

THE STATE OF TOURISM MANAGEMENT AND PLANNING IN THE PROTECTED AREAS OF PANAMA. THE CASE OF THE CHIRIQUÍ GULF NATIONAL MARINE PARK, PANAMA*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is considered by many countries, Panama among them¹, to be a driving force for economic growth and a form of sustainable development. The government of Panama pursues it through the *Plan Maestro de Desarrollo Turístico Sostenible 2007-2020* [Master Plan for Sustainable Tourism Development 2007-2020] which includes a declaration of principles to govern tourism over the next 12 years. The aim over this period is, on the one hand, to consolidate existing tourist products according to criteria of sustainability, and on the other to strengthen less developed products (Nel-lo et al, 2007; EUROPRACTIS, 2009). In line with this, in recent years the *Autoridad Nacional del Ambiente* (the Panamanian environmental authority, or ANAM) has attached special importance to tourism in building up the value of protected areas and generating revenue.

The Master Plan for Sustainable Tourism Development 2007-2020 identifies the Chiriquí Gulf as one of the 26 destinations in Panama to be built up on the basis of beach tourism, sport fishing and marine ecotourism. In order to preserve this environment it is essential to

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¹ Article 3 of law no. 8 of 14th June 1994 «Promoting tourist activities in the Republic of Panama» states that tourism is an industry of public utility and national interest.

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plan tourism; the first step in this is a diagnosis of the activity, including an assessment of tourist potential and of the area's existing resources.

II. OBJECTIVES, METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

The aims of this article are to establish the state of management in the protected areas of Panama from the point of view of tourism and assess the degree of development of tourism and planning instruments in the above-mentioned area.

The methodology used was to compile working documents from the different public bodies involved in tourism planning. Next, statistical data and scientific documents related to the topic and field of study were collected. Finally, field work was carried out at two different levels of proximity: one used GPS techniques to locate resources and the other made use of an exhaustive file to compile a range of topic information about each of them. UNACHI, URV and ANAM staff took part in this work.

III. MANAGEMENT AND PLANNING IN THE PROTECTED NATURAL AREAS OF PANAMA

1. Management and planning in protected areas

The Panamanian environmental authority ANAM, set up in 1998 by law no. 41 of 1st July 1998, is the body with powers in the area of natural resources and the environment. The *Sistema Nacional de Áreas Silvestres Protegidas* (National System of Protected Forest Areas or SINAP) was set up in 1992 (Resolution JD-022-92 of 2nd September 1992; Resolution JD-09-94 of 28th July 1994) and is made up of 17 areas of responsibility. Efforts are currently being made to develop regulations in relation to the management of the SINAP.

Out of the total number of protected areas declared, 19 have management plans and 36 have strategic plans, operational plans and monitoring and surveillance plans. Moreover, the *Programa de Monitoreo de la Efectividad del Manejo de las Áreas Protegidas de Panamá* (Programme for Monitoring the Effectiveness of Management of Protected Areas in Panama, or PMEMAP)² is applied in these 36 areas, which means evidence and records of their state exists. According to the last report published by the ANAM, the rating in the social, administrative and natural resources spheres (for 2008) has improved substantially, moving from a rating of mediocre to one of acceptable. The political/legal sphere remains within the «acceptable» category, but in the economic sphere, while there have been ups and downs, the situation continues to be mediocre, this being the weakest management area.

Most of the problems suffered by the protected areas of the country derive from the scanty financial resources at their disposal. If budget is compared to protected land area, Panama can

2 This programme is a regional methodology, in place since 1997, for assessing the management of protected areas in Central America with the support of the Central American Protected Areas System (CAPAS), in coordination with the *Consejo Centroamericano de Bosques y Áreas Protegidas* (Central American Council of Forests and Protected Areas, or CCAB-AP) and the *Comisión Centroamericana de Ambiente y Desarrollo* (Central American Commission on Environment and Development, or CCAD). In conceptual terms the strategy is based on the method developed by The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and known as the Rating Report: Criteria for Consolidation of Protected Areas.

be seen to assign an average of 3.5 dollars per hectare (PROARCA-APM, 2005), a figure far below those for the other countries in the region. The revenue generated by the admission of visitors has grown steadily. In 2008, the protected area which earned the greatest amount from charging fees was the Coiba National Park, with 126,000 dollars, representing a 150% increase on the year before. Next comes the Isla Bastimentos National Park with 76,000 dollars, again a 150% increase, followed by the Chagres National Park with 75,000 dollars, a 57% increase on the previous financial year. These are the three parks with the highest revenue; the rest lag far behind, with the next-highest revenue for a park coming to just 21,000 dollars.

Out of the 65 protected areas in the SINAP, 47 have an institutional presence and a total of 362 staff work in them. The average number of rangers is 7.7 per area, though there are large parks as in the case of the area studied here with more than 14,000 hectares and just two people for patrolling and management tasks (ANAM, 2009).

