tourism potential, valuable protected landscapes, institutional transitions and emerging sustainability pressures. These characteristics make the region suitable for examining how governance quality, participation, benefit-sharing and regulation influence conflict management effectiveness.

## **2.7 Synthesis and Research Gap**

The reviewed literature shows that conflict management in protected area tourism is a multidimensional governance issue. Tourism development can generate employment, conservation funding and local entrepreneurship, but it can also produce social tensions when benefits are unequal, participation is weak and regulations are inconsistently enforced. The most recent literature emphasizes that sustainable tourism in protected areas requires integrated governance systems that combine stakeholder participation, environmental justice, community empowerment and regulatory capacity. Despite these advances, several gaps remain. First, much of the literature examines governance, participation, benefit-sharing and regulation as separate themes, while fewer studies integrate them into a unified explanatory model. Second, many studies focus on single case studies, limiting comparative understanding across destinations. Third, empirical

research from the Balkan region remains relatively limited, despite the region's growing importance as a nature-based tourism destination. Fourth, there is insufficient quantitative testing of how governance-related factors influence conflict management effectiveness and sustainable tourism outcomes. This study responds to these gaps by proposing an integrated framework in which governance quality, stakeholder participation, benefit-sharing equity and regulatory effectiveness are treated as antecedents of conflict management effectiveness. Conflict management effectiveness is then conceptualized as a key mechanism through which governance contributes to sustainable tourism development. By focusing on protected area tourism destinations in Albania, Serbia and Montenegro, the study contributes to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it integrates Stakeholder Governance Theory, Environmental Justice Theory and Community-Based Tourism Theory. Practically, it offers a framework that protected area managers and destination policymakers can use to diagnose governance weaknesses and design conflict mitigation strategies.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on an integrative literature review and qualitative case discussion. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate given the complex, context-dependent nature of conflicts in protected area tourism, which involve social relations, power dynamics, and institutional arrangements that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative indicators alone. The literature review focuses on peer-reviewed academic articles, books, and policy reports published primarily over the last fifteen years. Sources were selected using key terms such as *tourism conflict*, *protected areas*, *community-based tourism*, *stakeholder governance*, and *environmental justice*. The review emphasizes conceptual frameworks and empirical studies that address the relationship between tourism development, conservation, and local communities. International literature is complemented by regionally relevant studies to ensure contextual relevance to the Balkan setting. In addition to the literature review, the study employs a qualitative case discussion approach. Rather than presenting primary empirical data, the paper draws on secondary sources, documented case studies, and existing analyses of protected areas in Serbia, Albania, and Montenegro. These cases were selected based on three criteria:

- (i) their significance as established or emerging tourism destinations within protected areas;
- (ii) the presence of documented conflicts related to tourism development;
- (iii) their relevance in illustrating different governance models and conflict management approaches within the Balkan region.

The case discussion method allows for comparative analysis across different national and institutional contexts, highlighting both common patterns and context-specific differences. The cases are not intended to be statistically representative but are used analytically to explore how governance structures, stakeholder participation, and benefit-sharing mechanisms influence conflict dynamics. The main limitation of this methodology lies in its reliance on secondary data, which may reflect the perspectives and interpretations of original authors. However, triangulating multiple sources and grounding the analysis in established theoretical frameworks enhances the reliability and analytical depth of the findings.

#### 4. STUDY AREA AND CASE SELECTION

The study focuses on three protected tourism destinations in the Balkan region:

1. Tara National Park (Serbia)
2. Theth National Park (Albania)
3. Prokletije National Park (Montenegro)

These destinations were selected using purposive sampling based on four criteria:

- ecological significance and protected area status;
- tourism importance and increasing visitor demand;
- documented evidence of tourism-related conflicts;
- representation of different governance and management approaches.

Tara National Park represents a relatively advanced example of participatory governance and stakeholder engagement. Theth National Park has experienced rapid tourism growth accompanied by governance challenges, unregulated construction, and stakeholder tensions. Prokletije National Park provides insights into the effects of centralized governance and limited local participation. The selection of multiple cases allows for analytical comparison and increases the external validity of the findings by identifying common patterns across different national contexts.

