



Enhancing financial sustainability of the Protected Areas system in Georgia

Piloting of Entrance Fees to Lagodekhi and Mtirala National Parks

Concept



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Abbreviations

APA	Agency of Protected Areas
GEF	Global Environment Facility
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
LPA	Lagodekhi Protected Areas
LNP	Lagodekhi National Park
MNP	Mtirala National Park
NP	National Parks
NPA	National Protected Areas
PA	Protected Area
PWD	Persons with disabilities
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

1. Introduction

The present concept is a general policy document that reflects a unified vision for the introduction of entry fees in the protected areas of Georgia. It outlines strategic goals and business recommendations for action

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plans, taking into account international practices. The document describes the attitudes of various stakeholders towards the introduction of entrance fees to protected areas (PAs) and provides a unified approach for developing action plans for subsequent piloting. It also evaluates the existing capabilities of the administration employees of Mtirala NP and Lagodekhi PAs to implement the entry fee scheme, including fee collection and payment operations, as well as public communication (with an emphasis on local residents). A list of interviewees is attached. Additionally, the concept describes the experiences of administering entry fees in other protected areas and provides examples of practices working with different target groups.

2. General framework of the concept

"The main goal of protected areas is the conservation of biodiversity, which is a national priority for the country. The new concept of protected and other conservation areas in Georgia¹ is based on the 'Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework' to achieve the vision of the Biodiversity Convention - 'Living in harmony with nature by 2050.'² It also takes into account the commitments made by the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030. According to the strategy, the country aims for strict protection of at least 10% of its area with protected³ and other conservation areas. Areas of particular importance for biodiversity, as well as ecosystem functions and services, should be protected and managed through effective area-based conservation measures (Goal 3).

"The concept of an entrance fee takes into account the IUCN's fundamental principles of 'Tourism and Visitor Management in Protected Areas.' According to these principles, for tourism in protected areas to be sustainable, it must primarily contribute to the long-term conservation of nature and ensure the preservation of biodiversity through appropriate visitor management.⁴

The concept also aligns with Georgia's ecotourism strategy, which is based on the principles of the Global Ecotourism Network⁵.

Those who carry out, participate in, and market ecotourism activities should adhere to the following principles of authentic ecotourism:

- *Create direct financial benefits for conservation, community and private sector;*
- *Creating conditions for guests to have a memorable interpretive experience helps raise awareness about the political, environmental, and social climate of the host countries;*
- *Creating a positive experience for both visitors and hosts;*
- *Designing, constructing, and operating facilities with minimal environmental impact;*
- *Minimize physical, social, behavioral, and psychological impact on fauna and flora;*
- *Recognize and respect the rights and spiritual beliefs of indigenous and local populations, strengthening them through participatory cooperation.*

¹ On the initiative of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia (MEPA), and with the financial support of the Swedish Government through the Swedish Development and Cooperation Agency (SIDA), a working version of the new concept for protected and other conservation areas was prepared in December 2023 under the project "Save Nature - Georgia".

² Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, CBD/COP/15/L.25, December 18, 2022.

<https://www.cbd.int/doc/c/e6d3/cd1d/daf663719a03902a9b116c34/cop-15-l-25-en.pdf>

<https://www.cbd.int/gbf/vision/>

³ Strict protection does not necessarily mean the area is not accessible to humans, but leaves natural processes essentially undisturbed to respect the areas' ecological requirements."

⁴ Leung, Yu-Fai, Spenceley, Anna, Hvenegaard, Glen, and Buckley, Ralf (eds.) (2018). Tourism and visitor management in protected areas: Guidelines for sustainability. Best Practice Protected Area Guidelines Series No. 27, Gland, Switzerland: IUCN. xii + 120 pp.

<https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/PAG-027-En.pdf>

⁵ Ecotourism Strategy of Georgia 2020 -2030 and Action Plan PSD TVET SC/GIZ.

Initiating and implementing ecotourism activities in protected areas is also seen as a mechanism for involving the local population in the sustainable use of natural resources, enhancing public engagement, and promoting environmental education⁶. It aims to achieve broader goals beyond simply traveling to a destination. Georgia's ecotourism concept, approved in 2021, emphasizes biodiversity protection and conservation, along with environmental education and interpretation.

