

## Article

# Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas—Application of the Prism of Sustainability Model

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**Abstract:** Research on the impact of protected areas on sustainable tourism development is undeniable. It means that protected areas should be significant tourism destinations for the success of sustainable tourism. The improvement of natural values, reduction of negative tourism effects on the area, strengthening of the residents' role in tourism planning, development of the nature-based form of tourism, adoption of legal regulations, and the provision of economic benefits for both managers and residents are the main activities of sustainable tourism development. The areas of Kopački Rit Nature Park in Croatia and Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve in Vojvodina Province (Northern Serbia) are parts of the European river protected area called "The European Amazon", and are protected as the Mura-Drava-Danube Transboundary UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. The aim of the research is to obtain significant results regarding the attitudes and satisfaction of 1225 residents with sustainable tourism development using a quantitative methodology (*PoS model*), and SPSS analysis of the carried-out questionnaire. The respondents' attitudes are related to the ecological, economic, sociocultural, and institutional sustainability of the protected area as a tourism destination. In addition, interviews were conducted with the managers of natural assets and experts in their tourist development. Answers from the interviews were used to confirm the obtained results.

**Keywords:** sustainability tourism development; residents' satisfaction; protected areas; prism of sustainability



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## 1. Introduction

Dealing with the development of tourism poses a number of tasks to researchers. In this regard, it is obvious that tourism is once again going through a turbulent period in its evolution. Obstacles affecting the progress of tourism have always been numerous. They were often invisible considering all the occurrences in the world in the previous and this century. Studying the sustainable development of tourism, the authors of this paper understand that changes and challenges are constant.

Sustainable tourism development is defined as a complex system in which numerous goals need to be reached [1,2]. Some of the most significant are ecological, sociocultural, and economic. Sustainable tourism development in protected areas is defined as a set of activities that managers implement into the protection measures of sensitive areas with the main aim to improve ecological principles [3,4], satisfying tourists and local communities and directing the largest part of the earnings obtained from tourism to management models [5]. Sustainable tourism development is most often affected by flora and fauna protection, area usage intensity, occupancy rate, local community role,

sociocultural impacts, tourism contribution to the local economy, development control, waste management, etc. [3,5–12].

When analyzing tourism's impact on protected areas, it is very important to investigate different aspects of these influences. Researchers must keep in mind that these are specific tourist destinations with distinct natural and cultural heritage. Safeguarding the cultural identity and cultural practices of local communities is also a sustainable development objective [13,14]. Therefore, it is essential to examine the attitudes of the population about sustainable tourism development [15,16] and the sustainability state of a destination [3,5,7,17–23].

The aim of the research in this paper is to obtain important results regarding the state of sustainable tourism development in the two selected protected areas by using quantitative methodology. This can be examined by measuring the perceived attitudes and satisfaction of the population with sustainable tourism development [23,24]. The respondents' answers can point to the significance of the protected areas to the preservation of ecological [25], economic, sociocultural, and institutional sustainability [26]. The research results could be used for creating a strategy for sustainable tourism development and future research on the significance of protected areas for the development of tourism destinations. The limitations that have occurred in this research concern the COVID-19 pandemic, which in a large number of cases represented a barrier to making contacts during the personal survey of residents.

## 2. Literature Review

Sustainable tourism development includes ecological, economic, and sociocultural sustainability [27]. The ecological dimension of tourism development refers to the positive aspect of tourism's impact on nature and the improvement of its elements [28]. Economic sustainability generates benefits for the local population through various aspects and impacts of tourism development, such as the impact on employment, earnings from selling entrance tickets, local products and services, strengthening of the role of the local population in tourism development planning and management processes, controlled use of resources, and other benefits [29,30].

Sociocultural sustainability is achieved through the positive impacts of tourism development on the attitudes and satisfaction of the local population [31,32]. It can be achieved by the promotion of local culture and cultural heritage, the development of positive interactions between tourists and the local population, and the implementation of initiatives, suggestions, and ideas from the local community and tourists toward the improvement of tourism offers [30,33]. In a Romanian context, Candrea and Bouriaud [34] identified that the main challenges for tourism in the protected area are the effective participation of communities in tourism development, harmonizing tourism to conservation goals, encouraging all stakeholders to support the conservation of biodiversity, and channeling part of tourism revenues toward supporting conservation.

In the paper by Trišić et al. [35], residents' satisfaction was examined in relation to the impacts and effects of four dimensions of sustainability (ecological, economic, socio-cultural, and institutional). The research was conducted in three protected areas: Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve, Kopački Rit Nature Park, and Danube-Drava National Park. According to the results of this research, the sociocultural and ecological dimensions of sustainability have the most significant impact on residents' satisfaction with sustainable tourism development. This extensive research has produced numerous results that can be used as a basis for tourism planning in protected areas. One of the more important results is that the local population must be actively involved in tourism planning and development. Additionally, for this type of destination, it is significant to develop specific forms of tourism, such as nature-based tourism, ecotourism, and bird-watching, which aim at protecting nature.

