

Giving voice to people living in protected areas. An interpretative phenomenological analysis

Dan Florin STĂNESCU,

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania
dan.stanescu@comunicare.ro

Ștefan George KUDOR,

*"Simion Mehedinți - Nature and Sustainable Development" Doctoral School,
University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania*
stefan.george.kudor@drd.unibuc.ro

Abstract

Protected areas represent a critical component of conservation efforts globally, serving as safe zones where ecosystems, species, and natural landscapes can be preserved. They play a significant role in maintaining biodiversity by limiting human activities that may disrupt habitats or exploit resources unsustainably.

Objectives: Within the framework of the Endangered Landscapes Programme (ELP), a program managed by a team working under the direction of the Executive Director of the Cambridge Conservation Initiative, the current research conducted by Natura 2000 Coalition Romania, seeks to provide a comprehensive idiographic analysis of the lived experiences of individuals residing in a protected area, employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the methodological framework. IPA is a systematic qualitative method that examines how people sense their significant life experiences. **Approach:** The study was conducted on a sample of five participants between 34 and 75 years old. Each participant was interviewed based on a semi-structured interview and their transcripts were further analyzed using the interpretative phenomenological analysis. This method implied analyzing the experiential responses and their meanings line by line, followed by the identification of the emergent themes from the experiential material, focusing on similarities and discrepancies within each case and between all instances. **Results:** Six themes emerged from the experiential material provided by the participants: profound connection with nature, protected areas' impact on the community, the importance of ecological education and information, over-tourism, and sustainable development challenges. Based on the "verbatim" content obtained, there could be outlined **Implications:** We believe that this type of approach provides new insights regarding the real experience of people who live in protected areas, based on first-hand information from people who went through the experience.

Keywords: IPA, qualitative analysis, nature, conservation.

1. Introduction

MacKinnon and colleagues [1] note that since 2010, the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) have adopted Aichi Biodiversity Target 11. This target set a commitment to conserve, by 2020, at least 17% of terrestrial and inland water areas and 10% of coastal and marine areas through networks of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) [2].

Although substantial progress has been achieved in increasing the number and extent of protected areas (more than 21 million square kilometers of new and expanded terrestrial and marine sites were added since 2010 [3], further efforts are needed to enhance governance, management effectiveness, and other quality aspects outlined in Aichi Target 11 [4].

Protected areas are essential for conserving natural and cultural capital, encompassing the most representative and significant zones regarding biodiversity, natural values, and associated

cultural heritage, being acknowledged as one of the most effective strategies for conserving biodiversity and preventing the loss of forests and other natural habitats [1], [5] [6] Management measures in these areas are designed and implemented in a way that aims to maintain or even restore, where necessary, natural ecosystems and populations of wild species, while also ensuring or seeking solutions for the sustainable use of natural resources.

As mentioned by Dearden and colleagues [7], the establishment of protected areas serves as a fundamental pillar of global conservation efforts. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) defines a protected area as a “clearly defined geographical space, recognized, dedicated, and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values” [8] (p.2). Beyond conserving biodiversity, protected areas (PAs) offer a series of other types of ecosystem services [9]. They help mitigate resource exploitation, such as reducing deforestation, and aid in managing threats within their boundaries, including the control of potentially invasive plant and animal species [10].

2. Biodiversity and conservation context - Romania

Romania is the most biogeographically diverse country within the European Union (EU), hosting 5 out of 11 EU-recognized regions: alpine, continental, panonic, pontic, and steppe. With 1572 protected areas (PA) covering 71254 km², more than 25% of the country's surface benefits from legal protection [11] [12] [13].

Romania is home to remarkable surfaces of intact natural ecosystems and landscapes and one of the widest spectrums of EU, national, and international protected species and habitats: over 700 km² of pristine and semi-pristine forests [14], 33% of Europe's brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) and 25% of its wolves (*Canis lupus*), high populations of the Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx*) compared to other EU countries [15], high level of farmland biodiversity [16]. At the same time, as one of the EU's last members and with a strong inertia from decades of communist dictatorship, Romania is still struggling with development, dealing with considerable issues regarding corruption, quality of life, lack of strong civil society organizations, minimum participatory governance and poor environmental policies.

