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ECOTOURISM OF THE SARAJEVO'S PROTECTED AREA "VRELO BOSNE" – BOSNA SPRING: A PARADIGM FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM?

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ABSTRACT

Ecotourism in Sarajevo is a significant driver of visits and its tourism image and increasing tourist urbanization. The natural monument Bosna Spring is among the city's most popular protected areas, combining natural and cultural features and serving as the top prominent recreational site in the city's immediate vicinity. The paper examines the ecosystem services, recreational values, and awareness of conservation at Bosna Spring, aiming to identify the advantages and challenges associated with the protection and advancement of ecotourism from the perspective of the younger generation: Erasmus students, who primarily represent EU visitors. The primary ecotourism functions are recreation and relaxation, with sports activities being favored by men and educational initiatives being more appealing to women. The youth is mostly aware of the conservation rules and regulations; however, it is more pronounced among return visitors than first-time visitors. The key priorities include conservation efforts, educational outreach, promotion of sustainable tourism, and scientific research. Despite the challenges faced by the area (urbanization and a lack of infrastructure), Bosna Spring is largely a representative model of a sustainable ecotourism destination.

Keywords: Bosna Spring, conservation, recreation, ecotourism, sustainable destination.

INTRODUCTION

The monument of nature "Bosna Spring"/ "Vrelo Bosne" (IUCN-III) is located in Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and is under the protection of "Protected Natural Areas of the Sarajevo Canton," covering an area of 603 ha. According to Temimović

(2018), Bosna Spring is one of the country's major ecotourism attractions and the most visited protected area. Thanks to its sustainable development strategy, it is considered a model example of (eco)tourism in this part of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Statistics from 2024 (ZPPKS, 2024) showed that during the first six months, 143,385 tourists visited Bosna Spring, which is 19,260 more than in the same period of the previous year, an increase of 15.5%. Foreign tourists account for 62% of all visitors, which highlights their importance in local ecotourism. These tourists pay at the same time a higher entrance fee, and this revenue is used for the management, maintenance, and protection of the area. These funds are mainly used for the development of tourism infrastructure, educational activities, and conservation of natural values. This phenomenon of rising interest in the area can also be evidenced in Google Trends data, where searches for the keyword Bosna Spring have been increasing over the long term. Searching for interesting natural heritage is therefore something that is resonating in trends among foreign and local tourists. The strategy that the protected area management chooses in communicating to foreign tourists can be crucial in the tourists' attitude towards the protected area itself; at the same time, it can also influence the tourists' willingness to pay a higher entrance fee, ergo increase the financial possibilities of improving the infrastructure and protecting the area.

Gathering information on the level of protection and development of the Bosna Spring area was necessary for the paper. Therefore, the first part of the thesis provides the readers with basic and contextual information that allows a better understanding of the current situation. Furthermore, we discussed the local government plan for the period 2020-2030, which provides proposals for changes in the conservation conditions and management system of the area. The following part of the paper analyses the results of a questionnaire survey focused on the perception of this protected area by young foreign visitors (Assessment of ecosystem services and conservation perspectives in the Bosna Spring Protected Area from the knowledge of youth visitors). The research examines how foreign young tourists perceive the importance of Bosna Spring, what ecosystem and infrastructural benefits the area provides them, and how they evaluate its role in the context of sustainable development.

METHODOLOGY

Protected areas are essential for the sustainability of ecosystems, the prevention of urban heat island levels, and the recreational values they provide not only to local residents but also to visitors from around the world. This paper focuses on assessing ecosystem services, recreational values, and conservation awareness in the Bosna Spring area. The aim is to identify the main benefits and challenges associated with the conservation of this site from the perspective of the young generation, especially

Erasmus students, as non-participating units in the region and with an external perspective on conservation from abroad. The main research questions are:

1) What ecosystem services and infrastructure services are most important to visitors? And are there gender differences in perception?
2) What is the level of visitor awareness of conservation and sustainable development rules in the area?
3) What are the views of the younger generation from abroad on the future development and conservation of the area?