The forms of tourism in the protected areas must be based on nature and the improvement of the natural and social elements of the destination [36]. In a study on sustainable

tourism, Cottrell et al. [31] examined the impact of sustainable tourism development on residents of Frankenwald Nature Park using the PoS model in their research. By measuring four dimensions of sustainability, they concluded that sustainable tourism significantly affects the satisfaction of residents. These results indicate that protected areas can be formed as important tourist destinations. Creating such specific tourist destinations contributes to the development of awareness of nature conservation among residents and visitors [12].

Asmelash and Kumar [37] point out that the function of the protected areas in sustainable tourism development can be researched by examining the four dimensions of sustainability: ecological, economic, sociocultural, and institutional. The research results indicate a significant impact of sustainable tourism development on residents. The ecological and sociocultural aspects of the development of tourism in protected areas are important when planning and developing tourism in these destinations. Hussain et al. [38] examined the impact and importance of protected areas on sustainable tourism development by measuring four dimensions of sustainability (PoS model) [12]. The survey was conducted in the Jammu and Kashmir protected areas. They singled out environmental sustainability as the most significant dimension with the greatest impact.

An empirical study by Khan et al. [39], aimed to examine the impact of sustainable tourism on the attitudes of the local population and visitors to the Gilgit Protected Area in Pakistan, using qualitative and quantitative methodology. PLS-SEM statistical analysis was used in the research to analyze and present the data obtained by survey respondents. Basically, the questionnaire was designed according to the PoS model, with the aim of measuring ecological, economic, sociocultural, and institutional sustainability. In this paper, the basic research hypothesis was examined, namely: *The four dimensions of the prism of sustainability (ecological, economic, socio-cultural and institutional dimensions) and how they affect the inhabitants of Pakistan*. After the analysis, the concluding remarks indicate that the hypothesis is partially confirmed. It has not been confirmed in terms of economic and institutional sustainability. The ecological dimension was singled out as the most important dimension, which has the greatest impact on the satisfaction of residents and visitors. The institutional dimension indicates that there is a need for greater encouragement of various subjects in planning tourism development. These are state bodies, local businesses, companies, tourism, hotel companies, etc. In addition, economic factors play an important role, so it is necessary to provide significant financial resources for different projects, which should be directed to the planning and development of tourism.

Jeelani et al. [40] examined the attitudes of local people in the mountain tourism destination with a sensitive ecosystem, the “union territory of Jammu and Kashmir”. The main goal of this research was to show the importance of sustainable tourism development. Statistical data processing was performed with the help of the SUS-TAS method, which has the task of ranking and mutually rotating a total of 42 statements, which are positioned in seven groups. The second goal of the research was to determine which dimension of sustainability has priority in local activities and in relation to the protected area. After analysis, the ranked values are as follows: environmental sustainability (variable value 16.01), social consumption (6.03), economic profit (3.68), long-term planning (2.86), the role of the local community (1.79), visitor satisfaction (1.64), and central economy (1.57). The extremely high rating given to ecological sustainability indicates the developed awareness of the local population about the need and importance of protecting the space and the living world from the various influences to which this protected area is exposed. If this value is compared with the values of tourist satisfaction and economic profit, it can be concluded that special care is focused on ecological sustainability and on activities aimed at protecting this area. The results of the research can be used to make tourism development strategies that implement tourism in protected areas, which represents an important scientific contribution. Appropriate and relevant communication between the destinations and residents and between destinations and visitors is a key element of increasing satisfaction among both groups. Regarding the use of social media, Wilkins et al. [41] pointed out its role to inform park and protected area management, but also the shortcomings coming from the

fact that social media users may not be representative of all park visitors. Wilkins et al. [41] also concluded that social media can be used for visitation estimation, for exploration of spatial or temporal patterns of visitation, and for understanding the aspects of the visitor experience. Briciu et al. [42] concluded that place brands should use the Internet in order to gain visibility.

### 3. Research Areas

Kopački Rit Nature Park is a protected wet habitat located in the region of Baranja in northeastern Croatia, named after the village Kopačevo. In the wider area of the Park, there are the settlements of Bilje, Kopačevo, Vardarac, Lug, Grabovac, Kneževi Vinogradi, Suza, Znajevac, Batina, and Zlatna Greda. Osijek is the largest city (around 100,000 inhabitants), which represents the contractive tourism zone of this nature park [35]. The park covers an area of 231 km<sup>2</sup> [43].

Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve is located in the northwestern part of Serbia, in Vojvodina. It covers an area of 57,348 ha. The area of the reserve is very near the towns of Apatin (17,000 inhabitants) and Sombor (47,000 inhabitants), which represent the contractive tourism zone [44]. Besides these two towns, in the wider area of the reserve, there are the settlements of Bezdan, Bački Monoštor, Kupusina, and Sonta. The residents of these settlements use the resources of the reserve or they depend for living on tourism development to some extent.

Both of the protected areas represent an important tourism destination because they belong to a unique spatial system called “The European Amazon” [45]. It is protected as a transboundary UNESCO reserve of the Mura-Drava-Danube Biosphere and it includes 10 different protected areas in Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, and Serbia [35,46,47]. Besides the course of the Danube, “The European Amazon” also consists of the lower courses of the Mura River in Slovenia and the Drava River in Croatia, thus creating a 700 km long zone that covers an area of more than a million hectares [47]. The research areas can be seen in Figure 1.

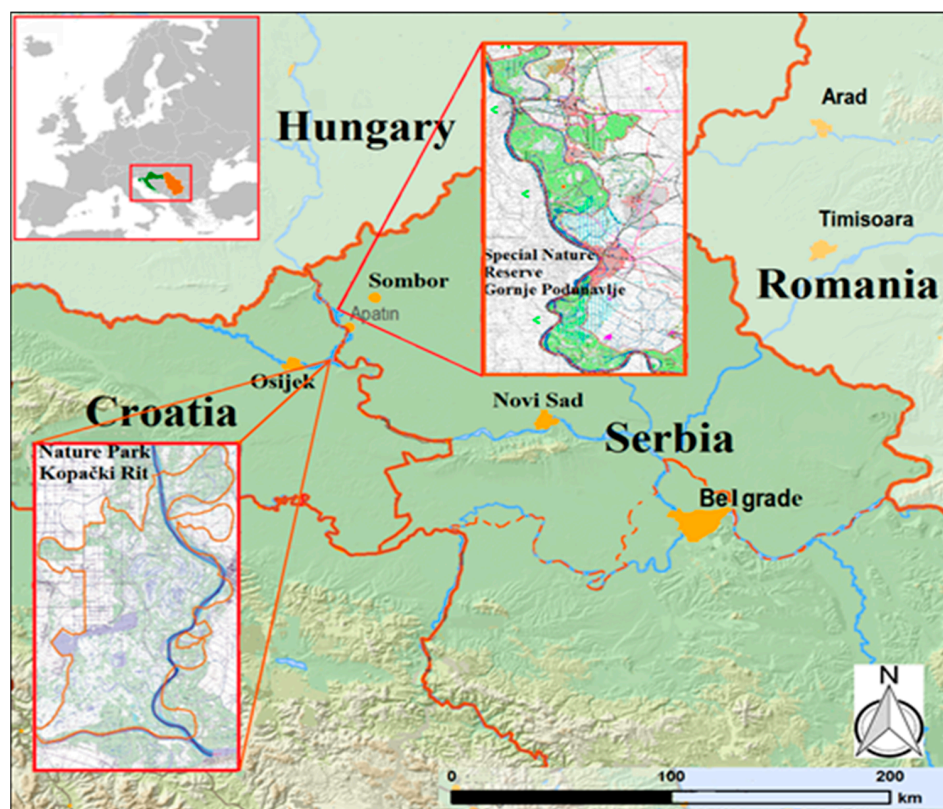


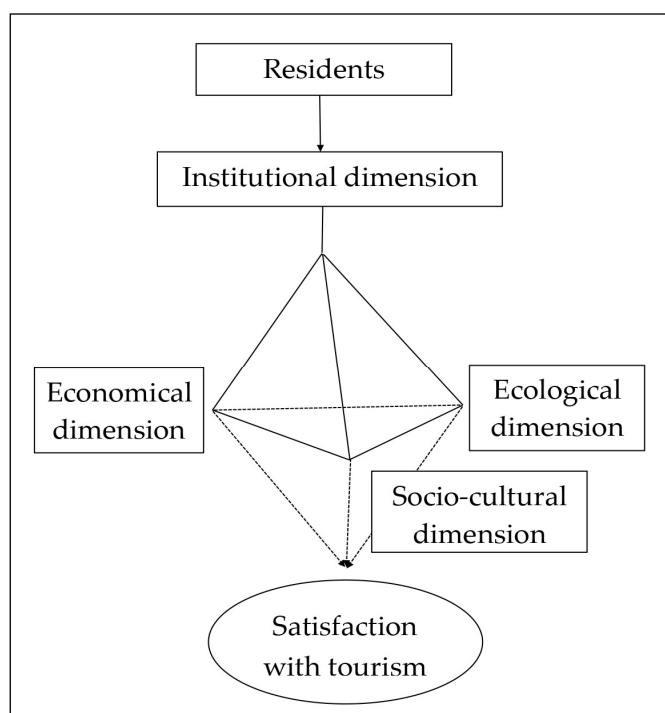
Figure 1. Study area—two cases from neighboring countries. Source: created by the author.