Stringer and Paavlova [17] pinpoint one of the causes as “a lack of historical involvement of communities in decision making” and emphasize the need for a more inclusive and multi-stakeholder approach to approach environmental objectives efficiently (p. 138). Romania's high biodiversity results from complex social-ecological interactions within a diverse natural context. It has been influenced by past political regimes and, at the same time, by a slower development rhythm and by a series of good regenerative forestry and wildlife management or traditional ecological practices within its mostly rural territory. Today, Romania's natural values face high threats due to its rapid and tumultuous development pace in the EU's open-border context, its vulnerable institutions, and insufficient civic involvement.

2.1. Protected area governance in Romania

Romania's wide spectrum of protected areas (including scientific reserves, national parks, nature monuments, natural reserves, natural parks, Natura 2000 sites, UNESCO World

Heritage, Man and Biosphere, and Ramsar sites) can be classified within IUCN categories Ia, II, III, IV, and V. The main governance system was rather open-minded after a dedicated law was published in 2007 – a standardized legal framework based on IUCN categories with a quasi-centralized management system, offering the possibility for private entities and NGOs to be fully responsible and active PA managers, alongside other state institutions. Even so, only scientific reserves, national parks, natural parks, and several particular sites had some form of active administration, while most sites existed only on paper.

The management situation degraded after 2018, when the government published a bill that did not allow private third parties to manage PAs, leading to even more non-managed areas. In addition, because of Romania's rush to accomplish EU pre and post-membership obligations together with its lack of participatory governance practice, a lot of PAs (mainly Natura 2000 sites) were designated without proper community consultation and most of the sites imposed noticeable mandatory restrictions on public and private property lands, rivers, forests, meadows and pastures. Besides some intermittent financial compensations for private forest owners, the government focused on enforcing restrictions without implementing any realistic strategy for compensatory measures for other types of land and resource owners in PAs.

2.2. Project area

The project area is considered one of the largest areas of the EU with a high degree of natural connectivity, biodiversity, geodiversity, and pristine landscape, including a considerable number of rural communities. The territory includes 4 national parks – category II IUCN (Semenic – Cheile Carașului, Cheile Nerei – Beușnița, Domogled – Valea Cernei, Retezat), 4 natural parks – category IV IUCN (Porțile de Fier, Geoparcul Platoul Mehedinți, Geoparcul Dinozaurilor Țara Hațegului, Grădiștea Muncelului – Cioclovina), multiple overlapping Natura 2000 sites, one UNESCO Man and Biosphere undergoing designation and one UNESCO International Geopark (Țara Hațegului). The main administrator for the national and natural parks is the National Forestry Agency–Romsilva, followed by Mehedinți County Council and the National Environmental Agency (former Protected Area Agency). The Hațeg Country UNESCO Global Geopark is administered by the Bucharest University in partnership with local NGOs.

The territory covers over 7000 km² of land, of which almost 10% are strictly natural protected zones, old growth, and pristine protected forests. The area diversity includes ecotourism destinations and traditional communities, unique mountain landscapes, geological heritage, and European bison rewilded zones.