The aim of the research is to get a comprehensive overview of young visitors' views on the current state and potential of the Bosna Spring area. This text analyses the results of the questionnaire survey and compares them with the management plans for the area, with an emphasis on sustainability and protection of the natural environment. The main research method was a questionnaire survey, which is a type of quantitative research aimed at collecting a large amount of data. This approach allows for a wide range of responses, as opposed to qualitative research, which focuses on detailed examination of individual cases. Research assessing the ecosystem services and recreational values of the Bosna Spring area was conducted through an online questionnaire survey. The questionnaire was designed to collect data on visitor habits, awareness, preferences, and attitudes towards environmental protection.

The questionnaire was divided into five sections: Visitor habits and frequency; Conservation awareness; Preferences regarding recreational activities and services; Willingness to contribute to nature conservation; Demographic data. The data collection focused on the younger generation of international visitors who could provide a unique perspective on ecosystem services and tourism pressure in the area. Unfortunately, it was not possible to include a broader group of respondents because the peak visitor season occurs primarily in the summer months. The goal was to gather as much relevant data as possible through social media and online campaigns to ensure the results were as representative as possible.

Questionnaire structure

The structure of the questionnaire was a combination of open- and scaled questions. At the beginning of the questionnaire, the focus was to find out the basic information of the respondents. Their gender and level of educational attainment were ascertained using a multiple-choice method where they chose from the options we provided. The rest of the questions were asked using scales. The first one is generally how knowledgeable visitors are about the area's opportunities and attributes. The respondent expressed this feeling using the scale: Not at all (1) - Very well (2). The next focused on visitor ratings in terms of the importance of each level from the visitors' perspective. Here respondents were given the opportunity to express their opinion on a scale of: Not important - 1, Rather not important - 2, Neutral - 3, Rather important - 4, Definitely important - 5. A large part of the questionnaire

consisted of questions exploring the positives and negatives that digitalization brings. We published the questionnaire on Friday, 3.12.2024, and therefore the data collection lasted 11 days until the specified deadline for the end of the data collection—Tuesday, 14.12.2024. Our primary platform was Google Forms, which in the end proved to be more useful than the initially intended Typeform portal due to the mainly free access. So, the data collection was online and, in a few cases, it was assisted data collection. The main characteristics of the respondents include their gender, which allowed us to focus on the differences and similarities they share. As a second characteristic is their number of visits, which was divided again into two groups. Overall, the data set contained a set of 41 respondents from a specific group of exchange students through Erasmus, CEEPUS, and other bilateral programs.

RESULTS

Ecotourism in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Sustainable tourism is a concept that connects nature conservation with the economic and social development of local communities. This approach aims to minimize the negative impacts of tourism on the environment while maximizing its benefits. Banda et al. (2019) stated that in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is characterized by high biodiversity, sustainable tourism is an important tool for promoting regional development and protecting natural resources, which include the protection of endemic species of fauna and flora and watersheds, as well as their springs. One of the main elements of sustainable tourism is the emphasis on biodiversity conservation. Protected areas offer visitors the opportunity to experience authentic nature with minimal anthropogenic influence. These sites serve not only to protect natural values but also as resources for environmental education and recreation. According to Žunić (2022), tourism development is also supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, such as eco-oriented accommodation facilities that emphasize the use of local resources and traditions.Another key aspect of sustainable tourism is the involvement of local communities. These communities benefit from the income that tourism generates, for example, from the sale of local products or the provision of guiding services. This model also raises local awareness of the importance of conservation and motivates them to actively participate in the management of protected areas. Banda et al. (2019) noted that European and international projects also contribute to the development of sustainable tourism. Thanks to EU funding, activities have been implemented in protected areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which included the restoration of natural resources or the improvement of infrastructure for visitors. Žunić (2022) stated that these actions have not only increased visitor numbers but also enhanced economic opportunities for local people in the whole region.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's protected territory accounts for 4.57% of its total area. Nature conservation efforts in Bosnia commenced in the 19th century, with the strict nature reserve of "Perućica" (1954) as the first declared protected area in the country. Bosnia and Herzegovina has four national parks: "Sutjeska" (1962), Kozara (1967), Una (2008), and Drina (2017). The development of protected areas has been aligned with IUCN criteria (since 2003), leading to the establishment of more than a hundred protected areas within the country, with the first IUCN sites established in the Sarajevo Canton, such as “Bosna Spring” (bos. Vrelo Bosne), among others.