#### 4. Methodology

When researching certain topics and phenomena, it is very important that authors use previous research that deals with similar problems. Therefore, in this paper, the impact of sustainable tourism on the satisfaction of residents was studied by measuring the impact of four dimensions of sustainability, which is a continuation of the research of Trišić et al. [35]. Unlike the previous research, qualitative and quantitative methodologies were used in this research. This research includes a survey of residents in two protected border areas of the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Croatia. In order to achieve scientifically more thorough and representative results, the research was extended over time and included a larger sample, i.e., a larger number of respondents and settlements where the survey was conducted. In addition, this research also applies a qualitative method using the interview technique, with representatives of the management of protected areas and experts, with the aim of reaching significant results. The surveying technique was applied with the help of a questionnaire as an instrument. Respondents were selected using a random sample method. The survey was anonymous. It was done in person and electronically with the help of social networks.

The research model was conceived according to the PoS model (*Prism of Sustainability*), (Figure 2), which was used by Trišić et al. [35] in the research on sustainable tourism development in protected areas (Huayhuaca et al. [29], Cottrell et al. [31], and Kruger, Viljoen, and Saayman [48]). The research model was adapted to the study of the impact of sustainable tourism on the satisfaction of residents in Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve and Kopački Rit Nature Park.



**Figure 2.** Prism of Sustainability (*PoS model*). Source: Cottrell et al. (2013).

In the research, we used questionnaires with 17 statements grouped into four dimensions of sustainability and four questions related to the residents' satisfaction with sustainable tourism development (Tables 1 and 2). The respondents expressed their attitudes using the five-point Likert scale (1—absolutely disagree, 5—absolutely agree, while a score of 3 represents a neutral attitude) [48–53]. The survey was conducted from March 2020 to February 2023.

**Table 1.** Respondents' perceptions of the sustainable tourism dimensions (n = 1225).

Items	Kopački Rit Nature Park (n = 575)		Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve (n = 650)	
	$\alpha$	Mean	$\alpha$	Mean
<b>Dimensions of sustainable tourism</b>				
<b>Institutional dimension</b>	<b>0.612</b>	<b>3.40</b>	<b>0.656</b>	<b>3.16</b>
Tourists are guided through the protected area by trained guides and representatives of the local community		3.61		3.06
Tourists in the protected area can see local brands (wineries, ethno houses, handicrafts, local enterprises, etc.)		3.50		3.30
In the protected area, the manager's instructions on nature protection and tourist activities are followed		3.30		3.08
Tourists are provided with information that reflects the history of the reserve, its population, and its settlements		3.19		3.21
<b>Ecological dimension</b>	<b>0.772</b>	<b>4.22</b>	<b>0.713</b>	<b>3.94</b>
There is a joint role of tourists and locals in protecting the area		3.85		3.55
There are facilities, services, and activities available to tourists and the local community in the protected area		4.70		4.31
There are tourist facilities without impacts on the environment		4.11		3.96
<b>Economical dimension</b>	<b>0.701</b>	<b>4.15</b>	<b>0.649</b>	<b>3.70</b>
Tourism in the protected area benefits the local community		4.09		3.47
Tourism in the protected area supports the local economy		3.50		3.11
Tourism in the protected area contributes to the employment of the local population		4.17		3.46
Local products are available to tourists		4.59		4.21
Tourists support the payment of tickets to the protected area		4.41		4.29
<b>Sociocultural dimension</b>	<b>0.781</b>	<b>4.23</b>	<b>0.652</b>	<b>3.83</b>
Tourists are interested in home products and crafts		4.31		4.11
Tourists are in contact with the local community		3.61		3.42
Tourists are interested in local traditions and customs		4.21		3.47
Tourists visit local cultural facilities and events		4.49		4.32
Tourists are interested in historical sites		4.52		3.82

Items measured on a 5-point Likert agreement scale;  $\alpha$ —Cronbach's alpha reliability.

