

Full Length Research Paper

Tourists' perception of landscape design: The case of resorts in the Belek Specially Protected Area

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Tourism development in protected areas is highly critical for the sustainability of resources. Landscape design of the resorts can make a great contribution to physical environments by emphasizing the protection of natural character and cultural identity. The purpose of the study is to analyze the landscape designs of the resorts of the Belek region, which is one of the most important specially Protected Areas (SPA) in Turkey. Seven resorts from the Belek SPA are evaluated to find out the tourists' perception about the landscape designs of the resorts. The views of the designers and the local authorities are also investigated to question the main design concepts and characteristics of the tourism developments. According to results of the questionnaire survey, tourists in general heed the landscape design of the resorts and are particularly impressed by the water element, the natural atmosphere, and conservation of important plant species such as *Pinus pinea*. Interviews with the landscape designers show that there is a considerable awareness vis-à-vis the protection and sustainability of the environment through choosing the native plant species and using water supplies economically. However interviews with the local authorities demonstrate that the tourism policy for the region gives priority to the construction of large-scale resorts and investments which generally have less connection with the local people and the local characteristics of the region. Therefore, resorts in the Belek region should take action to protect the environment from the negative effects of mass tourism.

Key words: Tourist's perception, resorts, landscape design, Belek Specially Protected Area (SPA), Turkey.

INTRODUCTION

Protected areas are established primarily to preserve some type of biophysical process or condition such as a wildlife population, habitat, natural landscape, or cultural heritage such as a community's cultural tradition. Tourists visit the protected areas to know and experience the values for which the area was established and to gain personal benefits (Eagles et al., 2002). Tourism has both positive and negative effects on physical, social and economic environments. These effects interact, often in complex ways. To maximize benefits while minimizing costs requires a comprehensive approach which can be formed under the concept of sustainability. Tourism activity can lend itself to the concept of sustainable

development easily because in so many cases tourism is dependent upon the maintenance of the natural environment and natural processes for its own survival" (Butler 1993). In addition, sustainable tourism development is beneficial for local people's life quality and self esteem and provides economic growth at both regional and local levels (Tosun, 2001).

Generally, tourism helps to improve infrastructure and telecommunication facilities and provides maintenance and protection of natural and historical assets as well as economic benefits. However, it has many negative effects depending on the scale of its pressure on the environment, such as pollution of water resources, overcrowding, waste disposal, production of litter, etc. (Baysan, 2001). Among the negative effects of tourism, degradation of the physical environment is the most important consequences of rapid and unplanned tourism development (Hillery et al., 2001; Lynn and Brown, 2003).

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Figure 1. Location of Belek.

According to Cohen (1978), one of the factors influencing the environmental impact of tourism is the density of tourism in a particular region. The number of annual visitors increases the density of tourist site use. This may result in the complete transformation of the region. Consequently, the rise in the number of tourists causes an increase in land prices, as new developments have to be built to accommodate the increasing number of visitors. This may, in turn, give rise to intensive utilization of the land and to sky-scraper resorts instead of structures and resorts that could have been more harmonious with the local environment. The relationship between tourism and the environment is to make a balance in which the environment would be protected for tourism but also protected from tourism. On the one hand tourists come to visit a particular location for the sites and the surrounding environment. On the other hand, if the surrounding environment is not protected and becomes eroded, then the location will lose its attraction. This situation also shows why “environmental awareness” should be taken into consideration by tourism developers as well. If the tourism destination loses its uniqueness and originality, the sense of place is replaced by the sense of monotony which makes the tourism experience worthless for the tourists. Therefore, planning and design activities in protected areas are critically important. Especially, construction of huge tourist resorts as well as new apartments, built as second summer settlements- in coastal areas result in loss of local natural landscape character and ordinary environments without local identity.