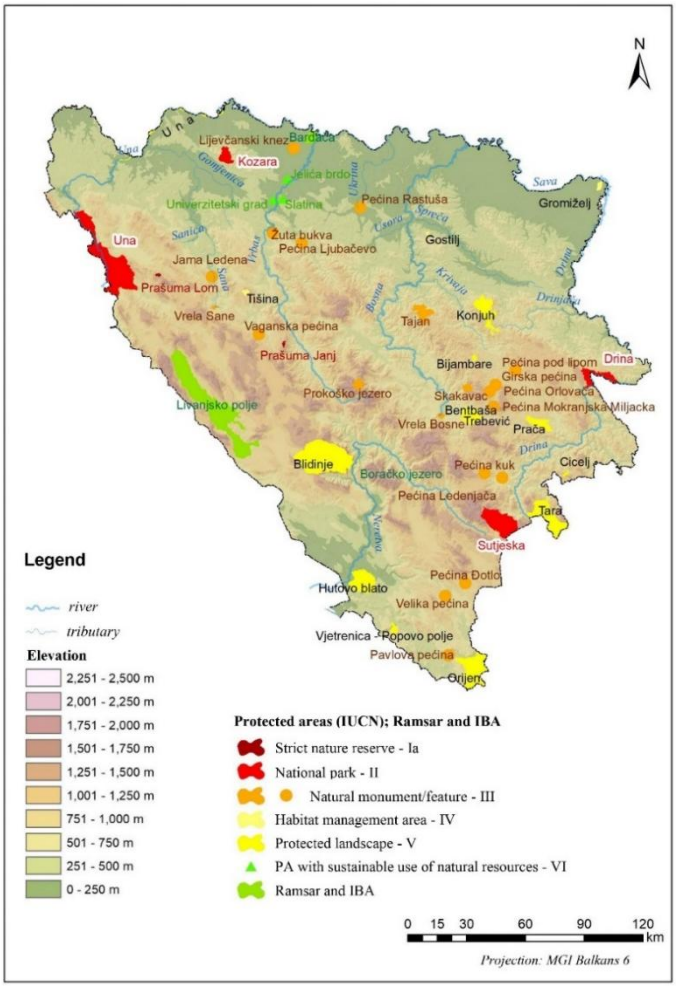


Figure 1. Map of protected areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina **Source:** Authors

Žunić (2023) observed that Bosnia and Herzegovina has been recognized as an ecotourism destination, with an increase in tourist visits to protected areas. However, the data on these visits is primarily based on ticket sales and parking lot usage. Green

spaces in proximity to the city are particularly favored by both international and local tourists, as Sarajevo serves as a connection between natural landscapes and urban settings, enhancing its overall appeal and demand as a tourist destination. Mirić et al. (2017) highlighted that natural attractions near Sarajevo, such as Bosna Spring, significantly contribute to the city's fundamental tourist image. Furthermore, Žunić (2018) emphasized a marked interest among tourists from Gulf countries, drawn by the refreshing natural environment. Žunić (2023) noted that the most frequented protected areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina are located in Sarajevo, attributed to the capital's popularity, favorable accessibility, tourist engagement, and the growing ecological awareness among visitors regarding the health benefits of immersing oneself in nature.

Case of Bosna Spring – tourism & geographical features with the key strategy goals of the protected area development

Bosna Spring, located in Sarajevo Canton, is one of the most significant protected areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Declared a natural monument in 2006, it spans 603 hectares, divided into a nucleus zone of 54.5 hectares and a buffer zone of 548.5 hectares. The nucleus zone, which includes the Bosna Spring and its immediate surroundings, is strictly protected to preserve its biological and hydrological diversity. The buffer zone allows for recreational activities and sustainable tourism, ensuring a balance between nature conservation and land use. The Bosna Spring is a unique hydrological phenomenon, located at the junction of the Igman and Bjelašnica mountains and the Sarajevo field, where the Bosna River originates. The area is rich in water resources, including thermal and thermo-mineral groundwater, surface water flows, and karst springs. The spring itself is a critical water source, providing drinking water for the city of Sarajevo. Its ecological diversity encompasses flooded forests, wet meadows, and aquatic habitats, which not only create a visually appealing environment for visitors but also serve as a refuge for many protected species of flora and fauna. Gajević (2013) stated that the area also plays a vital role in biodiversity conservation, providing a habitat for the endemic species Gammarus bosniacus and supporting diverse microhabitats.