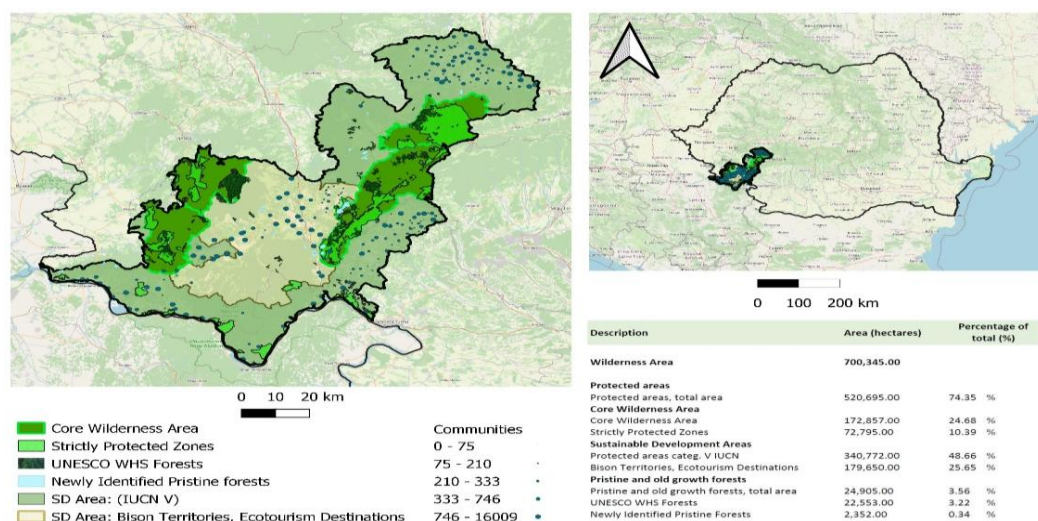


Fig. 1. Current project area.
Source: Created by the author

3. Methodology

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) focuses on understanding the lived personal experience of each individual, exploring how people comprehend or engage with certain events or processes in their lives. It allows researchers to study, describe, and interpret the meaning individuals ascribe to their experiences [18]. Smith [19] highlights two fundamental theoretical foundations underpinning this qualitative methodology: phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. These concepts stem from the belief that human beings are not mere observers of an objective reality but are individuals who create their biographical narratives, interpreting and understanding the world around them in a way that is meaningful to them [20]. IPA is phenomenological in that it explores an individual's perception of an event, rather than aiming to produce an objective record of the event itself. The foundation of phenomenological psychology lies in the personal and subjective interpretations individuals give to the events they experience [21].

IPA was specifically designed to allow researchers to develop theoretical frameworks based on the data gathered from participants, transcending the verbal terminology and conceptualization used by the participants themselves [22]. The goal of IPA is to explain individuals' perspectives on the world and the associated cognitions, providing an "insider's" view of the phenomenon under investigation. At the methodological level, an IPA study involves intensive and detailed analysis of data gathered from a relatively small group of participants. Textual data is collected through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, or data journals. The subsequent analysis generates patterns then shaped into thematic forms [21] [23].

Data was gathered through a semi-structured interview comprising 17 open-ended questions (Table 1), facilitating real-time, open dialogue between the researcher and the participant.

Table 1. Semi-structured interview guide

| |
|---|
| What do you like most about this area where you live? |
| Please think about your story since living here and tell me what has changed in the last 3–5 years for the area's residents, whether the changes have been positive or not. |
| How would you describe your relationship with nature as a resident of this area? |
| How could this relationship with nature be better than it is now? |
| What does a protected area mean to you? |
| What is it like to live in a protected area? |
| How has the existence of the protected area influenced the life of the local community you are part of? |
| What have been the biggest challenges you've faced as a resident of a protected area? |
| Please consider and tell me whether any tense situations have arisen in the community since the area became protected |
| How do residents of this area get involved in protecting it? |
| What worries you the most about how things will evolve in the area? |
| How would you describe the role of local authorities in managing protected areas? |
| What would you say is the role of protected area/national park administrators? |
| Are there any other institutions or individuals who could play a role in managing protected areas? |
| What are the first things that come to mind when considering sustainable development? |
| What does sustainable development in this area mean to you? |
| How do you think the quality of life for residents of these communities in the protected area should be improved? |

Source: Created by the author

The participants, five males, aged between 34 and 75 constituted a reasonably homogenous, purposive sample [24] sufficient to depict a perspective, rather than represent a population. Smith and colleagues [18] stated that in IPA studies, “samples are selected purposely (rather than through probability methods) because they can offer a research project insight into a particular experience” (p. 48).

4. Results

Participants were encouraged to share their experiences openly as residents of protected areas. The interviews were audio-recorded, and verbatim transcripts were used as the primary data for analysis. The analytical process adhered closely to Smith and Osborn's four-stage framework [24] outlined. This began with an in-depth interpretative reading of the first interview transcript, during which initial reactions to the text were noted in one margin. These preliminary notes were then abstracted into emergent themes at a higher level and recorded in the opposite margin [24]. Subsequently, the researcher examined the themes to identify connections, resulting in a table of superordinate themes for the first case. This process was repeated for each of the four cases. Finally, patterns across cases were identified and consolidated into a master table of superordinate themes (Table 2).

Table 2. Emergent themes

| |
|--|
| Profound connection with nature |
| Protected areas' impact on the community |
| The importance of ecological education and information |
| Over-tourism |
| Sustainable development challenges |

Source: Created by the author

4.1. *Profound connection with nature*

Participants speak enthusiastically about the beauty of natural landscapes, describing their contrasts as a source of inspiration and inner peace. For V., nature represents not only an aesthetic resource but also an integral part of his identity, playing a special role in his daily life. In this context, he emphasizes the need to protect the environment, warning about the negative effects of human activities, such as deforestation, which can profoundly disrupt the natural balance.

