

THE ROLE OF THE UNESCO DESIGNATED SITES IN FOSTERING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN SOUTH-EAST EUROPE

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Abstract

Within a more globalised and growing tourism, the role of the niche sectors - such as the cultural tourism and eco-tourism - is becoming of strategic importance, particularly in times of financial crises.

UNESCO designated sites - namely, the *World Heritage sites* and the *Biosphere Reserves* - are playing a growing role in visitors' destination management, primarily due to their cultural and natural uniqueness and their iconic significance. Within this framework, the South Eastern European (SEE) region has more to contribute to the European and international tourism sector, by further promoting a proper management of its UNESCO sites and linking them to the major cultural and natural tourism destination networks.

The first part of the paper analyses the general framework which governs the UNESCO sites designation processes and management, in the light of the multi-scale and multiple players theoretical approaches of territorial governance. In the second part, the more specific role of those designations in fostering tourism and local development in SEE is taken into consideration, using the limited quantitative data which are currently available. At this scope, two specific cases - both World Heritage sites from the SEE region - are considered in details - the *Plitvice National Park* (Croatia) and the *Gamzigrad-Romuliana* (Serbia) - analysing the effects of designations to the visitors presence.

The findings tend to demonstrate that the process leading to the UNESCO designation and a proper trans-scale governance management in place result into contributing to the improvement of the tourism sector and the local development.

Keywords UNESCO designated sites (World Heritage sites and Biosphere Reserves), Cultural tourism, Eco-tourism, Cultural and natural heritage, Values