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Sustainable tourism in the Caucasus - overview and case study
Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park (Georgia)

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SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Overview and Case Study of Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park (Georgia)

Abstract by Karin Steinmetzer

Tourism in the South Caucasus: Overview

The South Caucasus region is still a 'blank spot' on the world tourist map; currently existing tourism is merely niche tourism (explorers segment). While there is little chance that the South Caucasus will become a top international destination, the niche tourism has great potential to develop into sustainable high quality cultural tourism and ecotourism. Even in its current undeveloped state, tourism already contributes significantly to the local economy and is especially important for mountainous areas where there are few economic alternatives.

Georgia's potential is rooted in its fantastically situated cultural monuments, its unspoiled nature, as well as its ancient cultural values. Armenia boasts monuments from early Christianity in spectacular locations, and Azerbaijan's main attraction is its capital city, the old town of Baku. Thus, the current core product for the region is a study trip, partly combined with hiking.

During Soviet times, Georgia - the "Soviet Riviera" and "Switzerland of the Soviet Union" - welcomed more than 1.8 million tourists per year. The system and its infrastructure completely collapsed in 1990. Even though such figures may never be reached again, 2005 was the best year for tourism in Georgia since it gained independence in 1991, with more than half a million visitors travelling to Georgia, of whom about 30,000 went for holiday purposes.

The main obstacles for tourism development in the South Caucasus are the poor standards of services, the internationally non-competitive price-quality ratio and the totally inadequate tourism infrastructure, especially in Georgia (e.g. signposting, road conditions, sanitary facilities) as well as the lack of marketing, even despite Georgia's current efforts.

Local conditions for development of sustainable tourism

There are good preconditions for sustainable tourism development in the South Caucasus with regard to sustainability principles pertaining to the environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development. For the overall goal of poverty alleviation, regional development through community-based tourism is an important strategy.

Therefore, a favourable fact is that tourism, especially in Georgia, is mainly focused in rural areas. Much of the money spent by tourists directly contributes to the local economy as accommodation is run by local residents, and food is purchased locally. Furthermore, the tourism industry is controlled by local incoming agencies (tour operators based in Tbilisi) rather than international companies, which is favourable for the local economy.

Unlike many other developing countries or countries in transition, the South Caucasus does not import goods or services to support its tourism, but uses local resources. However, this leads to one of the most important obstacles for the further development of tourism today: the low standard of tourism services. Strong efforts in tourism education are inevitable.

Main threats to sustainable tourism development

The main threat to environmental resources, one of the main resources for tourism development, is uncontrolled development stemming from the lack of a proper land use plan. Speculation, lack of experience, and perhaps ignorance are likely reasons for unsustainable development. Furthermore, no tourist spot has adequate waste or wastewater management. Soil erosion and illegal logging also threaten the natural heritage.

Case study: Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park

In 1995 Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park was established in central Georgia with the support of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the German Government, and it was officially inaugurated in 2001, and opened for tourists in 2003.

This was the first national park in the Caucasus region - the first to be established according to international standards and the first opened for visitors. The park's Visitors' Service offers tourist information and guide service, and the infrastructure includes 9 tourist trails, 4 tourist huts and a locally run guest house. The National Park offers opportunities for eco-tourism, environmental education and recreational opportunities at its entrance areas.

Due to its isolation and protection, Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park is a refuge for the large spectrum of flora and fauna found in the Lesser Caucasus. This includes several rare and endangered species, relict species and species endemic to the central Caucasus region. The park's tourist potential is based on diverse ecosystems (virgin mountain forests, alpine meadows), easy access to the main trails, safe hiking and the attractive surrounding region.

Visitor growth

The number of tourists visiting the park increased substantially since its opening. The first year the national park recorded 1,021 visitors (2003); in 2004 this figure increased to 1,688, and in 2005 the total amount of 2,520 visitors was recorded. The main trends during this period were:

- *Purpose of visit:* Increased interest from educational institutions
- *Information sources:* mainly Personal recommendation; increasing importance of Internet
- *Seasonality:* strong seasonality (July, August, September)
- *Country of origin:* Fewer Georgian and European visitors; more Israelis over the years

Objectives for further growth include increasing the number of Georgians visiting their park, as well as increasing the number of overnight stays, broadening the season, propagating topic-centred guided tours (e.g. bird-watching tours, wildlife tracking) with an educational background and further involvement of locals (mountain farms, local guest houses).