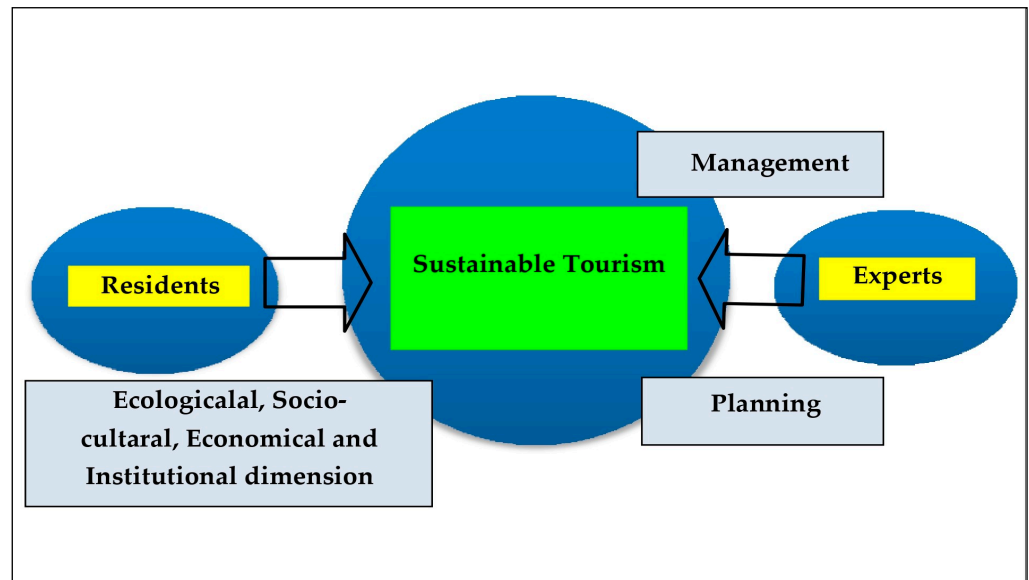
**Table 2.** Scale items for the satisfaction index (n = 1225).

Index	Kopački Rit Nature Park (n = 575)		Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve (n = 650)	
	$\alpha$	Mean	$\alpha$	Mean
	<b>0.721</b>	<b>4.29</b>	<b>0.687</b>	<b>4.04</b>
Tourism in the protected area provides benefits for me and my family		4.11		4.21
For me, sustainable tourism is very important		4.51		4.11
For me, this area is an important destination owing to tourism		4.66		4.33
The quality of my life and the life of my family has improved due to tourism		3.86		3.53

It was stated that in this research, in addition to surveying residents, qualitative research and data collection techniques were also included. Interviews were conducted with experts and management representatives who have direct or indirect connections with both protected areas. Interviews were carried out through IT applications, by phone, or by e-mail. The interviewed experts have different functions in the management, planning, and control of tourism development in the studied areas. Moreover, the experts were asked selected questions. The questions were about an expert view of the state of sustainable development of tourism in Kopački Rit Nature Park in Croatia and Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve in Vojvodina Province (Northern Serbia). The purpose of interviewing experts and representatives of managers of protected areas is to compare the results of the resident

survey with the results of the conducted interviews in order to determine the value of the obtained results. By comparing the results, more reliable conclusions can be drawn about the sustainable development of tourism.

The conceptual model of research can be seen in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** The conceptual model.

The quantitative methodology was applied using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS v.21), (IBM, NY, USA). Cronbach's alpha analysis was used for testing the reliability of samples and measuring the four dimensions of sustainability and the level of the residents' satisfaction with sustainable tourism development. Finally, using the regression analysis, the value of satisfaction with sustainability dimensions was examined [31]. The comparison method was used for the results obtained for both protected areas in all the findings.