Ecotourism is a bundle of socially and ecologically responsible forms of travel, non-motorized activities and services that offer experiences and interpretation of nature and cultures, well-managed and with low environmental impact. It promotes an understanding of nature among travellers, but also generates appreciation among the local people for their own natural and cultural values. It thus contributes to the preservation of nature, to the sustainable use of ecosystem services, has regional added value and supports high quality of life for the local population.

Based on the above, the main essence and idea of the entrance fee to the PAs of Georgia is to promote the creation of financial benefits for conservation, ecosystem services and the minimization of environmental impacts.

3. Methodology

The document was developed based on situation analysis of the protected areas in Georgia (see chapter 4). The analysis incorporated the findings from secondary research, consultations with the Agency of Protected Area, territorial administrations of Lagodekhi, Mtirala, Martvili PAs, the Network of Friends of Protected Areas, 'Nakresi,' the Ecotourism Association, and other local and sectoral institutions, representatives, and experts.

See attached Stakeholder Engagement Plan for more details.

4. International experience with entry fees

Lack of funding is one of the most significant barriers to achieving the conservation goals of protected areas⁷. There are various approaches to funding PAs, as well as numerous innovative ideas for generating revenue and managing visitors. The financing fund is primarily used for resource management, including conservation activities, public education, park protection, and the maintenance of infrastructure and facilities. For example, 80% of the operating costs of Botswana's protected areas are covered by international tourists interested in African wildlife. A special discount is offered for visitors arriving through tour operators. In Croatia, national park entrance fees vary according to the locations/popularity of the parks and the length of the walking routes. Entrance tickets are sold through a common web portal for all Croatian National Parks. Slovenia provides an interesting example where the entrance fee to national parks is collected at visitor centers, and parking fees in protected areas are included in the budgets of local municipalities. Similar to Georgia, the largest share (3/4) of income from protected areas in Slovenia comes from the Škocjanske Jame (a World Heritage Site), where a large number of visitors and investments in tourism infrastructure are concentrated in a small area. In Slovenia, each municipality independently introduced these fees, which initially caused dissatisfaction among visitors. Municipalities are now gradually harmonizing the system and beginning to manage visitors more comprehensively, including the introduction of free or low-cost public transport.

⁶ <https://www.cbd.int/gbf/communication/>

⁷ https://parksjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/PARKS-25.1-Van-Zyl-10.2305-IUCN.CH_2019.PARKS-25-1HVZ.en_-1.pdf

There is no entrance fee for visitors, but travel agencies that offer specific tourism activities may have to pay fees and adhere to certain conditions. Travel agencies that wish to conduct specific tourism activities within the national parks may be required to pay fees. These fees likely contribute to the maintenance and management of the parks. To operate within the national parks, travel agencies must adhere to conditions specified in a cooperation agreement with Metsähallitus Nature Conservation Service. Contracted travel agencies are recognized and advertised at national park visitor centers and on official park websites. This helps visitors identify authorized agencies that operate within the guidelines set by the conservation service. This system helps to balance the goals of promoting tourism while safeguarding the ecological integrity of Finnish national parks. It ensures that tourism activities are conducted responsibly and sustainably, minimizing any adverse effects on the natural environment.

Research revealed that International tourists visiting national parks in low-income countries pay an average entry tax of \$20 USD. This tax is relatively higher compared to middle-income (fee is under \$10 USD on average) and high-income countries (entrance fee is around \$5 USD)⁸. The implication of these differences is that low-income countries can potentially generate more revenue per capita from entry taxes compared to higher-income countries.

A review of international examples shows that imposing entrance fees serves to protect national parks. In particular:

- Ensuring the optimal number of visitors to manage ecological impact within the park and minimize congestion to enhance visitor satisfaction.
- Encouraging visits to facilities during periods of heightened ecological sensitivity.
- Achieving social goals, such as environmental education and providing access to recreational facilities.
- Aligning fees with public expectations and those of similar attractions to ensure compliance and visitor satisfaction. Ensuring the optimal number of visitors to manage ecological impact within the park and minimize congestion to enhance visitor satisfaction.