##### 4.1 Drivers of Conflict in Protected Area Tourism

The analysis of the selected Balkan cases reveals that conflicts in protected area tourism are primarily rooted in structural and institutional factors rather than in tourism activity per se. Four interrelated drivers emerge consistently across the cases: centralized governance structures, unequal distribution of tourism benefits, limited stakeholder participation, and weak regulatory enforcement. Centralized governance remains a dominant feature of protected area management in the Balkans. Decision-making authority is often concentrated at the national or regional level, limiting the influence of local communities on tourism planning and land-use regulation. This governance structure reduces the capacity of local stakeholders to articulate their interests and negotiate trade-offs between conservation and development, thereby increasing perceptions of exclusion and injustice. Unequal benefit distribution further exacerbates tensions. While tourism generates economic value, benefits are frequently captured by external investors, urban-based tourism operators, or centralized institutions. Local communities, in contrast, often experience restrictions on traditional activities and increased living costs without proportional economic returns. This imbalance reinforces the perception that tourism and conservation primarily serve external interests. Limited stakeholder participation represents a third critical driver of conflict. Although participatory rhetoric is increasingly present in policy documents, meaningful involvement of local communities in decision-making processes remains limited. Consultation mechanisms are often formalistic, occurring after key decisions have already been made, which undermines trust and legitimacy.

Finally, weak regulatory enforcement contributes to conflict by allowing unregulated construction, informal tourism activities, and environmental degradation. Inconsistent enforcement not only damages ecosystems but also fuels social tensions, as communities perceive regulations as selectively applied or ineffective. Together, these drivers create a governance environment in which conflicts are likely to emerge and persist.

#### **4.2 Serbia: Tara National Park**

Tara National Park in Serbia illustrates how participatory governance mechanisms can mitigate tourism-related conflicts when they are institutionally embedded and supported by clear mandates. The establishment of a User Council, which includes representatives of local communities, tourism operators, and park authorities, has improved communication and facilitated dialogue among stakeholders. Conflicts in Tara have historically centered on land-use restrictions, construction limits, and wildlife-related damages affecting agriculture. Through negotiated zoning arrangements and compensation schemes, park authorities have been able to address some of these concerns and reduce tensions. The User Council provides a platform for discussing grievances, sharing information, and negotiating solutions, contributing to higher levels of trust between stakeholders. However, the Tara case also demonstrates that participatory mechanisms are not a panacea. Power asymmetries persist, and local communities do not always possess equal negotiating capacity. Nevertheless, compared to more centralized governance models, the Tara experience suggests that institutionalized participation can transform conflicts from confrontational disputes into manageable negotiation processes.

#### **4.3 Albania: Theth National Park**

Theth National Park represents a contrasting case, characterized by rapid tourism growth combined with weak governance and limited regulatory enforcement. In recent years, increased visitor numbers and rising demand for accommodation have led to unregulated construction and informal tourism development. Enforcement of planning and environmental regulations has been inconsistent, creating uncertainty and social tensions. Local communities in Theth often perceive tourism development as externally imposed and poorly coordinated. Although tourism has generated income opportunities, benefits are unevenly distributed, and decision-making remains centralized. Residents frequently report limited involvement in planning processes and inadequate communication with authorities, leading to conflicts over land use, cultural integrity, and environmental protection. The Theth case highlights how weak governance can exacerbate conflict even in contexts where tourism is economically beneficial. The absence of effective participatory mechanisms and consistent enforcement undermines trust in institutions and fuels resistance to both conservation measures and tourism regulation. This case underscores the importance of aligning tourism growth with governance capacity to prevent conflict escalation.