“I believe that nature should be conserved as well as possible, and everyone should have a good relationship and be grateful towards nature, so to speak. In other words, we should try not to destroy or harm it as much as we can” (V)

Similarly, L. expresses genuine pride in the Hațeg region, which he describes as “pleasing to the eye” with remarkable tourism potential. L. considers living in a protected area a privilege and actively promotes the region’s beauty. His relationship with nature is defined by tranquility, relaxation, and spiritual rejuvenation, strengthening his attachment to the area.

“There are many areas here in Țara Hațegului that are pleasing to the eye and invite you to return to those places. Since I was a child, I have lived close to nature. I was fortunate to have people in my family who loved nature. And I was taken outdoors from a young age. I live in harmony with nature. That's how I was taught. I love nature. I love walking a lot. And as long as I can, I will keep walking” (L)

The same attitude toward nature can also be observed in the case of T. who stated:

“I believe that nature, as I said from the beginning, has been very generous with us here in Țara Hațegului. If you respect it, it gives you so much in return—peace, relaxation, the joy of seeing its beauty, and the joy it brings to the soul” (T)

In the same way, C. describes nature as a fundamental part of his life, perceiving protected areas as a “home.” Outdoor walks, and foraging for plants and mushrooms, are activities that deepen her connection to an “unspoiled” and authentic environment. This profound bond suggests a symbiosis between humans and nature, where respect for the environment is a central value.

“I really love nature; I walk on the hills, I enjoy foraging for wild edible plants and mushrooms, and I like going into the mountains and hiking on trails. I enjoy seeing nature that is either untouched or only slightly altered by humans, and in this area, you can truly find that” (C)

M. expresses a special attachment to the village of Moceriș, his birthplace, which he considers unparalleled. The mountainous landscapes, gentle animals, and local wildlife, such as deer, wild boars, and stags, define his sense of belonging.

“Well, I was born here in Mocerış. So, I wouldn’t trade this place for any other. I really wouldn’t trade it for any other place. It seems to me there are no places more beautiful than here. [...]. When I came here, I brought my wife with me; I think we walked over 30 kilometers to reach our hills” [...] I really love nature, and I enjoy seeing animals like these, not predators because I don’t like them. [...]. Having predators bothers me because they might harm or kill other animals. But I like gentle animals, like pheasants, deer, and wild boars.

For all participants, nature is more than just a landscape; it is a source of peace, inspiration, and identity. Through their deep connection with the environment, they underscore the importance of its protection, both through appropriate regulations and education. Their attachment to the region and the values they promote reflect a clear vision of the necessity to preserve and cherish what is authentic and unspoiled.

4.2. Protected areas’ impact on the community

Protected areas, by their nature, bring both advantages and challenges to local communities. Participants emphasize that these areas significantly contribute to the local economy by attracting tourists and investments. The positive impact of tourism supports local businesses and economic growth, positioning protected areas as valuable resources. However, this economic potential is overshadowed by conflicts arising from strict regulations. Residents often perceive these restrictions as obstacles, particularly when they limit traditional activities or require approvals for even minor repairs. Frustration is exacerbated by bureaucratic processes that seem to disregard local traditions and community needs.

“It’s difficult because I don’t think they really understand what a protected area “entails” and don’t realize that it works in their favor, not against them. They only see the restrictions and permits, not the benefits that the protected area provides” (C)

V. views protected areas as having an important educational role, serving as “learning laboratories” for both locals and visitors. They provide opportunities to understand the importance of environmental conservation, yet there is a disconnect between the perceived and experienced benefits within the community.

“Some people don’t like the fact that others come and say this is a protected area, and there’s always that territorial feeling: Hey, you don’t tell me what to do; I’ve been here before you! I had land there; you’re not allowed! Or anyway, I’ll do it my way, say what they want, and do what you want. That’s how it was at the beginning, but the impact has been positive overall because protected areas continue to help educate people. Whether you like it or not, they’re real outdoor learning laboratories” (V)

M. observes that many residents fail to appreciate the advantages offered by environmental protection, focusing more on restrictions than on benefits like tourism or maintaining a balanced natural environment. He values the role of protected areas in preventing chaotic development and maintaining a balance between human activities and nature. He believes

that while restrictions have been applied, they have not been invasive or overly burdensome, contributing to long-term environmental protection.