The landscape design of tourism resorts can play an important role in protecting the natural character and identity as well as the scale and style of the newly

constructed architectural units (Sayan, 1998). Using local architectural references, indigenous vegetation as the plant material and the local materials in design can enhance the unity of visual landscape and quality of design while ensuring the *genus loci*. According to Wilson (1992); landscapes are increasingly shaped by consumer demands, recreation, tourism and even nature conservation, which all combine to model the ‘new aesthetics of nature’. “Ecotourism deals with special interest holidays. Its clients are mainly interested in biodiversity preservation and endangered or rare species such as lions, elephants, birds, turtles and whales. This tourist profile is assumed to be more environmentally aware than the average holiday maker and is willing to spend money to contribute towards conservation” (Nalbantoğlu, 2002). The natural and characteristic features of the surrounding environment are found attractive by tourists and leave a positive impression for a good holiday experience. Increasing demands of tourists about environmental awareness are an important factor which determines the decision-making process for choosing holiday destinations. “In the case of tourism people using protected areas can differ in many ways, including their personal characteristics and perception about the recreation environment” (Petrosillo et al., 2006). Therefore it is vital to have information about the existing tourist profile and their perception in order to plan tourism development in a sustainable way. The purpose of the study is to analyze the landscape design of the resorts of the Belek region, which is one of the most important specially protected areas in Turkey. Seven resorts from the Belek SPA were selected for evaluation to find out tourists’ views about the landscape designs via questionnaires. There were also interviews with the designers of the resorts to find out the main design concepts, and with local authorities to question the characteristics of the tourism developments.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Belek municipality is located 30 km east of the Antalya City centre on the Mediterranean coast of Turkey (Figure 1). Belek was designated as a tourism center by decree of the Council of Ministers in 1984 and then its boundaries were enlarged in 1991. Surrounded by antique cities, the area has natural and cultural assets. There are many habitats such as forests (including especially *Pinus brutia* and *Pinus pinea*), stable and non-stable dunes, maquis, wetlands and agricultural lands. 500 of 600 endemic plant species which grow in the Mediterranean region exist in Antalya and its environs (Sünbül et al., 2004). In a bird inventory study prepared between the years 2000-2002, 213 bird species were recorded in the area. Belek region is one of the 17 most important nesting sites in Turkey for the loggerhead sea turtle (*Caretta caretta*), which is listed as an endangered species by IUCN (The World Conservation Unit) (Kuvan, 2005).

The coastal zone of Belek Tourism Center has been determined as a protection zone for the reproducing of *Caretta caretta* (Dikmen Diriöz, 2008). It was declared a “Specially Protected Area” in 1990 by a decision of the cabinet (Council of Ministers) of Turkey. It covers 12500 hectares of land of which 9.1% is allocated to either

Table 1. Characteristics of selected tourism resorts.

Name of the tourism resort	Club Alibey Belek	Club voyage	Ela quality	Grida village	Rixos premium	Spice	Susesi Deluxe and Spa
Year of foundation	1997	2007	2007	1996	2005	2007	2007
Certificate		Blue Flag, ISO environment management certificates					
Location	İskele Site	İleribaşı Site	İskele Site	İskele Site	İleribaşı Site	İskele Site	İskele Site
Area (m ²)	130.000	93.500	110.000	80.000	400.000	91.000	90.000
Natural characteristics	Squirrels living within the compound, bird species	Squirrels living within the compound, bird species	Squirrels living within the compound, bird species	Squirrels living within the compound, bird species	Squirrels living within the compound, bird species	Squirrels living within the compound, bird species	Squirrels living within the compound, bird species
Plant use	Natural vegetation of the Mediterranean	Local plant species, indoor plants imported from the Netherlands, preservation of existing pine trees	Local plant species, exotic plant species imported from Italy	Local plant species, preservation of existing pine trees	Local plant species, preservation of existing pine trees	Local plant species	Local plant species exotic plant species imported from Italy
Water use		Environmental cleaning activities along the coast line	Recycle of water in air condition system				Decomposition of waste, energy saving
Activities for raising awareness on environment		Bicycle tours, picnicking, collecting of garbage	Planting of trees, collecting olives				Environmental education for the staff

tourism or summer housing. "Belek's forests are under the status of a conservation forest established principally to prevent dune erosion along the western and eastern parts of the tourism center (Kuvan, 2005)." However the area, which is a rapidly developing tourism center with these protection priorities, is clearly vulnerable to tourism's negative environmental effects.

All of the establishments licensed by the Ministry of Tourism were constructed in the forest areas (Kuvan, 2005)". With the ecotourism concept the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism initiated some policies and projects for diversification of tourism products and the decline of tourism development pressure and generalization of socio-economic benefits of tourism.