On May 25, 2006, the Sarajevo Canton Assembly declared Bosna Spring a natural monument, establishing legal boundaries for its protection and classification as a Category III protected area. This legislation also set objectives for conservation, defined zones, and regulated interventions, natural resource use, and management responsibilities. The Cantonal Public Institution for the Protection of Natural Areas oversees the site's management, ensuring the preservation of its natural values, promoting sustainability, and developing infrastructure for tourists (FAO, 2014). Bosna Spring serves as a model for sustainable management and an inspiration for other protected areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina and beyond.



Figure 2. Bosna Spring - natural monument and popular ecotourism site in the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Sarajevo's protected area (IUCN-III) **Source:** CA Author

Since the introduction of admission charges in 2014, the number of visitors to Bosna Spring has steadily increased, reaching over 250,000 in 2017, making it one of the most visited protected areas in the country. "Mostly visited and most popular protected areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina are those in Sarajevo (the capital), led by the protected landscape of Trebević and the natural monument Spring of Bosnia" (Žunić, 2022). Key cultural and historical landmarks, such as the Roman bridge at Plandište, nearby archaeological sites, and iconic locations like the Great and Small Alley, add significant cultural value and enhance the visitor experience (Temimović, 2018). At Žunić (2013), the Bosna Spring is a favorite protected and recreational site for both locals and tourists due to its attractiveness and accessibility. Furthermore, Žunić (2024) highlighted that the entire area of Bosna Spring represents a vibrant tourist environment, beginning with its buffer zone that encompasses the Ilidža spa park, complemented by an extensive promenade (Great Alley/Velika aleja) lined with the plane (Platanus acerifolia) and horse-chestnut trees (Aesculus hippocastanum).

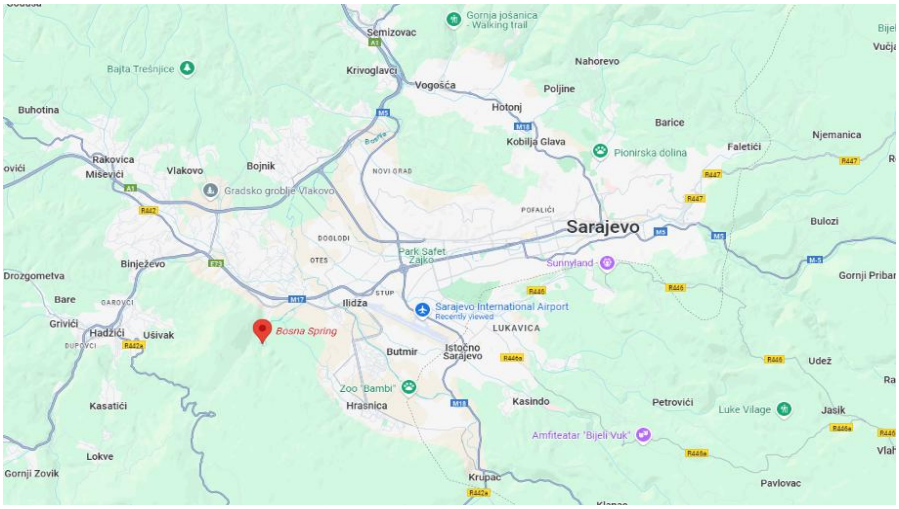


Figure 3. Location of Bosna Spring in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina
Source: Authors, based on the Google Earth Maps