#### **4.4 Montenegro: Prokletije National Park**

In Montenegro, Prokletije National Park illustrates the challenges associated with centralized management and limited local benefit-sharing. Although tourism is promoted as a strategic development tool, decision-making authority remains largely centralized, and local communities have limited influence over tourism planning and revenue allocation. Conflicts in Prokletije are less visible than in Theth but remain latent. Communities express frustration over restricted land use and limited economic returns from tourism. The absence of transparent benefit-sharing mechanisms reduces local incentives to support conservation objectives, increasing the risk of non-compliance and informal activities. The Prokletije case demonstrates that conflicts do not always manifest as open confrontation. Latent conflicts, characterized by dissatisfaction and disengagement, can undermine long-term sustainability by eroding social support for protected area management. Addressing such conflicts requires proactive governance reforms that enhance participation and ensure equitable distribution of tourism benefits.

#### **4.5 Comparative Discussion**

A comparative analysis of the three cases confirms that conflicts in protected area tourism are primarily governance-driven rather than tourism-induced. Where participatory mechanisms and benefit-sharing arrangements are institutionalized, as in Tara National Park, conflicts tend to be more manageable and less disruptive. In contrast, contexts characterized by centralized decision-making, weak enforcement, and limited stakeholder engagement, such as Theth and Prokletije, experience more intense or latent conflicts. The findings support theoretical perspectives emphasizing community-based tourism, environmental justice, and collaborative governance as essential components of conflict management. Importantly, the cases demonstrate that governance quality shapes not only the emergence of conflicts but also their form and intensity. Participatory governance does not eliminate conflict but transforms it into a process of negotiation and adaptation, which is critical for sustainable tourism development in protected areas.

#### **5. CONCLUSIONS**

This study demonstrates that effective conflict management is a fundamental prerequisite for sustainable tourism development in protected areas, particularly within the Balkan context. The analysis confirms that conflicts in protected area tourism are driven primarily by governance deficiencies rather than by tourism activity itself. Centralized decision-making structures, unequal distribution of tourism benefits, limited stakeholder participation, and weak regulatory enforcement consistently emerge as the core factors shaping conflict dynamics across the examined cases.

The comparative discussion of Tara National Park in Serbia, Theth National Park in Albania, and Prokletije National Park in Montenegro illustrates how variations in governance arrangements influence both the intensity and the form of conflicts. Where participatory mechanisms and dialogue platforms are institutionalized, as in the case of Tara National Park, conflicts tend to be transformed into manageable negotiation processes rather than escalating into open confrontation. In contrast, weak enforcement and exclusionary governance structures, as observed in Theth, intensify social tensions and undermine trust in public institutions. In Prokletije National Park, centralized management and limited benefit-sharing generate latent conflicts that, while less visible, pose long-term risks to conservation outcomes and community support.

The findings underscore the importance of inclusive governance structures that move beyond symbolic participation toward meaningful stakeholder engagement. Community participation, when supported by clear mandates and institutional capacity, enhances procedural and distributive justice, strengthens local support for conservation, and reduces resistance to tourism regulation. Equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms are particularly critical, as they align local livelihoods with conservation and tourism objectives, reducing perceptions of injustice and marginalization.

From a policy and management perspective, the study highlights the need for protected area authorities and tourism policymakers to prioritize collaborative governance approaches, such as co-management arrangements, stakeholder councils, and transparent benefit-sharing frameworks. Conflict management should be embedded as a core component of destination governance rather than treated as a reactive response to tourism pressures. Strengthening regulatory enforcement while simultaneously improving communication and trust between stakeholders is essential for preventing conflict escalation.

The study also acknowledges several limitations. The analysis relies on qualitative case discussion and secondary data, which may not fully capture local perceptions or recent governance developments. Future research should therefore incorporate primary empirical methods, such as interviews and participatory observation, to assess stakeholder experiences more directly. Longitudinal studies examining the long-term impacts of participatory governance reforms on conflict dynamics and conservation outcomes would further enhance understanding.

Overall, this paper contributes to the literature on sustainable tourism and protected area governance by demonstrating that conflicts in tourism destinations are best understood as governance challenges. Addressing these challenges through inclusive, transparent, and adaptive governance mechanisms is essential for achieving both conservation objectives and sustainable tourism development in the Balkan region and beyond.

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