The Belek Management Plan prepared in 1996 with the collaboration of International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) and the World Bank is one of pilot projects aimed at conservation and

development of natural and cultural environment in the region (Bal, 2002).

In order to evaluate tourism developments and their reflections on the landscape, seven resorts were selected randomly as the sample sites from the Belek SPA, namely: Club Alibey Belek; Ela Quality Resort; Susesi; Rixos Hotel Premium Belek; Club Voyage Belek Select; Spice Hotel and Spa and Grida Village (Table 1).

The questionnaires and interviews were carried out at these seven sites. Since questionnaires were applied to tourists who were on vacation, most of them refused to fill out the forms, and resort managers were also very sensitive about their guests' comfort and therefore limited time was provided for the application of questionnaires, and that only to tourists who had volunteered to answer the survey. The questionnaires were applied to tourists staying in the selected resorts to find out their environmental awareness and perceptions about landscape design. The questionnaires were applied through the summer months

of 2008. A total of 100 questionnaires were administered to the subjects.

Data analyses were carried out using cross tables which enable the comparison of variables; in line with this a chi square (X^2) test was carried out by 90% confidence interval. SPSS 15 Package Program was used for data analyses. In addition, face to face interviews were conducted with the landscape designers of the selected resorts to see their design aims and priorities. Furthermore, the local authority was questioned about the tourism developments of SPA in order to evaluate the participation

Table 2. Reasons for hotel choice.

Reasons	Percent %
Others' recommendation	12
Architecture	18
Landscape design	12
Ads in media	11
Travel agency's recommendation	39
Other	8
Total	100

of local people in the tourism sector.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings obtained from the tourist questionnaires

The profile of the tourists

The questionnaires were administered to 100 tourists accommodated at the selected resorts in the Belek region. Of the 100 people interviewed, 44 were male and 56 female. 58 of those who filled out the questionnaire reported that they were single, while 42 said they were married. 67 of those who filled out the questionnaire did not have any children. 14 of those surveyed were aged between 15-25, 82 were aged 26-50, and only 4 were over 51 years old. While 22 of those surveyed were educated at high school level, 52 were university graduates and 26 had graduate degrees. Of those surveyed 56 were foreigners and 44 were Turkish (domestic) tourists. These figures demonstrate that the profile of the tourist who agreed to answer the questionnaire is mostly middle aged, single and without any children. According to the survey results people are mainly informed about the Belek region by other people who have already been to the destination (38%) or by the travel agency (32%). Tourists were asked about their reason for preference of Belek as a holiday destination. Recommendations of other people (41%), climate factors (32%) and natural beauty of the region (19%) are mentioned respectively. This result may also show that even though Belek is a specially protected area the qualities of the region are not known by the respondents. It can be noticed that none of the respondents mentioned affordability as a reason. This could be attributed to the fact that the resorts in question are luxury resorts and the tourists are mostly from the upper income group.

The tourists were also questioned about the way they form their preference in order to see if the design of the resorts is one of the concerns. 39% of the respondents report that a travel agency's recommendations influenced their choice. Other factors such as the style of the architecture (18%) and the qualities of the landscape (12%) are less frequently mentioned. Environmental concerns

are not emphasized specifically by any of the tourists spontaneously (Table 2). Tourists were asked about which type of tourism experience appealed to them. Among the tourists who took the survey, 69% prefer sun and sea tourism, 26% prefer to visit historical and cultural areas and 5% golf tourism (Table 3). There is a significant relation between the choice of tourism type and education. It is observed that 62% of the tourists who prefer history and culture tourism are university graduates (Table 4). Nearly half of the tourists (47%) find the quality of service as the most impressive feature of their holiday experience. Design of outdoor spaces in resorts is mentioned by 18% while richness of café and restaurant menus is mentioned only by 15%. The large majority of those surveyed (over 80%) acknowledged that they did pay attention to the landscape of the resorts in which they stayed. Women tourists are more sensitive about the landscape design of the resorts (65%) than men (35%) tourists (Table 5). The criteria for a successful design were also researched. The tourists mostly state that the organization of space is successful (41%). The most impressive element of landscape design is said to be the water element (68%) (Table 6). When the choice of elements is examined according to gender, it can be seen that while men tourists are mostly impressed by the water element, women tourists are impressed by colorful surfaces used in landscape design (plastic objects, flower beds etc.) and vegetation as well as the water element (Table 7).