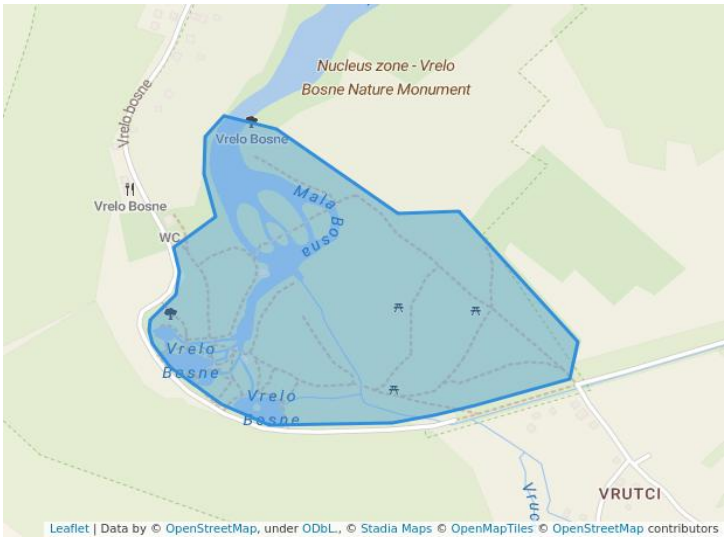


Figure 4. Nucleus area of the Bosna Spring/ Vrelo Bosne **Source:** Pacer, 2023

Despite its popularity, Bosna Spring faces challenges such as urbanization pressures from nearby development projects, often financed by foreign investors, and the need for improved infrastructure, including better sanitation facilities and enhanced access to individual monuments. Temimović (2018) noted that the Bosna Spring is a specific example due to its position close to the urban zone of the Sarajevo canton. The pressure of urbanization caused by development projects, the lack of protection of the surrounding karst areas (such as Igman and Bjelašnica), and the

low use of modern technologies for monitoring and sustainability of the protected area itself. Future plans aim to expand green tourism, focusing on environmental sustainability, cultural preservation, and economic benefits. Increasing local community involvement and raising visitors' environmental awareness are key steps toward long-term sustainability.

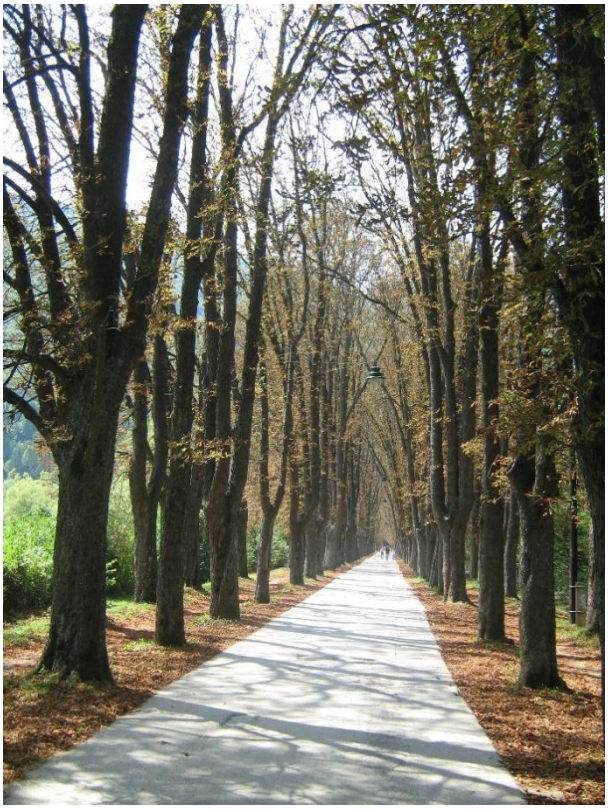


Figure 5. Great Alley of Platanus acerifolia **Source:** CA Author

Raising environmental awareness, introducing environmentally friendly technologies, and promoting socio-cultural sustainability are crucial for further development. The site appears to be a good model for educational programs (International Biodiversity Day has already educated over 15,000 students in the area). Sustainability in the area includes the protection of natural resources, the promotion of local traditions and culture, the use of renewable energy sources, and the enhancement of economic benefits for the local community. Bosna Spring is an example of how nature conservation can be combined with tourism development and an inspiration for other protected areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This is also confirmed in the intention of the Strategy 2020–2030 (Ministry of Physical Planning, Construction and Environmental Protection of Sarajevo Canton, 2020). Some of the promoted objectives are, for instance, the promotion of cultural

and natural heritage and the organization of excursions and educational activities in cooperation with professional institutions, which are key priorities. The program allows for flexible booking and adaptation of content according to the age group and education of the participants. Basic equipment will be provided for research activities, and conditions for the presentation of results will be created. Workshops and excursions with expert commentary will be available to visitors, and refreshments and meals will be provided according to the length of the program.