4.1 Types of Entrance Fees to Protected Areas

Understanding the types of fees established in protected areas for tourism purposes is crucial for managing visitor impacts, conserving natural resources, and sustaining park operations. Below are the typical types of fees that may be implemented⁹.

The Tourism User Fee (TUF) is a specific activity-specific fee that is collected at tourist attractions and includes fees for entering tourist attractions, accessing certain services and providing resources.

Types of Tourism User Fee¹⁰:

Entrance Fee: This fee is paid by visitors upon entering the Protected Area (PA) and represents a contribution towards its management. Depending on the PA's management goals, this fee can be differentiated for different groups of visitors.

⁸ ⁸ https://parksjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/PARKS-25.1-Van-Zyl-10.2305-IUCN.CH_2019.PARKS-25-1HVZ.en_-1.pdf

⁹ ECOTONE, UNDP/GEF project -“Catalyzing Financial Sustainability of Georgia’s Protected Areas System. UNDP/GEF project (PIMS6138). October, 2021

¹⁰Tourism Users Fees. file:///Users/macbookair/Downloads/Sustainable_Finance_of_Protected_Areas_Tourism_Bas.pdf

Service/Service Charge: This charge pertains to specific services provided within the protected area, such as parking, camping, accommodation, equipment rental, etc.

Concession Fee: This fee is primarily levied on companies (known as "concessionaires") that provide services within PAs, such as overnight stays and food provisions. Fees are charged for the temporary management of these businesses.

Licenses and Permits: These fees are imposed on private companies operating within or adjacent to DTs (e.g., tour operators, guides) and individuals participating in specific recreational activities (e.g., motorcycling, camping). They may be required to obtain licenses or permits.

Tourism-based Taxes: These taxes can be collected at hotels, airports, and other collection points to support nature conservation efforts.

Differentiation of entrance fee amount for tourism users is considered for the following reasons¹¹:

- Residents of municipalities adjacent to protected areas pay certain taxes;
- PA territorial administrations typically aim to facilitate visits by local residents for environmental education and recreation. Residents will be disappointed by high fees;
- Foreign tourists are generally willing and able to pay more for nature conservation.

4.2 International Entry Fee Practices

There are several ways to determine the amount of the entry fee. In most cases, a combination of several methods is used to determine the tax amount¹². These methods are:

- Based on the value of the contribution, the approach starts with calculating the total costs associated with expenditures. This includes salaries, operational expenses, maintenance of infrastructure and equipment, and other related costs, considering the visitor practices specific to the protected area.
- Based on market analysis, the determination of fees is influenced by studying similar protected areas within the country or other regions. The fee amount is contingent upon the elasticity of demand, which refers to visitors' ability to seek alternatives.

In regions with high fees, such as Africa, where visitors plan trips well in advance to experience unique protected areas, costs are justified by the exclusivity of the experience. Conversely, in Europe, where visitors decide more spontaneously and have numerous activity options, fees tend to be lower to attract frequent and flexible visitors.

- Willingness-to-Pay: Conducting a willingness-to-pay survey can be valuable for determining the amount potential visitors are willing to pay for entry or services.
- Depending on Visitor Categories: Different fees may be applied based on various visitor categories, such as children and adults, local and international visitors, and individual visitors or groups. Agreements with partner agencies, schools, and public transport owners can also influence fee structures. Additionally, special categories of visitors, such as highly motivated or experienced locals (e.g., mountaineers, nature lovers, bird watchers), may be eligible for discounted annual tickets.

¹¹Tourism Users Fees. file:///Users/macbookair/Downloads/Sustainable_Finance_of_Protected_Areas_Tourism_Bas.pdf

¹²ECOTONE, UNDP/GEF project -"Catalyzing Financial Sustainability of Georgia's Protected Areas System / UNDP/GEF project (PIMS6138). October, 2021

- Based on visitor experience and services offered: Fees can be increased when improvements are made to the visitor experience and services offered, such as providing better infrastructure or providing access to new protected areas.
- Tailored to Visitor Objectives (Geographically or temporarily): This strategy aims to prevent overcrowding in specific areas, minimize negative impacts on protected areas, and encourage visits to less crowded locations and off-peak seasons. It also promotes local services and products in these areas.
- Based on Connectivity between Protected Areas: Introducing ticket types that are valid for an entire system of protected areas or a group of nearby areas can enhance visitor convenience and promote less-visited sites.