“I believe it’s for the better, although I’m convinced not everyone in the community understands this. There are certainly people who try to focus on that one negative aspect they think might affect, let’s say, their small businesses. In the short term, perhaps, but in the long term, for the community as a whole, I think it’s only for the better” (T)

On the other hand, tensions surrounding the regulations of the National Park are evident. Some property owners complain about severe limitations on the use of their land, such as bans on cutting wood or clearing pastures. These rules are perceived as violations of property rights and obstacles to the free use of resources. The restrictions imposed by protected area status directly impact agricultural activities. For instance, land within protected zones cannot be declared to APIA for subsidies, limiting access to funding and agricultural opportunities. These policies create financial and administrative pressures for residents.

“The National Park is both good and not good for us. Let me give you an example. I have a plot of about 14 hectares. I bought it, and it wasn’t maintained by the people I bought it from. And now I’m not allowed to... to cut the wood that’s on it” (M)

Although protected areas offer benefits, such as tax exemptions for certain lands, these advantages are not seen as sufficient or equitably distributed. Within the community, there is tension between the positive ecological impact and the economic hardships experienced by locals. This situation highlights the need for better communication and a balance between environmental protection and the economic needs of communities.

4.3. The importance of ecological education and information

The respondent emphasizes the importance of educating the public about appropriate behavior in nature and promoting responsible tourism. Organizing awareness and training campaigns that include clear rules for visiting and conserving protected areas is deemed essential. The lack of education among tourists is identified as a major issue, negatively impacting both the environment and people’s relationship with nature.

“I think what’s missing is for those who work for nature to come closer to the people, to visit the villages, to communicate better and in a way that resonates with them—not using sophisticated language or terms that the locals don’t understand” (C)

Furthermore, in his view, ecological education is crucial in fostering a responsible relationship with the environment. V. advocates for educational programs, including those aimed at children, to promote awareness and respect for nature, thus nurturing a responsible attitude among future generations.

“The presence of volunteers, besides directly participating in activities and carrying out tasks for the benefit of both the community and the protected areas, also educates at home.

Because when a child comes and explains what they did today and with what purpose, it's somewhat impactful and has a very positive effect on adults" (V)

The participant also highlights the role of education in shifting mindsets and fostering respect for the environment. Raising awareness about the values and rules associated with protected areas is seen as a critical step toward building a harmonious relationship between communities and nature. This underscores the need for educational campaigns aimed at encouraging respect and responsibility, particularly among young people and tourists.

"I believe that everything starts with awareness, and here I think a lot of work needs to be done to make the residents of Țara Hațegului aware that they live in a protected area. From this point on, each person should find their own methods of protecting it" (T)

Another key point discussed is the need for clearer and more accessible information for residents in protected areas. Frequent confusion regarding the distinctions between different types of areas, such as the Dinosaur Geopark and the UNESCO International Geopark, reflects a general lack of understanding. The respondent suggests that public education can foster a better relationship between communities and the authorities managing these areas.

"I knew very well that there is a difference between the UNESCO Global Geopark Țara Hațegului and the Dinosaur Geopark - Țara Hațegului Natural Park, which has a similar name. From this somewhat overlapping of terms, confusion and lack of knowledge arose in the minds of the residents of Țara Hațegului. They didn't understand that a specific protected area imposes certain restrictions, like, for example, the construction of even the smallest building or something like that" (T)

To address these issues, educational campaigns, multiple sources of information, and clarification of the protected area concept are proposed. A specific example from the M. interview highlights the importance of explaining to locals that protected areas do not restrict their rights but can bring long-term benefits. Effective communication should come from both local authorities and protected area administrators, contributing to a more constructive relationship between people and nature.

"An intensive campaign should be carried out through various organizations, in schools, in pensioners' associations, women's organizations, to show and highlight to the residents what a protected area truly means. It should emphasize that it does not bring limitations to their rights as residents of the area and that, in the long run, it can only bring benefits" (M).

4.4. Over-tourism

The development of tourism in the Hațeg area brings both economic benefits and significant challenges. On one hand, the emergence of guesthouses and related businesses supports the local economy. However, poor management of tourist influx creates problems. Chaotic tourism, lack of informational signage, and an insufficient number of rangers negatively impact both the natural environment and visitor experiences. These issues

highlight the need for a more coherent strategy and greater involvement from the protected area administration.

The respondents express concern about the impact of uncontrolled tourism on nature, emphasizing the importance of mountain tourism education and the protection of natural resources. Unsupervised tourism can damage landscapes and biodiversity, prompting the proposal for the introduction of permanent guides in mountain areas to ensure compliance with ecological norms. This underscores the importance of a sustainable tourism model that safeguards the environment while providing a high-quality experience for visitors.