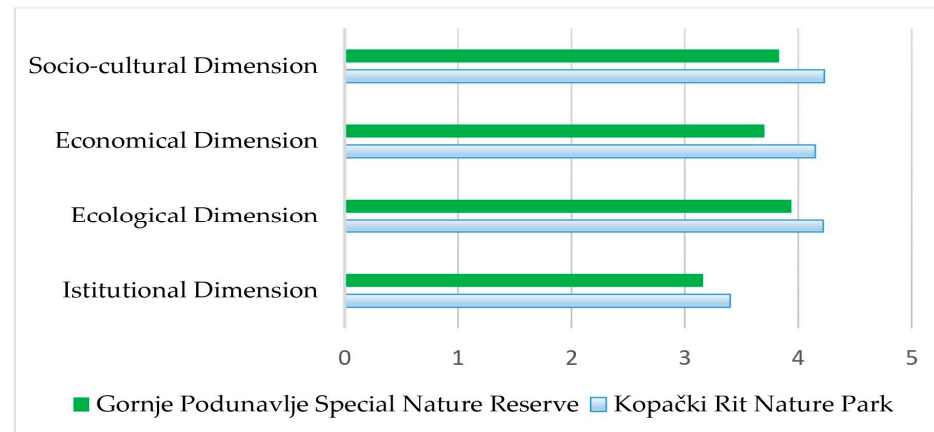
## 5. Results

The total sample consisted of 1225 respondents (46.94% in Croatia and 53.06% in Serbia). All questionnaires were valid for statistical analysis. The settlements in the Republic of Croatia where the survey regarding Kopački Rit Nature Park was performed were Osijek—45%, Kopačevo—21%, Bilje—12%, Vardarac—11%, Lug—7%, and Mece—4% of the total number of respondents. The settlements in the Republic of Serbia where the survey of the respondents regarding Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve was performed were Sombor—38%, Apatin—26%, Bački Monoštor—16%, Bezdán—10%, Prigrevica—6%, and Kupusina—4%. All the completed questionnaires were valid for the analysis. Among the respondents of both areas ( $n = 1225$ ), most of them were female (57%). The average age was 39 (ranging from 18 to 75). The largest number of the respondents completed secondary education (60.5%), 21.5% of them had elementary education, 12% had college or university education, and 6% of the respondents had master's or Ph.D. degrees. Most of the respondents were employed and lived from their work (77.3%), they were followed by the unemployed (11.7%), students (7.1), and pensioners (3.9%).

The reliability of variables was examined in order to test sustainability dimensions and residents' satisfaction with sustainable tourism development in the protected area. The indices were computed as variable means comprising each dimension (independent variables). The results of the performed regression analysis point to a high level of satisfaction with four sustainability dimensions. The Cronbach alpha scores were 0.61 and 0.65 (Kopački Rit Nature Park and Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve) for the institutional dimension (four items), 0.77 and 0.71 for the ecological dimension (three items),

0.70 and 0.64 for the economic dimension (five items), 0.78 and 0.65 for the sociocultural dimension (five items) (Table 1), and 0.72 and 0.69 for the satisfaction index for both protected areas (Table 2). From Contrel et al. [54] and Nunnally and Bernstein [55], “ $\alpha$ ” of 0.60 can be accepted as reliable in research where there are six or fewer researched items.

The obtained average values for each protected area, according to the dimensions of sustainability, can be seen in Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** The values of sustainability dimensions.

The sociocultural dimension has a higher value in the research of Kopački Rit Nature Park in Croatia ( $M = 4.23$ ) and the ecological dimension ( $M = 4.22$ ), followed by the economic dimension ( $M = 4.15$ ) and institutional dimension ( $M = 3.40$ ). In the research on the dimensions of sustainable tourism development regarding the Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve, the obtained values are insignificantly lower. The ecological dimension has the highest value ( $M = 3.94$ ), followed by the sociocultural dimension ( $M = 3.83$ ), the economic dimension ( $M = 3.70$ ), and the institutional dimension ( $M = 3.16$ ). The economic and institutional dimensions have lower values in both of the protected areas. The overall mean value of satisfaction with sustainable tourism development in Kopački Rit Nature Park is  $M = 4.29$  and in Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve is  $M = 4.04$  (Table 2).

Using the regression analysis, it can be determined whether each sustainability dimension contributes to the residents' satisfaction with sustainable tourism development [29,55–58]. The assumption was supported by all four-dimensional scores as significant predictors of residents' satisfaction with tourism [29,59] accounting for 39% (Kopački Rit Nature Park) and 32% (Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve) of the variances explained ( $R_1^2 = 0.387$ ;  $R_2^2 = 0.312$ ) (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Regression analysis on residents' satisfaction in each protected area ( $n = 1225$ ).

Satisfaction with Tourism Items	Kopački Rit Nature Park ( $n = 575$ )		Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve ( $n = 650$ )	
	$\beta^1$	$p$ -Value	$\beta^1$	$p$ -Value
Institutional dimension	0.156	0.000	0.122	0.000
Ecological dimension	0.223	0.000	0.216	0.000
Economic dimension	0.177	0.000	0.101	0.000
Sociocultural dimension	0.196	0.000	0.156	0.000

<sup>1</sup> Standardized  $\beta$  value used;  $R_1^2 = 0.387$ ;  $R_2^2 = 0.316$ .

As part of the interviews that were conducted with tourism development experts and representatives of protected area management, important issues related to the development



of sustainable tourism in these two destinations were discussed. Considering the importance of the local community for the preservation of protected areas, a very important issue was the possibility of their influence on the decision-making process regarding protected areas. The second issue was related to the financing of protected areas. Considering the funds allocated for promotion and presentation, the next question is what types of specific forms of tourism exist in protected areas and in what ways they develop. One of the very important aspects of tourism in protected areas is the participation of the local population. The following question is related to this problem in the form: Is it present and is it implemented in the observed areas?