5. Situational analysis of entrance fees to the protected areas of Georgia

Self-financing schemes for national parks in Georgia are considered as a mechanism for promoting effective management and financial sustainability. Since the creation of the modern system of Protected Areas, discussions have been ongoing, and separate activities have been carried out to impose an entry fee on Protected Areas. Service charges for specific services - overnight stay, rental of camping space and equipment, parking, and other benefits - have existed in Georgia for two decades. The entrance fee is a relatively new practice. It was first established in the caves of Prometheus and Sataflia. Since 2014, similar fees already existed in the protected areas of Okatse and Martvili, where the fee includes access to certain sights and the provision of certain services. An entrance fee is also imposed on the Vashlovani road for visitors using cars. The establishment of entry fees in all five protected areas is facilitated by the existence of relatively small and/or easily controlled areas.

Efforts to establish entry fees have been undertaken in various protected areas. However, practical implementation has proven challenging. The main hurdles include control mechanisms, fee collection practices, and effective communication with municipalities and local communities. For instance, a 2011 study by Nakresi highlighted a negative sentiment among the Tush people and other Georgian citizens towards the imposition of entry fees, particularly those visiting ancestral villages or friends and relatives in Tusheti.¹³ Despite this, the research also underscored local authorities' readiness to adopt such innovations, emphasizing the necessity for structured and formal consultations with residents.

Based on research conducted in 2021 under the UNDP/GEF project¹⁴, the implementation of an entrance fee and its specific amount are regarded as practical tools for balancing the objectives of protected areas and managing visitor flows. This is particularly evident at Mtirala National Park, where tourist numbers surge during the season, leading to traffic congestion on roads and inadequate on-site service provision

5.1 The key essence and messaging around the entry fee for the protected area

In the research conducted by Nakresi, it can be seen that foreign and local tourists have a relatively positive attitude towards the entrance fee. The survey also revealed their demand **for transparency and value for money paid**.

¹³NACRES, UNDP/GEF project -“Catalyzing Financial Sustainability of Georgia’s Protected Areas System UNDP/GEF project (00070382). Testing site-level revenue generation mechanisms in Tusheti PAs. June 2012

¹⁴ ECOTONE, UNDP/GEF project -“Catalyzing Financial Sustainability of Georgia’s Protected Areas System. UNDP/GEF project (PIMS6138). October, 2021

From interviews with tour operators in December 2023. A few key pointers: Tour operators and their clients **want to see clearly the tangible results and effectiveness of the fees they pay in terms of improved maintenance and better preservation of protected area values.** At first, the tour operators did not welcome the introduction of the entrance fee, because they were informed about it before the tourist season, when their offers were already developed, booked and sold. The specificity of the tourism product should be considered - it is often sold as a "virtual offer" in winter and spring, but the actual consumption/visitation mainly occurs in the peak season of May to October.

Tour operators and their clients are willing to accept the entrance fees if the funds are clearly interpreted as their contribution towards environmental protection. Environmental protection and social responsibility are integral parts of the mission for many tourism companies. However, when visiting protected areas, tour operators and their clients also expect to receive prompt on-site services and well-maintained infrastructure.

The entrance fee alone is not sufficient to ensure sustainable tourism management in a protected area like Lagodekhi. The key lies in the quality of the overall visitor experience and services offered. In the case of Lagodekhi, this is professional, knowledgeable guides, local staff in managing visitor services, helpful rangers, and well-marked and maintained trails. Visitor safety and security. cottages and community-based accommodation options and other complementary activities and offerings (N.A „Living Rooths)

When entering the Vashlovani Protected Area, the entrance fee is 5 GEL. In addition to the entrance fee, visitors have the option to purchase a 3 GEL brochure and map, which are considered additional services (Z.S. „Georgia Inside“).