Main reasons for success

The main reasons for the increased numbers of visitors are:

- *Cooperation:* Strong collaboration with tour operators from the early stage
- *Evaluation:* Regular evaluation within the Visitors and Guide Service
- *Process orientated planning:* Steady surveys of tourists and tour operators for feedback and recommendations, which is considered for future planning
- *Ownership:* Strong local ownership - highly committed staff
- *Marketing and PR:* Numerous target-specific marketing and PR activities, including VIPs

There is a high level of acceptance of the national park in the surrounding region, due to the fact that strong partners (both local and international) have been involved in designing and implementing the national park's strategy. Information campaigns by WWF since the beginning in the surrounding regions, continuous dissemination of information, a high volume special support zone development programme and the involvement of locals in the national park tourism development contributed to the high acceptance.

Besides conservation of the natural heritage and essential efforts in quality improvement, a key precondition for any further tourism development in the national park - or anywhere in the region - is further peaceful development in the Caucasus, as the tourist market is very sensitive to any instability, act of war or terrorism in holiday destinations.

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www.tourism.gov.ge; www.nationalpark.ge

Sustainable tourism in the South Caucasus

- example Georgia
- case study Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park



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Tourism in Georgia

- Top destination during Soviet Times
- Breakdown after independence
- Blank spot – „Terra incognita“ on today's world tourist map, but:
- Increasing Tourist arrivals – 2005 best year since independence
- Potential based on cultural heritage and diverse landscape



Current goals & strategy of the Tourist Department

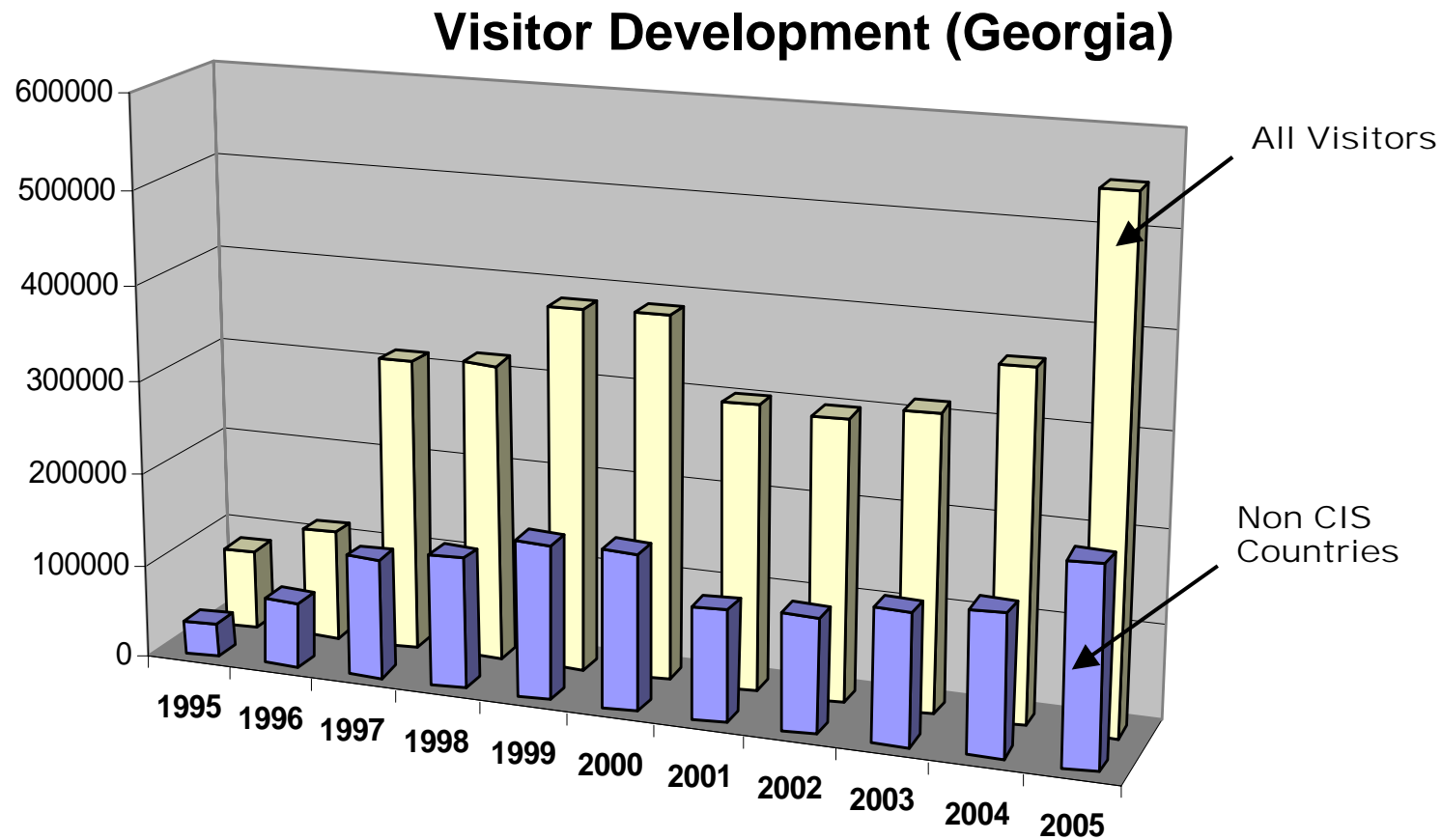
- Put it back on world tourist map – Repositioning
- Positioning as all year round destination
- No mass tourism (except Black Sea Coast) but quality tourism