In order to evaluate usage of different parts of the resorts by tourists questions were put forward to investigate the points used the most. The result shows that the poolside is the first place (68%) preferred by the tourist (Table 8). Gender seems to be an important factor for the preference of outdoor locations. All of the tourists who preferred shadow locations are male and privacy in space is preferred more by women (33%) than (67%) men tourists (Table 9).

The most favorite sports activities in the resorts are water sports, tennis, beach volleyball, football and golf, in that order (Table 10). Only 23% of the tourists criticized the landscape design of the resorts and stated it would have been better if more trees and fewer constructional elements were used. 79% of the tourists think that designs are formed around a style. The styles are

Table 3. Preference of tourism type according to gender.

Gender	Tourism type (%)			Total
	History and culture tourism	Sun, sand and sea tourism	Golf tourism	
Male	22 (85)	17 (25)	5 (100)	44 (44)
Female	4 (15)	52 (75)	0 (0)	56 (56)
Total	26 (100)	69 (100)	5 (100)	100 (100)

p<0.001

Table 4. Preference of tourism type according to education level.

Education level	Tourism type (%)			Total
	history and culture tourism	Sun, sand and sea tourism	golf tourism	
High school	1 (4)	21 (31)	0 (0)	22 (22)
University graduate	16 (62)	32 (46)	4 (80)	52 (52)
Postgraduate level	9 (34)	16 (23)	1 (20)	26 (26)
Total	26 (100)	69 (100)	5 (100)	100 (100)

Table 5. Importance of landscape design of hotels according to gender.

Gender	Importance of landscape design (%)		Total
	Yes	No	
Male	28 (35)	16 (80)	44 (44)
Female	52 (65)	4 (20)	56 (56)
Total	80 (100)	20 (100)	100 (100)

p<0.0001

mentioned mostly as tropical, Mediterranean and modern. For example, according to the survey conducted at Spice Hotel, the tourists surveyed described the landscape design differently from each other. When asked, most described the hotel as an oriental style, while others described it as Tropical or Moroccan, and very few

described it as Mediterranean. Another question was directed to tourists to see if they perceive a relation with the landscape designs of the hotels and the local landscape. While 20% state that there is no relationship with the local landscape, 37% link it with a tropical landscape and 35% with the Mediterranean landscape.

Table 6. The most impressive elements in landscape.

Impressive elements	Percentage
Vegetation	11
Water element	68
Colorful surfaces	18
Other	3
Total	100

Table 7. The most impressive elements according to gender.

Gender	Elements of landscape design (%)				Total
	Vegetation	Water element	Colorful surfaces	Other	
Male	1 (9)	38 (56)	3 (17)	2 (67)	44 (44)
Female	10 (91)	30 (44)	15 (83)	1 (33)	56 (56)
Total	11 (100)	68 (100)	18 (100)	3 (100)	100 (100)

p<0.001

Table 8. Preferred locations outdoors.

Locations	Percentage
Shadow areas	9
Private areas	6
Closeness to water element	68
Colorful plants	11
Other	6
Total	100

Table 9. Preferred locations in hotels according to gender.

Gender	Locations (%)					Total
	Shadow areas	Private space	Closeness to water elements	Colorful plants	Other	
Male	9 (100)	2 (33)	31 (46)	1 (9)	1 (17)	44 (44)
Female	0 (0)	4 (67)	37 (54)	10 (91)	5 (83)	56 (56)
Total	9 (100)	6 (100)	68 (100)	11 (100)	6 (100)	100 (100)

p<0.001

Findings obtained from the designers' and local authorities' interview

Almost all of the landscape designers interviewed in the research stated that they had tried to preserve the existing trees in the resorts. Landscape designers are

very careful about preserving the natural qualities of the area. They also think that their attitude towards environmental preservation helped to promote the environmental awareness of many tourism developers in the region. The natural features of the region have in most part been preserved by the landscape designs by using native plant

Table 10. Tourists' sports activities according to gender.