In the case of Lagodekhi, where you offer 1 and 3-day itineraries for individual visitors and small groups, the existing infrastructure seems suitable for commercial offerings. However, it would be highly beneficial to directly communicate to the visitors how the money they pay (through entrance fees, activity fees, etc.) is being used. (Z.S „Georgia Inside“).

Our tourists already understand the rationale for the entrance fee in the national parks. Visitors do not necessarily expect significant changes in the services provided, but rather the focus should be on establishing a mechanism to ensure transparency and accountability in how the collected fees are utilized for conservation purposes. N.A „Living Rooths).

According to local guides, the demand for immersive, experience-based tourism activities is increasing in Georgia. Today's traveller is more aware and discerning about what they are paying for. They are more environmentally and socially responsible. They seek greater interaction and engagement with the local hosts.

Travelers today see themselves as "explorers" or adventure seekers, rather than just tourists. They like to actively care for nature and share positive stories. They use social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram stories extensively. In this regard, it is essential to focus on what is being conserved and protected when sharing stories; highlight the unique features and priority of the protected area compared to others; emphasize the direct impact of visitor contributions, e.g. how the entrance fee funds are being used for conservation efforts. Provide concrete examples, like reforestation project in Ajameti PA („Zenbra“).

It is essential to prioritize educational, conservation, and biodiversity protection activities and avoid the perception that the situation has remained unchanged over the years (E.K.FNPA.

Society is willing to pay for services, as evidenced by the financial accounting statistics of revenues from services at PAs, along with the increasing range of services offered and tourist flows.

According to representatives of the Protected Areas Agency, under the forest code, forests should be accessible and free for the citizens of Georgia. However, a segment of society does not comprehend the concept of an ecosystem services tax or the rationale behind paying for conservation purposes. Given that

tourist infrastructure is lacking in all PAs, the eventual introduction of an entry fee is being contemplated. It may be more palatable to present the entry tax as a compensatory measure for the ecological footprint resulting from visitor traffic (G.K. Mtirala NP)."

Moreover, if visitors only utilize services available in the village (guesthouses, cottages, restaurants), they pay solely for those services. For instance, 60% of tourists in Chakvistavi are Arab and Jewish visitors who seldom venture onto the trails and prefer to stay and explore hospitality and traditions. A study under the ECOTONE, UNDP/GEF project¹⁵ revealed that only 14% of total visitors to Mtirala EP used the zipline and rope park provided by the park administration. This indicates that the majority of visitors primarily engage with tourism services provided by residents in Chakvistavi."

According to the National Tourism Administration, announcing the entrance fee as compensation for trails' maintenance and depreciation may lead to uncertainty, as these expenses are primarily covered by the state budget, which is approved annually. People expect that trail maintenance should be the responsibility of the state. According to them, it is much more favourable for visitors to pay for the protection of the environment and the benefit of nature rather than infrastructure maintenance. It is crucial to evoke an emotional connection to preserving natural heritage among consumers (T.M., Tourism Administration). This sentiment is also endorsed by experts engaged in environmental protection and conservation projects. Being environmentally responsible, paying for conservation projects can be more appealing to visitors. For instance, the message „Your entry fee supports the conservation of the Caucasian tur" (E.K., PAFN)."

5.2 Should entry fees be separated from other service charges?

Given the nature of the entrance fee, it is logical to separate the entrance fee to the national parks from the visitor service fee. This means that visitors pay an entrance fee for access to the trails in the national park. In addition, they will pay a separate service charge for the use of other amenities, such as the zipline, picnic and camping areas, and tourist shelters along the trail.

5.3 Determination and differentiation of entry fee amounts

Administrations use historically established prices and a standard approach to determine the amount of entry fee in PAs of Georgia. The entry fee is set by the order of the chairman of the Agency of Protected Areas (PAs).

According to tour operators and individual guides, it is feasible to impose a symbolic entry fee of 5 GEL. A fee of 10-15 GEL is also acceptable for the Georgian market, while a fee of 20-25 GEL is considered acceptable for the foreign market.