Through

- Branding, international Marketing and PR
- Support of private sector
- Infrastructure development
- Improving services in public sector
- Improving access

Tourist product

- Core product: Cultural tours, Adventure trips
- Main segment: Explorers tourism



Frame conditions for sustainable tourism

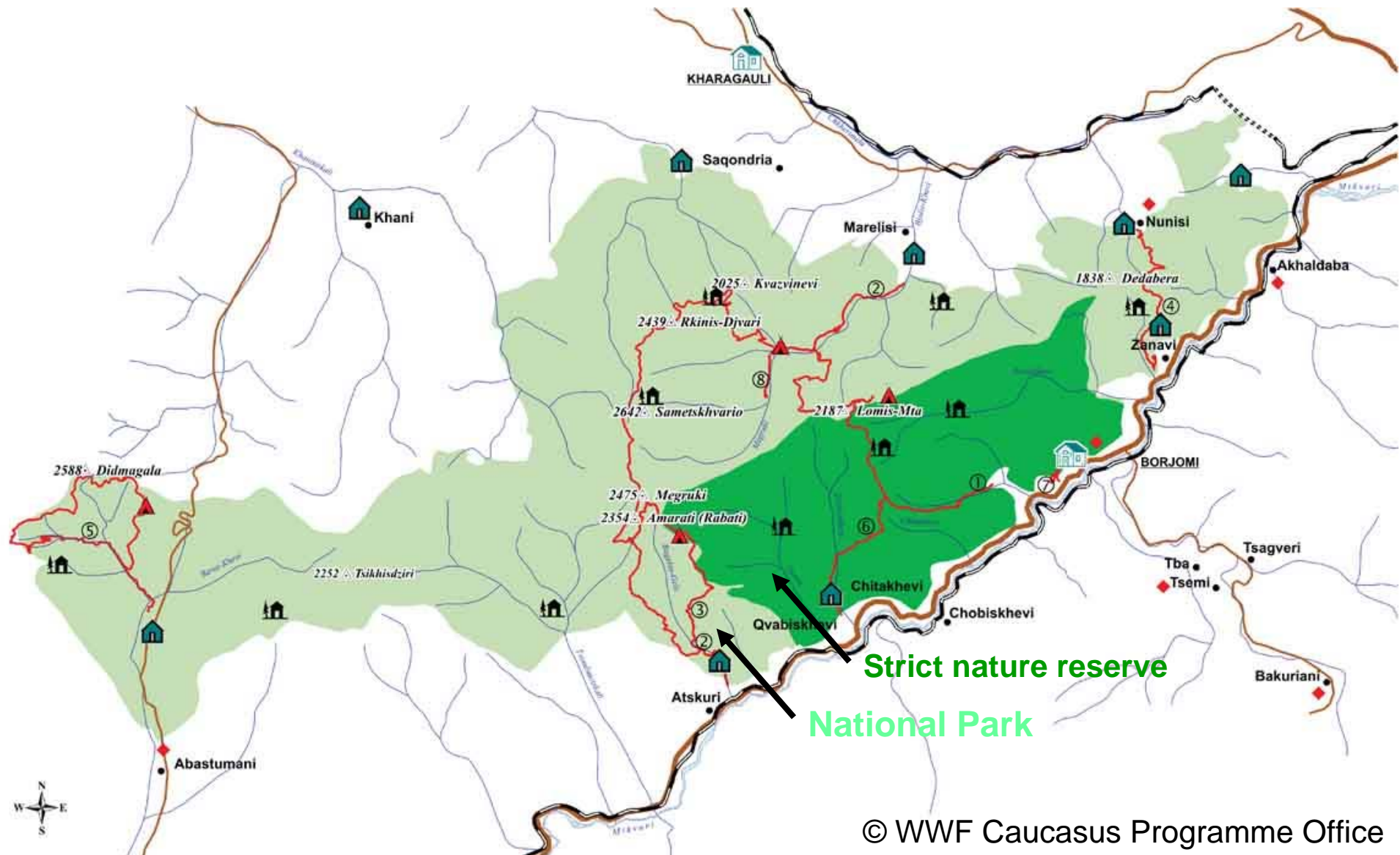
- Tourism business is mainly controlled by locals (local tours operators, private accommodation in rural areas)
- Tourism mainly focuses on rural areas – main sites to visit in mountain areas
- No import of goods or services, but use of local resources.
- Despite comparably few arrivals, tourism already significantly contributes to the local economy
- Setting of cultural monuments in spectacular Caucasian landscape USP for Georgia