According to PMEMAP results for the period 2001-2005, access routes exist into the 36 areas assessed, either on land or by sea, but the lack of sufficient vehicles, staff and supplies limits protection to 50%, and this figure falls significantly during the rainy season.

The protected areas in the SINAP generally have less than 50% of the basic facilities for management and most of them are reduced to an administrative headquarters of their own with very limited services: less than 38% of the 36 areas have a visitor centre, 55% provide accommodation, 61% have latrines and only 30% offer the possibility of visiting marked trails. Moreover, many of these facilities often have serious problems with care and maintenance (ANAM, 2006).

The strategic lines of ANAM policy from 2004 to 2009 envisaged tourism in general and ecotourism in particular as priority activities to be pursued. To this end 9 national parks with tourist potential have been identified: Soberanía, Coiba, General de División Omar Torrijos Herrera, Altos de Campana, Marino Isla Bastimentos, La Amistad, Darién, Chagras and Volcán Barú.

In the last report published by the ANAM, covering the period 2004-2008, it was clear that there had been a significant increase in the number of visitors to Panama's SINAP areas. Over these four years more than 305,000 people visited the protected areas, of whom 155,370 were Panamanian and 150,809 from abroad, representing an increase of over 300% in the case of foreign visitors and nearly 100% for Panamanians (ANAM, 2009).

2. The National System of Protected Areas (SINAP)

The SINAP is made up of 65 preservation areas which cover a land area of some 2,600 million hectares, representing about 34.3% of the country's territory. The most common management categories are those of National Park (15 protected areas), Forest Reserve (9 protected areas) and Forest Life Refuge (9 protected areas).

The representativeness and uniqueness of many of their natural resources have earned them international recognition. An important example of this is the Coiba National Park, declared a World Heritage Site, included in the UNESCO list of Natural Assets and part of the Tropical Eastern Pacific Marine Biological Corridor.

Most of the protected areas in the SINAP have inhabitants within and around their borders, even in the case of the more restrictive categories such as national parks. Another

problem in the Panamanian protected areas is land ownership. Half of the preservation areas include private land and only in some cases have agreements been reached with the owners over the activities to be carried on there.

IV. THE AREA STUDIED. THE CHIRIQUÍ GULF NATIONAL MARINE PARK

The *Parque Nacional Marino Golfo de Chiriquí* (Chiriquí Gulf National Marine Park, or PNMGCH) was set up in 1994 by a resolution of the INRENARE (JD-019-94). This park is located in the western sector of the Republic of Panama, more precisely in the western part of the province of Chiriquí.

It is volcanic in origin and forms part of the underwater volcanic chain extending from the Galapagos Islands to Cocos Island in Costa Rica. It is a representative sample of the marine and island ecosystems of Central America and forms part of the Tropical Eastern Pacific Marine Conservation Corridor. The park takes in the marine areas of some 20 islands and islets as well as their continental shelf, covering an area of 14,740 hectares. The climate of this archipelago has moderate variation in temperature with an annual average of 27°C and rainfall which varies according to the year between 1,800 and 2,500mm. It is estimated that about 30,000 hectares of the parks' area of influence is covered by mangroves, located mainly in Pedregal, Bahía de Muertos, San Lorenzo and Paridas (Canto, 2001).

The population living in the park is variable as it depends on the cycle of economic activity, though at least 50 people have been recorded as permanently resident there. Even though the number of inhabitants is small, there are eight groups with interests in the PNMGCH, most of them made up of people who depend directly on the resources of the park and its area of influence, including fishermen, conch gatherers and firewood gatherers, as well as two groups of student volunteers.

V. DEGREE OF DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT INSTRUMENTS FOR THE PNMGCH

1. The state of planning and management in the PNMGCH

The PNMGCH, included in the National System of Protected Areas (SINAP), does not have a management plan, though it does have an Annual Operational Programme and applies the PMEMAP. According to the last assessment published, the area studied scored ratings for management effectiveness from poor to mediocre (ANAM, 2006).

Institutional management of the park is limited and depends on a series of factors, one of them the small budget assigned to maintaining and managing the area. The lack of finance by the state is not compensated by the admission of visitors as these amounts are negligible (in 2008 75 dollars was collected).

The lack of staff is another of the factors limiting management, as there are only two people: a head or director of the protected area and one park ranger.

The lack of adequate infrastructure and facilities is another restrictive factor. The only building the park has is the monitoring and surveillance post on Isla Parida, located at Punta Jurel and owned by the ANAM, signposting for the area as a whole being nonexistent.

The existence of private property in the park (on Isla Parida there are about 21 landowners, most of them foreigners) is another critical factor as protection measures are often seen as being against owners' interests.

One of the activities carried on by the park is environmental education in schools in the areas of Barú, San Lorenzo and David. The isolation and distance of the park together with safety-related issues mean that educational visits to it are not organised, resulting in low awareness of the area's enormous natural, ecological and scientific interest at provincial level.