However, the strategy also highlights threats facing Bosna Spring. Including mainly anthropogenic pressures associated with over-visitation and unsustainable use of the area. Increased numbers of visitors are leading to ecosystem disturbance and pollution of watercourses and soil, with sensitive hydrological resources particularly at risk. Illegal waste dumping, deteriorating infrastructure, and irresponsible visitor behavior also pose major risks to the long-term conservation values of the area. Protecting the Bosna Spring therefore requires strict measures to regulate activities in the protected area, close monitoring of the state of nature, and effective cooperation between area managers and visitors to ensure its sustainability.

Data analyses

As part of the processing, we transformed the data from the questionnaires into an Excel spreadsheet, which we coded sequentially. We divided the spectral responses into a scale of 1-5, and for specific alternative responses, we created specific codes (male - 8, female - 9). In the next step, we transferred the document into a .txt schema for processing in JASP. We used both univariate and bivariate data analyses. In doing so, we mainly considered the variability of first-time visitors' and multi-visitors' responses to questions about awareness of the area rules and conservation.

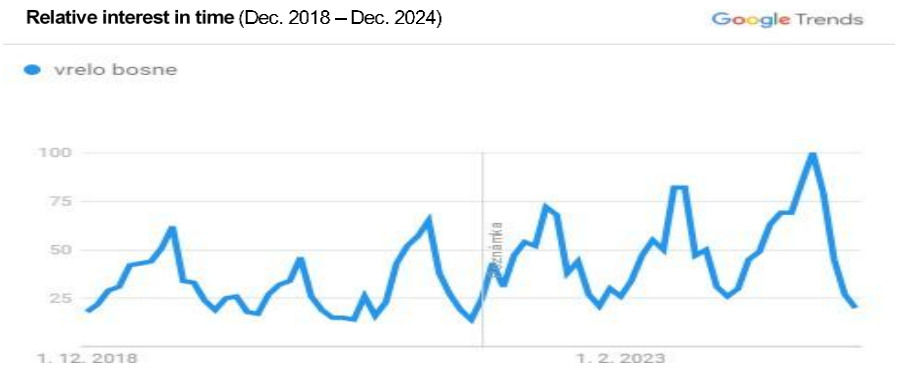


Figure 6. Respondent interest in survey. The numbers represent the relative to the highest point on the graph for that area and time. A value of 100 represents the highest popularity of a term. A value of 50 means the term was half as popular. A score of 0 means that there was not enough data for this term. **Source:** Own research supported by Google Trends, 2024

In the univariate analyses, the following responses can be detected: respondents are most aware of the recreational opportunities in the Bosna Spring area (75%), which is a logical result in the context of the fact that 85% of respondents went to the area specifically to visit the Bosna Spring area.

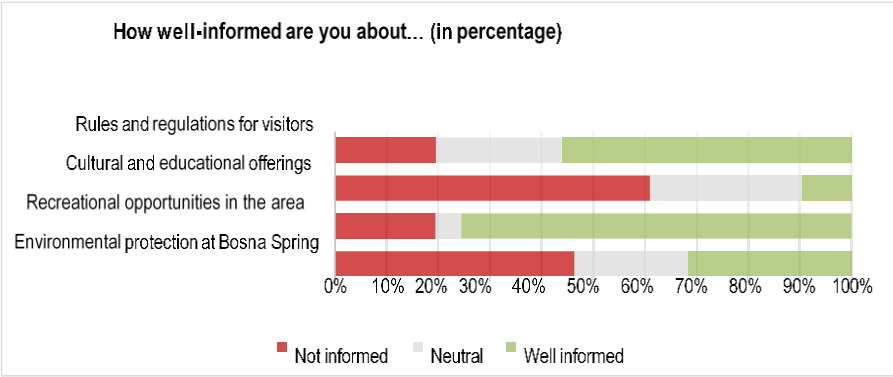


Figure 7. Conservation awareness and ecotourism preferences **Source:** Own research

