

PAN Parks

Lessons Learned Series



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The Value of the PAN Parks Research Network

June 2008



Dear Reader,

Working closely with the PAN Parks Research Network has been an extremely stimulating activity for me. Each of our network's members are deeply committed to helping our Foundation both apply and improve our concept. I am always pleasantly surprised by their contributions and motivation to support our efforts.

In this lesson, I hope to convey to you the importance of continuous learning. I think it is safe to say that our Foundation could never have reached the level of success we have had were it not for the dedication of those involved with our Research Network. I also believe that our future success will depend upon the continued support of our existing network and that of new participants. With this support, I am certain that our Foundation will continue to move forward in the innovative manner we have become known for.

I would like to take this opportunity to formally thank everybody that has been involved with our Research Network to date. Your contribution has been invaluable.

Sincerely,

Mylene van der Donk



*Mylene van der Donk,
Marketing & Research Officer,
PAN Parks Foundation*

Why Conduct Research?

The first thoughts about developing the PAN Parks Foundation (PPF) were put to paper ten years ago. Since that time, our Foundation has grown into an internationally respected project that now includes 10 well-managed wilderness areas, covering over 550.000 ha. In addition, we are partnered with over 66 local business partners and work with national and international businesses and tour operators.

From day one, conducting research has been an integral component to our success. In many ways, research had to play such an important role because PPF was an innovative concept and had no other model for using tourism as a tool for conservation and regional development to follow as it had not been applied systematically before in Europe. Since 1996, PAN Parks has cooperated with research institutes and universities who have helped our Foundation integrate theory and practice, starting with the formulation of our Principles and Criteria. Our research partners have helped make PAN Parks the innovative concept that it is.

Our Foundation has always been open to new concepts, new ways of improving park management, sustainability, regional development and partnerships with different stakeholders and new ways to improve our own performance. Research assists us to identify these new concepts, to learn from our experiences and to objectively evaluate our performance. One new concept we helped develop was PAN Parks Accommodation (PPA). PPA is an accommodation targeted at park visitors and was developed to be a financial mechanism for conservation.

The objective of the Research Network is to provide more insight into the context in which the PAN Parks processes take place. This information supports our work and that of our partners with the development and the implementation of PAN Parks processes. In the future, we aim to expand the Research Network and to gain insight into more areas. One area that we are particularly interested in is climate change, and the impact that climate change will have on protected areas.

Spotlight: Dr. Stuart Cottrell, PAN Parks Research Network



*Dr. Stuart Cottrell,
Associate Professor & Global
Tourism Coordinator,
Colorado State University*

PPF Archive

Dr. Stuart Cottrell developed the key research tool for the Analysis of Perceptions and Attitudes (APA – See LL 4) and is involved in the implementation of these studies with PAN Parks. In addition, he has written several scientific articles about the PAN Parks Foundation in various journals:

“PAN Parks is an exciting initiative with its cross-cultural implications for protected areas. As an academic, it poses many challenging and interesting applications ideal for research. I have developed my research program related to monitoring the impacts of sustainable tourism development, and PAN Parks provides the ultimate opportunity to do this.”

The PAN Parks Research Network

Following the initial research and implementation of our concept in 2002, researchers from several institutions have continued to commit themselves to assisting our efforts and serve on our Advisory Council. Among them are representatives from Leeds Metropolitan University (UK), Glion Institute of Higher Education (CH) and the Breda University of Applied Science, NHTV (NL). In addition, MSc students from other universities in Europe and the United States have conducted research on behalf of our Foundation at both verified and candidate parks.

In the past, several universities worked on different PAN Parks related studies, often concurrently, and it resulted in a need for a more structured research approach in order to ensure optimal contribution to the problems we faced during the implementation phase of our concept. Thus the PAN Parks Research Network was created in 2003 to coordinate all of the different research projects. The Research Network started thanks to the large number of useful student reports that were produced by students and faculty at, among others, the University of Applied Science in Breda NHTV, and the Wageningen University for Life Sciences, both located in the Netherlands.



Retezat National Park, Romania

Simon Kertys



Vlado Vancura

*Sharing information in Rila
Rila National Park, Bulgaria*

Spotlight: Niek Beunders, PAN Parks Research Network



Niek Beunders

Niek Beunders,
Senior Lecturer,
University of Applied Sciences,
Breda NHTV

Niek Beunders has been involved with PAN Parks since the formulation of the PAN Parks Principles and Criteria. Beunders was also instrumental in writing the handbook for the implementation of the PAN Parks Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy (STDS):

‘The importance of PAN Parks as a pioneer in converting tourism into a tool for nature conservation can hardly be underestimated. To this day, 10 years later, the concept is still unique in the world. The concept started from scratch in 1998 and at that time it was virtually impossible to find relevant literature and research data. The PAN Parks Research Network has been very useful in delivering relevant and practical research. PAN Parks is a laboratory where scientists, lecturers and, last but not least, students have been creating concepts and have found solutions for challenges that were encountered during this voyage of discovery.’