When formulating questions for experts and representatives of managers of these protected areas, the authors consulted important documents for these areas. These are documents that regulate the management and protection of these areas, as well as documents that regulate the development of tourism. The goal was to determine whether there are scientific, managerial, and public policy implications. The intention was to ask respondents to what extent the mentioned implications are present in protected areas. As part of the interview, the respondents expressed their views that scientific implications are the most measurable. This was stated by the experts from both protected areas. This coincides with the documents defining the protection plan and management of protected areas. Respondents for Nature Park Kopački Rit identified the scientific implications to a greater extent, while the respondents of the other protected area stated that the ecological implications were presented more in the form of plans. The respondents of both areas recognized the ecological implications as significant results of proper management of these areas. This coincides with the management strategies, in which the priority is the protection of the area and the development of nature-based forms of tourism. Respondents (experts) of both areas stated that management measures and activities are also an integral part of important strategic documents that regulate the management of this area. Management activities aim to improve protection and develop tourism without harmful consequences for the environment. Respondents stated that the implications of public policies are reflected mostly through the adoption of legal acts related to protected areas and financing on various bases, including funds and donations. Respondents of the protected areas of Kopački Rit Nature Park identified these impacts as more present and measurable to a greater extent. As it became clear during the research that the issue of implications is of great scientific importance, the authors will devote their future research to a thorough examination of this issue. Researching possible implications will include active fieldwork and numerous research methods and techniques as part of a case study.

## 6. Discussion

The inclusion of the Delphi method in the research helped us to confirm or refute previously obtained results. If we analyze the obtained average values of the given answers according to the dimensions of sustainability (Table 1), it can be concluded that the residents of both areas are significantly interested in environmental sustainability (4.22 and 3.94) and sociocultural sustainability (4.23 and 3.83). This is significant to observe from the aspect of the importance of specific forms of tourism, which need to be developed within these destinations. These forms of tourism can unite complementary tourist motives. In fact, different forms of tourism can contribute to sociocultural and environmental sustainability. The inclusion of ethno-social tourism motives and the local population in the development of tourism and the protection of nature are imperatives for the sustainable development of tourism. Possible more significant specific forms of tourism in both areas are nature-based tourism, ecotourism, scientific tourism, birdwatching, trips, hiking, nature watching, etc. The relatively lower obtained values of the institutional dimension may indicate the absence of significant support from various local, state, and international institutions.

Analyzing the data in Table 3, it can be concluded that the order of the obtained individual values is identical for both examined protected areas. The obtained data point to the fact that each sustainability dimension significantly contributes to the residents'

satisfaction with sustainable tourism development in both protected areas. If we compare these results with the research results obtained by Trišić et al. [35], Huayhuaca et al. [29], and Cottrell et al. [31], we can conclude that there is a significant similarity: in all the studies there is a significant impact of sustainable tourism on the satisfaction of residents and, therefore, residents are an important factor in planning tourism development. The role of residents in the development of tourism in protected areas must be an integral part of tourism development planning by all institutions.

The sociocultural dimension of sustainability is important to strengthen the interaction between visitors and residents [60]. The local community is the most important stakeholder and tourism products depend on their cooperation [61,62]. Through social interaction with destination residents, tourists increase their understanding of the locals and can play the role of “cultural brokers” between them and the community’s culture [63].

The development of various specific forms of tourism within protected areas, with the active role of residents, can strengthen the sociocultural importance of these important destinations for tourism. Such forms of tourism are educational, cultural, nature-based, wine, and event tourism; bird-watching, schools in nature, excursions, sports, and adventure tourism. A tourist offer should include local products, crafts, folklore, the local community’s gastronomy, events, cultural centers, educational programs on the importance of nature protection, etc. [64]. Tourist experiences have to be designed across all senses to maximize the overall tourist experience and decision-making process [65]. When the quality of the tourism experience is improved, then the sense of local pride and identity is enriched, helping to preserve traditional economic activities [66].

The experts emphasized that, unfortunately, their great influence in the development of many aspects of their protected areas does not exist. As the reason for this, they cited insufficient connection with regional institutions, the Republic Institute for Nature Protection, as well as departments in the government, at which level decisions are made. The influence of local experts can be advisory, but it is often not used to a sufficient extent. In response to the second question, the experts emphasized that funding is provided, but it is not enough if we want to develop a greater level of protection in these areas. In addition, the financial resources provided for tourism development are not enough. This directly affects the possibility of better promotion and presentation of these areas. Regarding the possibility of developing specific forms of tourism, the experts answered that “classic” specific forms of tourism are being developed in these destinations, such as ecotourism, hiking, sightseeing, and bird-watching. Other specific forms of tourism are less developed because they require considerable financial resources. The participation of the local population in the development of tourism is significant for the Kopački Rit Nature Park area. According to experts, this is primarily because for many years (over 20 years) they have been working on education and the inclusion of residents in the tourism development of this area. In contrast to the area of Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve, the situation is different and presents a problem. Our recommendation is that it is necessary to work much more intensively on education and the involvement of the local population in tourism development.

As the weakest point in the development of tourism in the observed protected areas, significantly less value appears in connection with institutional sustainability. This coincides with the opinions of experts about the absence of the local community in the development of protected areas.