“Since protected areas have become more present and people have become aware of this, all kinds of investors are coming. I believe that the people who live here are not taking full advantage of it and are not giving back to the protected areas as they should, nor are they benefiting from their presence. And I think that in a few years, there will be a very large tourism boom” (T)

Upon returning to the region, the participant (T) notes an increase in tourist activity, which they consider beneficial in the long term but not without challenges. The growth of tourism represents an economic opportunity but also pressures the need to balance regional development with environmental protection. Haşeg is seen as an ecotourism destination, and its tourism development must adhere to sustainability principles. To improve the visitor experience and support sustainable growth, better infrastructure is required, such as improved access roads and adequate facilities.

“I would like, and many others from the area would as well, for arrangements to be made and access points for tourism to be created. We have a very beautiful, very pleasant area. However, in a way, the National Park wants to keep things as they were, with nature, without creating trails or access roads. But, without roads, people don't come. Because now, people have become more comfortable. They want to drive from one place to another, they don't walk as much anymore” (M)

A specific example from the interview highlights the challenges posed by "chaotic" tourism, including the use of ATVs and the negative impact on traditional architecture and natural landscapes. C., for instance, voices concerns about over-tourism and its effects on local communities.

“I am concerned about over-tourism or, rather, chaotic tourism. Everyone tries to attract tourists with a brighter, shinier sign or a more colorful house, and this can harm the villages here, the local architecture, and ultimately the landscape and nature in general. The European funds that are given, even in protected areas, for ATVs and activities that are not suitable either for the protected area or, in general, for our country” (C)

Furthermore, the tension between the desire for tourism development and the need for conservation is felt by locals, who call for more infrastructure investments to attract tourists, even as the National Park administration prioritizes preserving the area in its

natural state. Thus, tourism development in the Hațeg area illustrates a conflict between economic necessity and nature conservation, both of which are vital for the region's future.

“Tourism should be centralized. These are sustainable things for both the community and the visitors of the protected areas. Because it is chaotic and local. Just like all over Romania and in Țara Hațegului. Also, there should be better preparation of the sites. For example, paleontological sites, geological sites” (V)

4.5. Sustainable development challenges

Participants expressed concerns about the risks associated with tourism investments, warning of potential "exploitation" of natural resources and land sold at low prices to external investors. This phenomenon could significantly alter the local community's structure, increasing the cost of living and disrupting the socio-economic balance of the region.

T. emphasizes the need for appropriate infrastructure to support ecotourism. Improving roads and creating bike trails are essential measures to ensure visitor access that is both easy and environmentally responsible. Such initiatives, he believes, would promote sustainable exploration and harness the region's tourism potential without compromising nature.

“The fact that cycling routes have been developed, that thematic trails have been created, and that work is being done in the field of sustainable development is a good thing. Now, I believe these things need to be maintained in the future” (T)

Moreover, T. regards local authorities and national agencies, such as the National Agency for Protected Natural Areas (ANANP), as crucial actors in safeguarding the region's natural and cultural heritage. However, he underscores the need for more active involvement and efficient collaboration between specialized institutions and local administrations. This partnership could yield sustainable development solutions, ensuring the conservation of natural resources alongside infrastructure modernization.

“It must be done in full harmony with nature and by respecting these protected areas. I don't know if this has been done or if serious steps have been taken in this direction so far, but I believe that people are starting to understand, and we hope it's going in the right direction. [...] The only benefits and the only viable path I see for Hațeg at the moment are to exploit its natural and historical benefits” (T)

For C., sustainable development should combine modernization with respect for the region's natural and cultural aesthetics. Drawing inspiration from examples like Germany, he advocates for measures that harmoniously integrate modern elements into the local landscape without compromising community identity. This holistic approach requires education, community engagement, and slow but steady economic growth rooted in sustainability.

“I’m thinking of harmonious and gradual development with nature. The first things I would consider, without destroying what we have, but at the same time preserving local values and ensuring comfort, without compromising comfort”[...] More funds should be allocated to protected areas, somehow for businesses that can develop in protected areas, not for ATV rentals, cars, or whatever else, but more for local businesses that can be developed here. Related to tourism, crafts, of course, modernized, gastronomy, and so on” (C)

M. similarly emphasizes the necessity of balanced development. He highlights the importance of collaboration between locals, authorities, and investors to preserve the region's natural and cultural values while providing the necessary comforts for its inhabitants. Such inter-community cooperation is seen as a cornerstone for integrating environmental protection with the area's economic and social needs.