The Research Agenda

The research agenda is demand driven. It includes subjects that are identified by our Foundation and our partners. It thus deals with daily issues for which solutions, background information, or a different perspective is needed. In practise, the network deals mostly with social and economic issues. There is less of a need for ecological studies in the parks that are certified as the parks already undertake the necessary studies in those areas.

PAN Parks has formulated the goal to become the gold standard for nature protection and high quality nature based tourism experiences. This goal is not yet in reach for all of our parks. We need to continuously stimulate people to improve management standards, intensify cooperation to help improve the quality of the tourism products and to work on sustainability issues. Due to the broad nature of our concept and our limited budget and capacity, we have found it necessary to set research priorities and develop a research agenda. The research agenda describes the most essential subjects for research that can assist us to improve our, and our partners’ performance and effectiveness.

The research activities are divided into three different themes:

1. PAN Parks Effectiveness
2. Marketing and Communication
3. PAN Parks Concept



North Trek

Oulanka National Park, Finland

Theme One: PAN Parks Effectiveness

→ Objective One: Gain insight into the effectiveness of the PAN Parks concept in the certified regions

One of the questions that returns regularly is the question: ‘Who benefits from PAN Parks status?’. This is a very reasonable question to ask since PAN Parks argues that next to conservation and park management, local businesses and communities also profit from PAN Parks status. Since these benefits are less visible than conservation benefits, it is important for our Foundation to show how we live up to our promises.

→ Objective Two: Assess the effectiveness and implementation of the verification process

The PAN Parks Principles and Criteria are the backbone of our initiative. Based on the verification of these Principles and Criteria it is decided whether or not the park may stay or become a PAN Park. Therefore, despite being costly for the Foundation and time consuming for the parks, the verification process is a very important element to the concept.

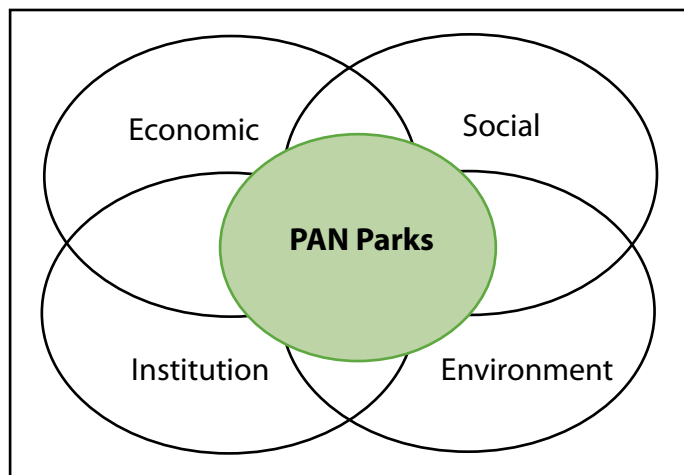


Figure 1. Sustainability Framework & PAN Parks

Theme Two: Marketing and Communication

→ Objective One: Collect marketing information to support PAN Park’s marketing activities

Now that the certified parks and their regions are more advanced in the formulation and implementation of the Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy, as well as with partnerships, our goal is to pro-actively assist these destinations with marketing. Our marketing activities are directed at individual tourists, as well as tour operators who develop organised holiday packages. The research we conduct helps us better target our efforts.

→ Objective Two: Evaluate the effectiveness of our communication, visibility and branding activities

Since our concept is based on partnerships and co-operation between different stakeholders, it is essential for us to know how our partners and users of PAN Parks products perceive our organisation. On an ongoing basis, we attempt to measure how recognizable the PAN Parks brand has become over the past 10 years. This research helps us determine things like what actions we should take in order to improve our reach and visibility.

Theme Three: PAN Parks Concept

→ Objective One: Documenting our knowledge and experience for dissemination to third parties

After 10 years of working to improve the management effectiveness of protected areas and the creation of sustainable tourism strategies and partnerships in which win-win situations are central to our PAN Parks concept, we have acquired a great deal of transferable knowledge. However, until recently, this information has been stored in the heads of our dedicated team and partners. As more parks and regions are becoming interested in our PAN Parks concept, some of whom certification is not a possibility due to size or location, we have realized just how important it is for us to record and share our knowledge and expertise with these eager third parties.