## 7. Conclusions

Massification of tourist movements and the development of tourism leads to unwanted consequences for the natural and cultural environment. Mass tourism can affect the destruction of sensitive ecosystems and mountain areas, the denial of local culture, and the consumption of natural and cultural resources. There are many examples of the expansion of tourism that ignored its negative elements. Therefore, it is extremely important to point out the possibility of creating specific tourist destinations.

Using the quantitative methodology in the research, results have shown that Kopački Rit Nature Park and Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve are unique tourism destinations for sustainable tourism. Studying protected areas in Serbia and Croatia, it is evident that both countries understand the importance of protected areas. The question is whether they equally affect the preservation and development of such areas. The examined attitudes and the residents' satisfaction with sustainable tourism development in both protected areas point to a significant impact of sustainable tourism development on the residents' perception and satisfaction. Studying the perception and satisfaction of tourists and residents in relation to tourism development is not easy at all. Knowing that sustainable tourism development presupposes a higher level of awareness and knowledge about the protection of natural and cultural values, the researchers have the task of determining that level of knowledge among the respondents. The obtained values of the residents' perception are relatively identical to the results of the satisfaction examination in both areas. Each area is taken individually, and it can be concluded that the obtained results are relatively identical in both observed protected areas. Slightly higher values of the residents' perception and satisfaction with sustainable tourism development are found for Kopački Rit Nature Park. The analysis of the obtained result values shows that there is a significant impact of sustainable tourism development in both of the protected areas. For further development of the destination, it is very important to evaluate the competitive advantages that will be constructed in relation to other similar destinations by reinforcing the unique elements of its identity [67].

Tourism can achieve significant benefits for the residents through all four sustainability dimensions: ecological, sociocultural, economic, and institutional sustainability. The results obtained using the comparative analysis of these two protected areas point to the significance of sustainable tourism development, not only for both of the countries taken individually but for the whole region as well. Residents are key elements when developing different forms of creative tourism as nowadays this type of tourism should be the aim of the places such as protected areas [68–70].

Interviews with experts and managers of protected areas contributed to a better understanding of the results obtained in the investigated areas. The perceived lack of cooperation of the local community with higher decision-making bodies has a negative impact on the protected assets. This means that it is necessary to influence the strengthening of local institutions and their role in the development of sustainable tourism, as well as the improvement of their work.

#### *Limitations and Future Studies*

The authors will focus their future research on the impact of these areas on the tourists' attitudes toward the level and scope of sustainable tourism development in these two preserved areas. By investigating individual protected areas, the authors have studied each work as a new puzzle to create a complete picture of the sustainable development of tourism in different protected areas. Researching visitor attitudes and satisfaction is particularly important for area managers. In this way, sustainable tourism experiences can be identified in order to increase interest in sustainable tourism programs [71]. Local communities must be the bearers of sustainable tourism development in protected areas. However, they often do not have adequate human resources that could meet all the requirements of sustainable tourism development for that. Therefore, the authors of this paper will continue with a deeper analysis of all elements of sustainable development in protected areas. Compiling the results of individual research, the authors will soon publish a comprehensive analysis of the development of sustainable tourism in protected areas.

Despite its contribution to the recent literature on residents' satisfaction with sustainable tourism development, the present study has some limitations, which open paths for future research. The first limitation might come from our chosen research methods. Despite the high number of respondents, the quantitative studies do not harvest valuable insights provided by the qualitative methods. That is why in this paper, the interview technique

of experts and management teams of protected areas was applied. The authors will use this technique in further works in order to confirm or not their quantitative research. A second limitation might be the focus on two areas from two neighboring countries. Future studies may consider comparisons between nature parks from different continents or far-distant countries.

New ideas resulting from this research will be directed toward the promotion and branding of protected natural and cultural assets. In addition, the authors will also deal with the influence of social media and the quality of websites of specific destinations in the next paper. Such continuous research of protected areas can create a proper promotion and policy of appearance on the global tourist market. It is a matter of branding these destinations because place branding and destination branding strategies are required for protected areas and the branding process needs the residents to be involved [72,73]. From a perspective of the branding process for a big city, Zenker and Beckmann [74] stated that “it is crucial to assess brand associations of the various target groups and then to highlight the distinct advantages of the place”, but this discussion is a perfect fit for other types of destinations. Additionally, new trends in communications have to be considered in promoting protected areas as sustainable tourism destinations. Palazzo et al. [75] revealed the role of Instagram’s influencers in generating engagement and how they can act as central hubs in raising awareness of destinations’ sustainable attributes. Bearing in mind the power of branding, communication, and social media and the promotion of protected spaces [76,77], the authors will deepen the presented research in this direction.

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