Under the UNDP/GEF project¹⁶, the amount of the entry fee is derived based on potential (estimated) revenues and costs associated with implementation. It is also calculated taking into account the recommended number of visitors and potential activities. Through the same project, the minimum entrance fee for the MNP was defined, which is 7 GEL for foreign visitors and 3.5 GEL for Georgian visitors.

¹⁵ ECOTONE, UNDP/GEF project -“Catalyzing Financial Sustainability of Georgia’s Protected Areas System. UNDP/GEF project (PIMS6138). October, 2021

¹⁶ ECOTONE, UNDP/GEF project -“Catalyzing Financial Sustainability of Georgia’s Protected Areas System / UNDP/GEF project (PIMS6138). October, 2021

In Martvili and Okatse canyons, as well as in Prometheus and Sataplia caves, prices are differentiated for Georgian residents, foreign citizens, and students. Residents of Georgia must submit proof of identity. It is also acceptable to present a photo of a driver's license or an ID card sent by mobile phone

Figure 1 Entrance fees in PAs. December 2023 data. Source: Nationalparks.ge

Protected Areas	Resident of Georgia	Foreign citizen	Youth (6-18 years)
Martvili Cave	10.35 gel	17.25 gel	5.5 gel
Okatse Waterfall	10.35gel	17.25 gel	5.5 gel
Okatse Canyon	9.20 gel	17.25 gel	5.5 gel
Promethea	11.50 gel	23 gel	5.5 gel
Sataplia	8 gel	17.25 gel	5.5 gel

The price of the ticket to the caves includes the service of a guide. When using additional services, such as the Prometheus boat ride, visitors must purchase a separate ticket for the boat tour. When buying discounted tickets for minors, it is necessary to present a valid ID or passport. Otherwise, they will need to purchase a standard ticket to enter the facility.

According to the respondents, it is desirable to implement the pricing practices of Martvili and Prometheus PAs at Lagodekhi and Mtirala PAs as well. This would involve different tariffs for residents of Georgia and foreign visitors. With increased fragmentation, the control mechanism becomes more complicated. There should be free entry for children under 6 years old and persons with disabilities. Additionally, it is desirable to provide certain benefits for young residents of Georgia, including schoolchildren, to ensure they have opportunities for informal education at the PAs and to encourage school trips, as is done at other PAs.

According to the agency's staff and consultants, it is desirable to establish a voluntary fee for the local population and periodically conduct structured and formal consultations with them about the goals and results of spending the revenues received from the nature conservation tax in the parks. Free entry permits should be issued based on an ID card showing the local visitor's place of birth

Finally, according to the new tourism reform implemented with the support of the USAID/Economic Governance Program, certified guides will be entitled to free entry to cultural and natural monuments or sites. The service of high-risk routes requires a qualified (certified) horse-riding and hiking guide, who will also be allowed on hiking trails, including protected areas, free of charge.

5.4 Entry fee operation and control

The entrance fee to the protected areas can be paid on-site using non-cash or cash payment methods. The agency has a contract with a private company and uses an online payment platform <https://saleframe.guru.ge>. The company is responsible for the collection of payments, cashier and controller services, installation of turnstiles, and transferring the funds to the state budget. In the future, it is planned to install fast payment terminals, known as "pay boxes," on-site. Visitor access is controlled by the administration, and any visitor entering without a ticket is fined by a ranger.

Travel companies prefer electronic payments. However, according to them, online payment is sometimes inconvenient for groups. It is desirable to conclude agreements with tour operators so that they can pay by transfer. Tour operators have established a practice of transferring payments with the managing agency of cultural sites using vouchers. For example, the Uplistsikhe Museum provides tour operators with a certain number of vouchers at the beginning of the year, which are filled out by the guide on-site. The voucher shows the number of visitors, company and guide data, the cost of the service received, etc. At the end of the year, the amount indicated on the vouchers is totalled and transferred to the agency's

account. Vouchers are numbered, bear a company seal, and a penalty is imposed for lost vouchers. The advantage of using vouchers is the saving of time for the on-site team and a more orderly process with fewer transfers in bookkeeping.