Threats for development of sustainable tourism

- Uncontrolled development – speculation, lack of experience, lack of (participative) planning
- Threats for the natural heritage:
 - no proper waste or waste-water management in tourist areas
 - illegal logging
 - soil erosion
- Political instability

Case study Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park



Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park

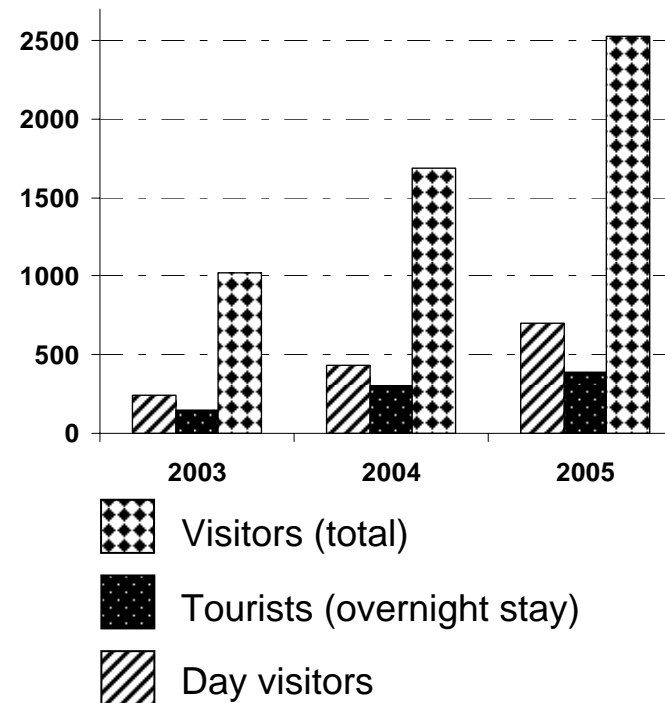
- was officially inaugurated on April 11, 2001.
- is the first National Park in the Caucasus region established according to international standards
- was implemented by WWF with support of the German government (KFW, CIM)