“Many times, we tend to say that people in the village should live in the same straw and wood houses, and why do they need sewage, water, and all the things that we ultimately benefit from in the city? [...] One form of development would be if the park and roads are properly arranged, but there should be access roads to certain places. For example, the waterfall on Valea Satului, or the Devil’s Lake. More hikers and tourists would come. And through this, the local people would benefit as well, as they could sell more of their products and become more known” (M)

All participants perceive sustainable development as essential for the region's future. It entails creating jobs, improving infrastructure, and protecting the environment. However, V. draws attention to irresponsible tourist behaviors, such as littering, which can severely impact the natural equilibrium.

“There should be no more destruction of potential paleontological sites. Tourism should be centralized. These are sustainable things for both the community and the visitors of the protected areas” (V)

To mitigate these issues, he proposes active involvement from authorities, fostering collaboration with environmental institutions and local communities. Local administrations must enforce clear regulations and support ecological education initiatives to ensure that economic development aligns with environmental protection.

Striking a balance between modernization and nature conservation is key to sustainable development. Tourism investments, if managed properly, can bring significant benefits but require careful planning, inter-institutional collaboration, and community involvement. Only through a sustainable approach based on education and respect for local heritage can the region thrive in the long term.

“I believe that, as a conclusion, this is how I see it, as a resident of this area and, again, as someone somewhat involved in tourism activities, that a truly sustainable development and an increase in the prosperity of the residents in the long term involves maintaining these protected areas. And not only that but also a serious campaign to inform the residents of the area. Because, with a serious informational campaign, they will understand and

perceive that they live in an area that is not only protected and brings them restrictions, but that it can also bring them future benefits” (T)

5. Conclusions

Participants describe nature as a source of inspiration, tranquility, and identity. They emphasize the importance of ecological education and the need to protect the environment, proposing educational initiatives to foster respect for nature. Moreover, they perceive protected areas as a "home," encouraging responsible interaction with an unspoiled environment. Although protected areas support the local economy through tourism, strict restrictions create tensions. Regulations are sometimes seen as obstacles, affecting traditional and agricultural activities. However, these areas are also viewed as educational opportunities, serving as "learning laboratories" for nature conservation.

Education is perceived as being essential for changing mindsets and promoting responsible tourism. Campaigns are needed to clarify the benefits of protected areas and inform communities about how environmental protection can bring economic and ecological advantages. Tourism development generates revenue but also pressures the environment. Chaotic tourism, lack of infrastructure, and improper resource use impact landscapes and local communities. A sustainable tourism model is needed to balance nature conservation with economic needs.

Participants also advocate for a regional development that combines modernization with respect for the natural environment and cultural heritage. Collaboration between authorities, communities, and investors is essential to ensure nature conservation, infrastructure modernization, and sustainable economic growth. Moreover, public education and clear regulations are crucial for maintaining this balance.

There are several potential limitations to this study. The first relates to the self-selecting method of sampling. Although Smith and colleagues [18] recommended this sampling method as preferred in IPA, we may end up interviewing participants who were more engaged and willing to share their personal experiences. Moreover, the sample is relatively small, and it should not be assumed that similar findings would come from other residents in similar situations.

In conclusion, this study highlights the profound connection participants have with nature and the challenges and opportunities associated with living in protected areas. While protected areas are valued for their ecological, educational, and economic contributions, tensions arise from regulatory restrictions and the pressures of tourism development. The findings underscore the importance of ecological education, sustainable tourism practices, and collaborative approaches to regional development that respect both natural and cultural heritage. However, the study's limitations suggest the need for further research to explore diverse perspectives and experiences in similar contexts, including a multi-stakeholder approach (local authorities, protected area managers/administrators). These insights can inform more inclusive strategies for balancing conservation with community and economic needs.

Acknowledgments

The Endangered Landscapes and Seascapes Programme (ELSP) is managed by the Cambridge Conservation Initiative (CCI) and founded by the Arcadia Foundation. It aims to transform the global understanding and conservation of biodiversity and secure a sustainable future for biodiversity and society [25]. The current study was elaborated within the project planning grant “Southwestern Carpathian Landscape: Safeguarding Europe’s largest Wilderness Area – for the wellbeing of communities” financed in October 2023 by the ELSP program and conducted by Natura 2000 Coalition Romania.