Currently, visitors to Lagodekhi and Mtirala only pay in cash, and the ranger issues a receipt-like document to the visitor. On-site services cannot be accessed by transfer. However, transfers are possible based on pre-signed agreements, a form of cooperation mainly used by tour operators. It is possible to sign a contract and then pay by transfer based on acceptance-handover acts

Under the new arrangement, entry fees can be paid at administration and ranger checkpoints. To avoid the need for additional infrastructure, it is recommended to install payment machines (e.g., payment machines in buses) and information boards at entrances. These boards will display information about the entrance fee amount and details. This approach eliminates the need to distinguish between residents and travellers, thereby reducing potential resentment among villagers.

Lagodekhi and Mtirala Designated Trails will require additional human resources to manage payments. It is challenging for a single visitor specialist employed by these administrations to handle phone calls, emails, product development, and visitor surveys simultaneously. Concurrently managing cash registers or pre-arranged groups adds to this complexity. Rangers are responsible for visitor control within the park, but it should be noted that rangers should not be tasked with fee collection. Outsourcing may be necessary to effectively manage fee collection, according to PA administrations. They also suggest outsourcing the maintenance and development of trails and existing infrastructure along these trails.

5.5. Fee Adjustment Process

During the pilot process of setting entrance fees, it is important to consider the number of paying visitors, their fees and administrative costs. In addition, structured surveys should be conducted with visitors, as well as with the local community, rangers and staff using pre-designed questionnaires.

5.6 Cooperation with Local Community and Municipality

In some cases, the community benefits derived from the use of ecosystem services exceed the revenue generated by protected areas (PAs). In the case of Mtirala, these benefits also surpass the operating costs of the national park. However, the economic impacts and benefits often go unrecognized. There are instances where the provision of services within PAs is seen as competition by the local population, which impedes cooperation. Even when individual entry or service fees for visitors are deemed acceptable, it remains essential to engage in comprehensive negotiations among stakeholders regarding the implementation and extent of these charges to ensure transparency in the control mechanisms.

The opinion of all respondents is to arrange intensive meetings with the community, to introduce the indirect benefits of PAs to the community, and to agree on responsibilities and involvement. It is desirable to renew the dialogue on issues of cooperation with local municipalities. Among them, is consideration of the possibility of coordinated driving to ensure smooth traffic, and to reduce the traffic of vehicles on the narrow road (traffic jams during the tourist season). For example: (i) the possibility of moving from Batumi to Chakvistavi by public or private transport (minibuses and private taxis); It is considered to stop the traffic through NP for visitors and bring other transport to Chakvistavi for the transportation of visitors (electric cars are preferable); (ii) Arrangement of parking lots at the entrances of the PAs. The taking of state or municipal property with usufruct is also considered (if possible in the target regions); (iii) traffic light and road signs for alternating traffic regulation on Chakvistavi road.

A plan was prepared to promote the involvement of interested parties. See the attached document.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations for Preparation of Pilot Plans

According to the concept of entrance fees to protected areas in Georgia, income generated from tourism activities is allocated to support protected areas and nature conservation efforts. The direct correlation between the conservation of natural areas and revenue from user fees serves as an economic incentive for conservation efforts.

Entrance fees are typically influenced by several factors, including the demand for natural resources and the perceived value that visitors place on their experience at the site. The fee structure also considers the availability and cost of on-site recreational services. As a result, protected areas often opt for paid entry where there is existing tourist infrastructure, adequate services, and favourable conditions for offering recreational experiences. This approach helps ensure that visitors receive value for their entrance fee while supporting the maintenance and enhancement of the protected area's amenities and conservation efforts.