Spotlight: Lessons Learned Series Feedback

Our Lessons Learned Series is one of the activities we have undertaken to document and share our gained experiences. Here are some of the reactions we have received from readers of our Lessons Learned Series who live and work outside of Europe:

- ✓ “Although we live in distinct realities, common issues are more common than one can imagine and PAN Parks lessons are very useful here in Brazil.”
- ✓ “Many thanks. I have already downloaded the others and put them in a folder in our tea room for other staff to have a look. Kindest regards. I look forward to the next issue.” (from Australia)
- ✓ “Congratulations!! I live and work in tourism in Patagonia Argentina and can imagine a little bit the difficulties to solve out in your way to success. ☺ Best wishes for the coming year!!!!”

→ Objective Two: To provide training tools for local partners

The TNA and our years of experience have given us insight into the various training needs of our local partners. Part of our research agenda is to develop methods to train our partners in the skills needed to bring them a few steps closer to their goals.

Implementation of the Agenda

Most of the studies we engage in have to be done at a very low cost because of our budgetary constraints. Many of our studies are done by students who benefit in part by gaining a practical real-life learning opportunity that contributes to the development of a sustainable future for Europe’s wilderness areas. Along with the assistance of our Research Network, especially Wageningen University, we are continuously trying to obtain funding for research in order to get more elaborate and comprehensive studies completed.

Several studies have already been done in relation to measuring the perceived benefits and attitudes of the National Parks and their PAN Parks certification. In 2007, a major study on the perceptions and attitudes of Oulanka National Park’s (Finland) stakeholders was completed with financial support coming from Oulu University and the Oulanka Research Station. For more details about the study, please read the fourth lesson in this series titled: How to Perform an Analysis of Perceptions and Attitudes.

Since the initial phase of our concept, different studies have been undertaken to support the work of our Foundation and our partners. The studies resulted in increased insight into the existing situation that facilitated decision-making processes and management focus of various protected areas in Europe. Studies have been completed on the following subjects:

- Verification
- Principles and Criteria
- Perception of Wilderness
- Attitudes and Perceptions of Protected Areas and PPF Certification
- Community Involvement
- Tourism Potential and Development
- Visitor Management and Interpretation
- Marketing and Product Development
- Financial Mechanisms



*Cultural traditions bring the entire community together
Central Balkan National Park, Bulgaria*

Most of the studies can be downloaded at www.panparks.org/projects/research

* The PAN Parks Research Network offers opportunities for young researchers to be involved in innovative projects. The efforts that are put into the study are concretely contributing to support and improve management practices and do not disappear on a dusty shelf.

Spotlight: Christine Koblun, Student who dedicated thesis to PAN Parks

While a student at the NHTV in Breda, The Netherlands, Christine Koblun dedicated her thesis to the subject of PAN Parks cooperation with local businesses.

“My name is Christine Koblun and I am a fourth year student at the NHTV in Breda, the Netherlands. I learned about the PAN Parks Foundation through guest lectures and my professor Niek Beunders. It was then that I got interested in dedicating my thesis to the certification process of PAN Parks local business partners, which happened to be one of the subjects on the research agenda.

With much support from the Foundation, I was able to analyze the certification process. In order to prove my theoretical outcomes, mainly based on the park’s Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy, monitoring reports and explanations given by Foundation staff, Mylene van der Donk and Vlado Vancura, a field trip was organised to Central Balkan National Park in Bulgaria. The amount of support I received from the park’s Directorate was beyond my expectations.

To me the uniqueness of the PAN Parks Foundation is not only the magnificent natural areas that PAN Parks tries to protect, but also a growing network of extremely dedicated people all over Europe trying to combine nature protection, education about its importance and their willingness to share some of Europe’s best kept secrets with a growing number of conscious visitors.

I want to thank the members of the PAN Parks Foundation, the Central Balkan National Park Directorate and all local business partners for introducing me to the PAN Parks experience.”



Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park, Georgia

The Future of the Research Network

In the future, the subject of training will be separated from that of research. A separate strategy be made for both, and will be implemented with the help of the members of the Research Network.

Finding funding for research is an obstacle at all times and financial partners are being sought after for this.

Together with all committed parties, we will continue to implement our research agenda for the benefit of the Foundation, the parks and local partners.

Contact Details

We are always interested in having new members join our Research Network. If you are interested in joining, or if you have any questions, please feel free to contact us:

Zoltán Kun
Executive Director
zkun@panparks.org

To download past lessons in the series, go to www.panparks.org/projects/lessonslearnedseries.

To find out more about PAN Parks visit panparks.org.