References

- [1] K. MacKinnon, K. Richardson and J. MacKinnon, "Protected and other conserved areas: ensuring the future of forest biodiversity in a changing climate," *The International Forestry Review*, pp. 93-103, 2020.
- [2] CBD, Convention on Biological Diversity Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020, Including Aichi Biodiversity Targets., Retrieved from <https://www.cbd.int/sp>, 2011.
- [3] UNEP-WCMC., Protected Planet: World Database on Protected Areas, <https://www.protectedplanet.net/en>, 2021.
- [4] P. Gannon, G. Dubois, N. Dudley, J. Ervin and et al., "Editorial Essay: An update on progress towards Aichi biodiversity target," *PARKS*, 2019.
- [5] J. E. Watson, N. Dudley, D. Segan and M. Hocking, "The performance and potential of protected areas," *Nature*, vol. 6, no. 515, pp. 67-73, 2014.
- [6] S. Woodley, H. Locke, D. Laffoley and K. MacKinnon, "A review of evidence for area-based conservation targets for the post-2020 global biodiversity framework," *PARKS*, vol. 25(2), pp. 31-46, 2019.
- [7] P. Dearden, M. Bennett and J. Johnston, "Trends in global protected area governance, 1992-2002," *Environmental Management*, vol. 36(1), pp. 89-100., 2005.
- [8] N. Dudley, Guidelines for applying protected area management categories., IUCN. Gland, Switzerland, 2008.
- [9] U. Schirpke, D. Marino, A. Marucci, M. Palmieri and R. Scolozzi, "Operationalising ecosystem services for effective management of protected areas: Experiences and challenges," *Ecosystem services*, vol. 28, pp. 105-114.
- [10] V. M. Adams, S. A. Setterfield, M. M. Douglas, M. J. Kennard and K. Ferdinands, "Measuring benefits of protected area management: trends across realms and research gaps for freshwater systems," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, vol. 370(1681), pp. 1-12, 2015.
- [11] Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, "Convention on Biological Diversity," [Online]. Available: <https://www.cbd.int/countries/profile?country=ro>.
- [12] EC, EEA, "The Biodiversity information system for Europe," [Online]. Available: <https://biodiversity.europa.eu/countries/romania>.
- [13] Ministerul Mediului, "Date GIS., " 2015. [Online]. Available: <http://www.mmediu.ro/categorie/date-gis/205>.
- [14] Ministerul Mediului, "Catalogul pădurilor virgine și cvasivirgine din România," 2022. [Online]. Available: <http://www.mmediu.ro/articol/catalogul-padurilor-virgine-si-cvasivirgine-din-romania/5550>.
- [15] R. Iosif, V. D. Popescu, L. Ungureanu, C. Șerban and et al., "Eurasian lynx density and habitat use in one of Europe’s strongholds, the Romanian Carpathian," *Journal of Mammalogy*, vol. 103 (2), pp. 415-424, 2022.

- [16] F. Mikulcak, J. Newig, A. Milcu, T. Hartel and J. Fischer, "Integrating rural development and biodiversity conservation in Central Romania," *Environmental Conservation*, vol. 40 (2), no. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0376892912000392>, pp. 129-137, 2013.
- [17] L. C. Stringer and J. Paavola, "Participation in environmental conservation and protected area management in Romania: A review of three case studies," *Environmental Conservation*, vol. 40(2), pp. 138-146, 2013.
- [18] J. A. Smith, P. Flowers and M. Larkin, *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: theory, method and research*, Sage Publications, 2009.
- [19] J. Smith, *Semi – structured interviewing and qualitative analysis*, 19995.
- [20] J. Ritchie and A. Lewis, *Qualitative Research Practice. A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*, Sage Publications, 2003.
- [21] J. Smith, M. Jarman and M. Osborne, "Doing interpretative phenomenological analysis, in Murray, M., & Chamberlain, K. (Eds.)," in *Qualitative Health Psychology*, Sage Publications, 1999.
- [22] J. A. Smith, "Hermeneutics, human sciences and health: linking theory and practice," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*, pp. 3-11, 2007.
- [23] M. Osborn and J. A. Smith, "The personal experience of chronic benign lower back pain: An interpretative phenomenological analysis," *British Journal of Health Psychology*, vol. 3(Part 1), p. 65–83, 1998.
- [24] J. A. Smith and M. Osborn, "Interpretative phenomenological analysis," in *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods*, Sage Publications, 2003, p. 51–80.
- [25] ELSP, "Programme Management / Endangered Lanscapes & Seascapes Programme," 2020. [Online]. Available: <https://www.endangeredlandscapes.org/about/programme-management/>.