Recommendations for piloting nature conservation tax in selected protected areas:

- *When implementing an entrance fee for protected areas, the primary focus should be on conservation. The essence of the entrance fees, communicated to the local population and other users during the pilot period, should emphasize the nature conservation aspect;*
- *The entrance fee will reduce the negative impact on the park's resources, such as drinking water. It will help prevent traffic accidents mitigate the need for expanding existing roads into two-way thoroughfares and ensure the safe movement of visitors within the park boundaries;*
- *The entrance fee does not include the fee for using existing services (zipline, camping site and tourist shelter);*
- *A visitor who does not enter the protected area but only uses services provided by residents (such as hotels, guest houses, cottages, and catering establishments) is not required to pay the entrance fee.*
- *To differentiate the entrance fees for the Local Protected Area (LPA) and the National Park (MNP) and establish the tariff, it is essential to consider the following factors: review statistics of visitor numbers and operational costs from the last five years (2019-2023); analyze entrance fees set at other Protected Areas (PAs) for benchmarking purposes, and gather feedback from consumers to understand their opinions and willingness to pay fee.*
- *The practice of price differentiation already implemented should be considered, which includes varying fees based on age and citizenship. This includes provisions for free entry and the implementation of free admission for disabled persons and guides as per the new tourism law.*
- *Since there is no precedent for a nature conservation tax in the protected areas of Georgia, this process requires specific educational and preparatory efforts. Initially, low entry tax rates should be established, with preferential rates for students, young people, and pensioners. The exact tariffs will be determined during the planning phase, and they will be adjusted after monitoring the pilot phase.*
- *Payment of the entrance fee should be facilitated within the Protected Areas (PAs). For the individual action plan of the National Park (NP), consider implementing payment mechanisms along the route to the NP. When engaging with stakeholders, it's crucial to acknowledge that the road belongs to the municipality and provides access to local residents' homes. Payment on the road could potentially lead to conflicts between the local population and PA employees.*

- *Information regarding the implementation of the entrance fee should be disseminated prior to the start of the season and made accessible through an Internet application. This process necessitates effective communication with the public, including local press and television channels.*
- *The collection of entrance fees for the protected area should be facilitated by a modern and secure method. This may include options such as internet purchases, pay boxes, mobile phone payments on-site, infrastructure setup at the entrance, or parking lot meters. Management of these methods should be entrusted to the PA or another competent organization.*
- *Information about ticket purchase, control procedures, and fines should be prominently displayed at trail entrances.*
- *It is advisable to utilize an online payment platform and consider outsourcing payment handling to private companies for administrations, cashier services, and controller services. Initially, utilizing internal resources and hiring temporary staff during peak tourist periods can also be considered.*
- *The trails in PAs should be monitored by rangers, with additional control points established at intervals where Internet access is available. Rangers' smartphones can be equipped with QR code readers for enhanced monitoring capabilities.*
- *Consider implementing a sticker system for visitors who pay the entrance fee in cash upon entering the PAs.*
- *Action plans should include the adoption of an assessment and coordinated management model to collaborate with tourism service providers, particularly involving the local population.*
- *Active communication with customers regarding the fees they pay is crucial, ensuring visitors understand that their contributions support the conservation goals of PAs. Messages can vary periodically to highlight different conservation topics.*
- *Establishing a control or reporting mechanism to track how funds from entrance fees are used for the purposes of the protected area and conservation is essential. This could be integrated into the annual reporting process to ensure transparency and accountability in fund utilization.*

Annex 1_List of interviewees

Day of meeting	Organization	Contact person
21.11.23	Protected Areas Friends Network PAFN	Ekatherine Kakabadze
22.11.23	Agency of Protected Areas	Beso Kusidi Toma Dekanoidze Nato Sultanishvili Irakli Goduadze
24.11.23	Georgian National Tourism Agency	Tamar Maisuradze Tamar Kakhidze
12.12.23	Nakres	Natia Muladze
12.11.23	Lagodekhi Protected Area Administration	Giorgi Sulamanidze
12.11.23	Mtirala Protected Area Administration	Giorgi Kuridze
13.11.23	Martvili and Okatse Protected Area Administration	Zaza Gagua
14.12.23	„Zebra“ adventure club	David Tsiklauri
14.12.23	Ecotourism Association	Natalia Bakhtadze – Englander

15.12.23	Georgian Inside	Zaira Solovyova
15.12.23	Living Roots	Nina Ardishvili
15.12.23	Ajara Tourism Administration	თინათინ ზოდუა