The protected area communicates well the rules and regulations in the protected area, which 56% of visitors understood during their visit. This was most likely due to the number of visible info signs that are posted throughout the protected area.
On the other hand, visitors are not clearly informed before entering about the level of protection of the area. Almost half (46%) of the respondents answered that they are not familiar with the level of protection of the Bosna Spring. This is certainly a loss in the context of the increasing interest in the area. Bosna Spring is an interesting ecotourist attraction, within which the approach of the Bosnian administration to nature protection could be highlighted. According to Google trends and data from the ZPPKS, interest in the area and its protection is increasing.

The second part of the questionnaire asks about the importance of each of the area's governance objectives. Respondents are most supportive of nature conservation itself (100%) and related educational programs (76%), promotion of sustainable tourism (70%), and support for scientific research for conservation (68%). These responses were ranked as the most important by respondents, reflecting public interest in conservation objectives, which the protected area should therefore actively communicate.

Bivariate analyses accounting for the number of visits show significant differences in awareness of park rules. Visitors who have visited the park more than once are 11% more aware of the rules than those who have visited only once. For the other questions, there were no significant outliers or differences in the data. Men attach more importance to sporting opportunities in the area (19%), while women emphasize the importance of education and programs in the area (14 %). On the other hand, they agree on the importance of general nature conservation.

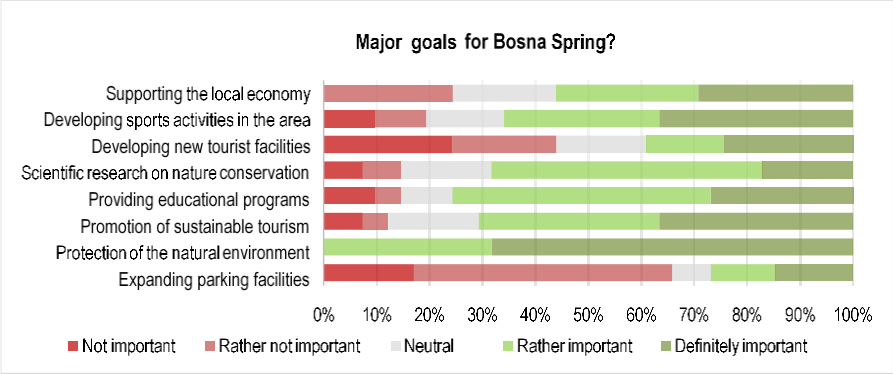


Figure 8. Ecotourism goals and willingness to contribute to nature conservation
Source: Own research

Table 1. Gender differentiation of respondent attitudes toward the contribution to nature conservation and ecotourism development

Most important goals for Vrelo Bosna	Male	Female	Diff.
Supporting the local economy	52	61	9
Expanding parking facilities	21	33	12
Protection of the natural environment	100	100	**0**
Promotion of sustainable tourism	74	65	9
Providing educational programs	69	83	**14**
Scientific research on nature conservation	69	66	3
Developing new tourist facilities	30	44	14
Developing sports activities in the area	74	55	**19**

Source: Own research, data in percentage

Other data show, for example, that visitors spend an average of 6 EUR here; 46% of the respondents had visited Bosna Spring more than once. This is probably related to the nature of the exchange students interviewed, for whom proximity to a protected area may be of interest. They often recommend visiting it to their families and friends who come to visit them, going to the area with them for the second time.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that the most important aspect that visitors associate with Bosna Spring is recreational opportunities, of which 75% of respondents are aware. This corresponds to the fact that 85% of participants visited the site primarily for recreation and relaxation. These results confirm that the area fulfills its role as an important ecotourism destination and serves as an important location for relaxation

and outdoor activities. Most notably, due to the highly urban nature of the Bosna Spring area, the importance of nature conservation is often overlooked and not sufficiently communicated to visitors.