Current state of tourist infrastructure

- 4+2 tourist shelters
- 9 trails - trail net approx 190 km
- Camp sites & picnic sites
- Entrance gates

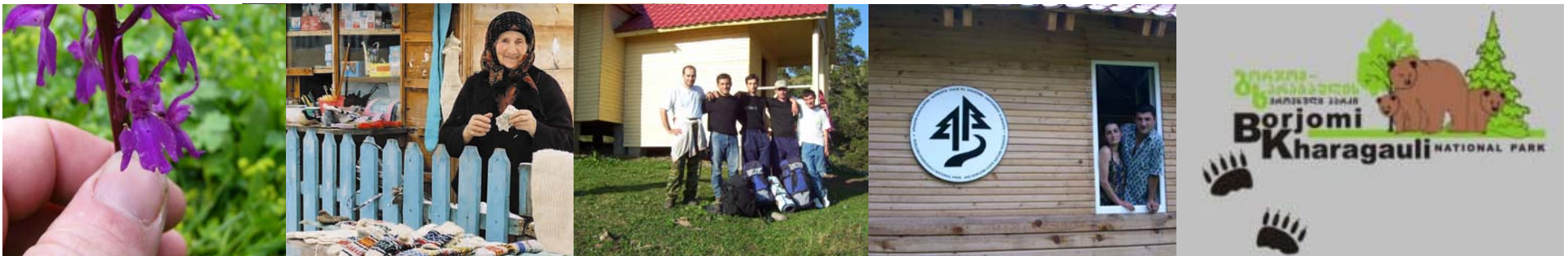
Visitor Growth



Objectives for tourism development

- to provide additional income to the NP
- to support local economy
- to facilitate nature experience and environmental education for visitors

Tourist development strategy focused on integration of surrounding villages



High acceptance of the National Park in the region

Activities for success

- Continuous information in the surrounding villages from an early stage
- Support zone programme aimed to improvement of socioeconomic situation
- Involvement of locals in tourism development wherever possible
- Environmental education with local school classes
- Involvement of VIPs for PR



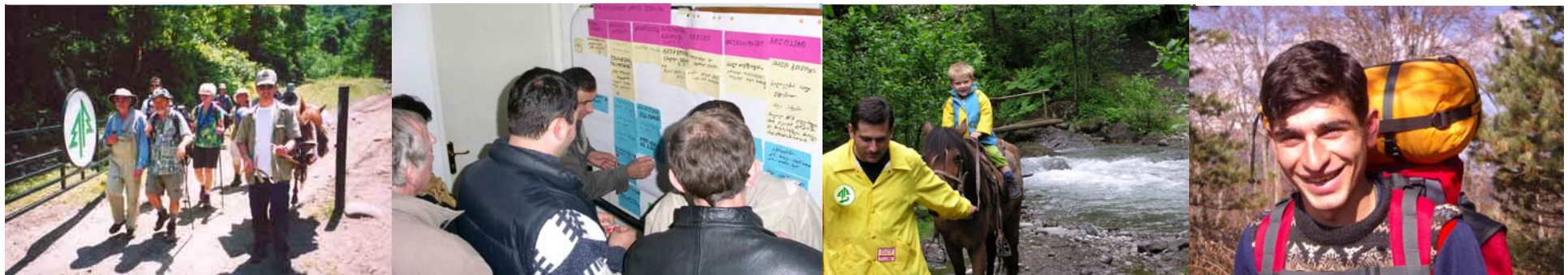
Tourist Development

Activities for success

Quality management for the National Park:

- obtaining steadily feedback from guests & tracking guests reclamations
- regular evaluation within the Visitors and Guide Service
- regular trainings for all involved in toruism development

And strong collaboration with Georgia based TOs (Incoming Agencies) from the very beginning



Perspectives

- Implementation of the sustainable tourism strategy 2nd phase:
Increase demand and strengthen position through
 - more involvement in regional development
 - increase co-financing through tourism
 - enhanced marketing for domestic tourism
 - application for **PANParks** certification
- Implementation of a Trust Fund for sustainable financing of the National Park (WWF-KFW)
- Ongoing programs in the support zone aimed to improvement of socioeconomic situation from various donor organizations