2. Tourist activity in the park: the starting situation

The PNMGCH can be accessed from the coastal districts of the province of Chiriquí (the districts of Barú, Alanje, David and San Lorenzo) and the closest districts of that of Veraguas, the most important harbours or landings being those of Puerto Pedregal (David district) and Boca Chica (San Lorenzo district). The journey from any of these harbours to Isla Parida is not a hard one, though it must be run by an expert familiar with the area and takes between 45 minutes and an hour and a quarter depending on the starting point.

Countless tourist activities are possible in the PNMGCH, highlights among them including beach holidays, observing nature and marine and terrestrial fauna, sport fishing, diving, surfing and so on.

According to recent figures from the park it officially had 111 visitors between 2004 and 2008 (ANAM, 2009), though this figure is known not to be realistic as not all tourists first pass through the park office in David to register and there is no other mechanism for monitoring at the departure points. Visits are highly seasonal and most of them are during the dry season which lasts from late November to March.

There are currently two companies selling tourist packages on the island and aimed at the international market. These are Coralstar and Ferryhotel, both of them based in Puerto Pedregal. In the sphere of publicity and information the scarcity of printed material is a major disadvantage when it comes to promoting the protected area. The park does not have any specific documents for promoting tourism which include information and logistical details, nor is there a clear information centre to go to for such documentation. As regards on-line promotion, the websites of IPAT and the town of David, capital of Chiriquí province, offer the park as a possible destination for ecotourism, sport fishing and diving, but do not provide any practical information for prospective visitors; they do not even include a contact address for the ANAM, the body responsible for the park.

VI. RESULTS, CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS

1. An inventory of resources: the first step to organising public use of the PNMGCH

The first step to organising the park is to create an inventory of its resources. As a result of fieldwork on Isla Parida, Paridita, Isla Gámez, Isla Santa Catalina and Isla Bolaños in the Chiriquí Gulf National Park a total of 74 resources were listed and classified according to an adaptation of the types and subtypes created by the OEA (OEA, 1978). For each of the

resources a diagnosis of its situation and state was made on the basis of working meetings with park staff.

The resources available in the island area of the park are focused on the coastal area, highlights being the existence of beaches (38), reefs (9) and mangroves (8), so that its tourist potential would lie along the coast, ignoring the interior of the island. Another piece of information gained from the inventory is its value for tourist use. Thus, it was shown that out of the 72 natural resources (mangroves, reefs, headlands, cliffs, coves, beaches, viewpoints, streams and lagoons) some 34.7% were considered unique resources and some 43% important resources.

2. Limitations in the management of the PNMGCH

Assessment of the planning and management instruments in the PNMGCH and analysis of tourist activity there have revealed serious limitations which generate problems for environmental conservation and a failure to take advantage of the opportunities for improvement.

The most critical situations arise from (a) the non-existence of a management plan, (b) the lack of an adequate budget to cover the park's needs, (c) the lack of staff, (d) the non-existence of adequate basic infrastructure such as, for example, a visitor centre or minimal facilities such as notices about prohibitions on access or rules for behaviour, (e) in general, underestimation of the environmental resources the park offers by the population of the province of Chiriquí, and finally, (f) the existence of private property within the park which limits the ANAM's ability to act.

3. Proposed measures to improve management of the PNMGCH

This study has made it possible to formulate several proposals aimed at improving management of the park, relating to different areas such as planning tourist activity, facilities, education, publicity, coordination, research and so on. Those considered most relevant are listed below:

- Drawing up a General Park Management Plan covering aspects specific to managing environmentally exceptional but fragile areas such as reefs, lagoons and mangroves, as well as dividing it into zones.
- Creating a Park Information System to include all the spatial data necessary for efficient management. Making specific inventories of reefs and beaches.
- Creating a series of basic infrastructures such as accommodation, minimal beach facilities and operational and directional signposting for all resources.
- Drawing up a manual of good practice in the protected area aimed at visitors, residents and communities who engage in activities in the area.
- Encouraging universities and research centres or institutes to carry out scientific studies and publicise the park's scientific and ecological value.
- Implementing instruments to allow for participative management of the park so as to involve private landowners, communities, NGOs, etc. in its conservation and management.

- Plan routes to connect the different resources in the park, paying special attention to trails on land taking in streams, viewpoints, etc., marine routes visiting the different reefs, routes round the lagoons on Isla Paridita or a waterborne route round the mangroves.
- Activating instruments for coordination between the ANAM, tourism stakeholders and the local population running tours in the area, in order to regulate their activity.
- Activating a system to monitor activities carried on in the park in order to have, among other things, records of moorings and visitors, a survey to find out their social/demographic details and how they see the protected space in order to gather information on tourism. It is also necessary to implement collection of fees for mooring, visits and so on.
- Attempting to buy properties which come on sale in order to build up the ANAM's authority as the body managing the park.

While activities have been run as part of a type of tourist operation which is outstanding for its conservation and management standards, there is still a need to begin to develop products which fit in with a model of sustainable tourism and offer viable options for generating economic opportunities for local stakeholders involved in the protected areas with tourist potential.