In addition, the survey highlights gender differences in visitor preferences. While men place more importance on sporting opportunities (19%), women place more emphasis on educational programs (14%). This suggests the need for a balanced offer that caters to different visitor preferences, including improved infrastructure for recreational activities and enhanced educational initiatives. These two aspects are also among the most desired in general, which could be an interesting outcome for programs in Bosna Spring. The development of sports activities could be another objective of the protected area.

Despite a relatively high level of awareness of park rules (56% of respondents), results show that almost half of visitors (46%) are not familiar with the level of protection of the area. This indicates a gap in pre-visit communication and educational activities that should be addressed to highlight the protected status of the area and its ecological importance.

The findings underline the role of visible information signs in the site, as respondents cited them as a key source of information. However, the lack of information prior to entering the park presents an opportunity to improve awareness through online platforms, brochures, and visitor centres. Effective communication about conservation efforts could also further engage visitors and strengthen their appreciation of Bosna Spring's protected status.

The results show strong support for conservation-related initiatives, reflecting growing public interest in environmental sustainability. Respondents identified conservation (100%), educational programs (76%), promotion of sustainable tourism (70%), and scientific research (68%) as key priorities for site management. These findings are consistent with broader global trends, with younger generations increasingly valuing sustainability and environmental stewardship. The strong interest in educational programs suggests a need for expanded opportunities such as guided tours, workshops, and interpretive activities that convey the ecological and cultural value of the area. The development of such programs could simultaneously raise awareness and generate additional revenue.

Survey results show that repeat visitors (46%) are more familiar with park rules, with an awareness rate 11% higher than first-time visitors. This trend highlights the importance of ongoing visitor engagement, as individuals who visit the area repeatedly often act as informal ambassadors and encourage family and friends to visit. This can help to increase visitor numbers and promote a culture of conservation among local and international visitors.

Furthermore, data showing an average expenditure of 6 EUR per visit highlights the economic benefits to local communities, which could motivate greater involvement of local communities in park management. Encouraging local businesses to offer environmentally friendly services and products could further enhance the sustainable development potential of the site.

CONCLUSION

The results are limited by the sample of respondents selected. If this questionnaire were presented to local residents or visitors in season, they could provide a more interesting insight into their priorities. In particular, local residents who could comment not only on the level of protection and awareness of the area but also on the tendencies of urban expansion zones and other issues.

At the same time, the sample of 41 respondents is not a sufficiently representative sample. Although the idea that different priorities are gendered, i.e., different levels of gender groups have different priorities, is confirmed, in any case it is not possible to apply these results to the entire sample of visitors.

We would like to conclude with a brief review of the literature and research to highlight the challenges that Bosna Spring may face in the future. The findings also highlight several challenges, including:

a) Urbanization pressures: Development projects near Bosna Spring pose threats to its ecological integrity, requiring stricter enforcement of protection measures and sustainable land-use policies.
b) Communication of protection status: Enhancing pre-visit education through digital platforms, signage, and outreach programs is critical.
c) Infrastructure improvements: Investments in eco-friendly infrastructure can enhance the visitor experience while minimizing environmental impacts.

To overcome these challenges, the following recommendations are proposed:

a) Strengthen Communication and Education: Improving pre-visit education and on-site communication is crucial for raising awareness about the protected status and ecological importance of Bosna Spring. This can be achieved through targeted campaigns, interactive visitor centres, and guided educational programs.
b) Promote Community Involvement: Actively engaging local communities in tourism management and conservation activities will ensure that economic benefits are equitably distributed. This approach fosters a sense of ownership and encourages sustainable practices among residents.
c) Enhance Sustainable Infrastructure: Investing in eco-friendly infrastructure, such as renewable energy solutions, better waste management systems, and improved visitor facilities, will minimize the environmental impact while enhancing the visitor experience.
d) Diversify Tourism Offerings: Expanding educational and recreational programs will attract a broader range of visitors and emphasize the importance of conservation. These offerings can include workshops, interpretive tours, and cultural experiences that align with sustainable tourism principles.

By implementing these recommendations, Bosna Spring can serve as a leading model of sustainable ecotourism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Balancing conservation priorities, visitor satisfaction, and community engagement is vital to preserving the area's natural and cultural heritage for future generations.

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