Gender	Sports activities (%)						Total
	Tennis	Beach volleyball	Water sports	Football	Golf	Other	
Male	4 (40)	2 (25)	23 (35)	10 (100)	5 (100)	0 (0)	44 (44)
Female	6 (60)	6 (75)	43 (65)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (100)	56 (56)
Total	10 (100)	8 (100)	66 (100)	10 (100)	5 (100)	1 (100)	100 (100)

species, which require less water suggesting that designs have been for the most part environmentally sensitive. And while choosing the plant materials, designers take into consideration the concept of the project, the climate and flora. Furthermore, many of the landscape architects have tried to design special spaces in which tourists can feel comfortable and relaxed.

Landscape designs are generally in harmony with the styles of the architectural design of the hotel building. Most of the designers try to find a balance between aesthetics, functionality, and letting the region be environmentally sensitive. Landscape designers stated that one of the most important features of outdoor design in the Mediterranean region is to provide ample areas of shade. Interviews with the local authorities demonstrate that the tourism policy for the region gives priority to the construction of large-scale resorts and investments, which generally have less connection with the local people and the local characteristics of the region.

Conclusion

This study examines the current situation of the Belek specially protected area (SPA), and indicates clues for the future landscape design of similar sites. The survey conducted in the Belek SPA shows that the natural and cultural features of the surrounding environment are found attractive by tourists, and leave a positive impression for a good holiday experience. Therefore, resorts in the Belek SPA should take action to protect the environment from the negative impacts of mass tourism. Furthermore, tourists in general take into consideration the landscape design of the resorts and are particularly impressed by the water element in design, and they prefer spending most of their time around it. Therefore, pool-sides in resorts are densely populated and the places used the most. This finding shows similarity with many other research results conducted in landscape design (Saatçi, 2009).

Landscape designers have used Mediterranean plant species in the design and have been careful about the

conservation of existing plant materials by using them in situ, for example *Pinus Pinea* vegetation. As a result, the natural atmosphere created by the conservation of the *Pinus pinea* and other unique natural beauties have impressed tourists and aroused their interest. However, results of the interviews and surveys suggest that a considerable number of the tourists are unable to make a connection between the surrounding environment and the landscape of the resort in which they are staying. Moreover, the interpretation of the styles used in the architecture and landscape design suggests a slight confusion of the image of design in the tourist's mind. Therefore, as well as use of native plant materials in the landscape design, some other elements which can give unity to the landscape should also be used in order to improve the local identity and perception of the tourists. Especially the references to local materials, forms and vegetation can enhance the architectural quality of the resorts and thereby the holiday experience for the tourists.

The most important responsibility of the planners and designers is forecasting the demands and concerns of tourists and protecting the natural and cultural features of a region. In the study, it is seen that tourists mostly have no idea about the special status of Belek as a protected area, nor about local values. They generally visit the site as a beautiful Mediterranean holiday spot. Neither the tour operators nor the hotel administrations give information about the environmental qualities of the region. In the context of sustainability, tourism planning in Belek SPA should be evaluated with a more environmentally sensitive approach. Tourists should be informed about the flora and fauna of the region and should be aware of the protected area instead of the artificial atmosphere of the resorts. The architecture and landscape design of the resorts can be used as effective tools to emphasize environmental qualities. These would be an increasingly important issue as many tourists have growing environmental awareness. In addition, tour operators and travel agencies should also be informed about the environmental qualities of the region and use this information to change the tourist profile of the region by attracting the

interest of environmentally conscious tourists, who are less demanding and consume less when it comes to environmental resources.

Other important stakeholders are obviously the resort managers in the region, who should also be informed about the environmentally friendly approaches to be used in a protection area. Other important beneficiaries of sustainable tourism development are the local people. In the region in question local people are involved in tourism activity to a limited extent that is in the service sector. However, demand for organic agricultural products or some original handicrafts can be integrated in the tourism sector. Therefore development of the local community based on ecotourism management institutions should be encouraged. On the other hand, the plants used in the resorts of the Belek area could be of more endemic types. The study suggested that there were not so many endemic types of plant used in the landscape projects of the Belek Region Resorts. It should be noted that the most important feature of protected areas is biodiversity (Shiva, 1993; Vitousek et al., 1997). Therefore landscape design and implementations in the protected areas should be sensitive to the sustainability of biodiversity. Even though the golf resorts of the Belek region are not included in this study, their negative impact on the diversity of species should be noted.

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