



Executive summary of the public audit report

PERFORMANCE OF NATIONAL PARKS

4 July 2014 No. VA-P-20-7-8



Full audit report in Lithuanian is available on the website
of the National Audit Office: www.vkontrole.lt

DEFINITIONS

‘Environmental monitoring’ means systematic observation of the state of the environment and its components and changes thereof and evaluation and prognosis of anthropogenic impact.

‘Biological diversity (biodiversity)’ means the variety of species of living organisms that live in terrestrial, surface water and other ecosystems, their habitats, and genetic diversity.

‘Reserves’ means the protected areas established for the preservation of the natural and/or cultural sites valuable from the scientific or cognitive point of view, the territorial complexes and objects (properties) of natural and cultural heritage located therein, landscape and biological diversity as well as gene pool.

‘Zones of ecological protection’ means the territories in which activity restrictions are set in order to protect neighbouring territories or objects as well as the environment against a potential adverse impact of the activity.

‘Invasive species’ means a fauna or flora species which is rapidly expanding outside its natural range and causes damage to local ecosystems, agriculture, landscape, etc.

‘Natura 2000’ means the European ecological network, an integral network of areas of importance for the protection of habitats which consists of areas containing certain types of natural habitats of Community importance and habitats of species of Community importance.

‘Preventive activities (ranger activities)’ means activities of the administration of the protected area aimed at educating the local population, visitors to protected areas and other interested persons, developing their environmental awareness, reducing red tape, and increasing the availability of information about opportunities for and limitations on activities.

‘Recreation’ means the process of recovering of a person’s physical and spiritual capacities, a person’s leisure activity whose purpose is to rest, travel and receive medical treatment at sanatoria and in resorts.

‘Strict reserves’ means the protected areas set up in order to preserve and conduct research of the natural or cultural territorial complexes of particular scientific value, ensure the unaffected course of natural processes or maintenance of authenticity of cultural properties, promote protection of the territorial complexes of natural and cultural heritage.

‘Nature management an/or heritage management projects for protected areas’ means projects developed for establishing a system of specific management measures in protected areas or parts thereof.

‘Protected areas’ means the land and/or water areas which have clearly defined boundaries, an acknowledged scientific, ecological, cultural and other value and for which a special protection and use regime (procedure) has been introduced by legal acts.

‘Planning schemes of protected areas’ means spatial planning documents prepared for the purpose of establishing a general strategy of the system of protected areas or parts thereof.

‘State (national and regional) parks’ means the large protected areas established in the areas which are complex from the natural, cultural and recreational points of view and are particularly valuable and whose protection and management is related to the designation of an area’s functional and landscape management zones.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

National parks are the protected areas established for the protection of the natural and cultural landscape of different ethno-cultural regions. The purpose of the national parks is to preserve naturally and culturally valuable landscape complexes and objects; to maintain the stability of ecosystems; to restore destroyed and damaged natural and cultural complexes and objects; to develop scientific research; and to promote and support the ethno-cultural traditions of Lithuanian regions.

There are five national parks in Lithuania covering the total of 144,400 ha (excluding 12,700 ha of the part of Kuršių Nerija (Curonian Spit) National Park situated in the Baltic Sea), i.e. 2.2 per cent of the country area, and accounting for 12.6 per cent all protected areas in Lithuania. The founder of the administrations of Aukštaitija, Dzūkija, Kuršių Nerija and Žemaitija national parks is the State Service for Protected Areas under the Ministry of Environment, meanwhile the Administration of Trakai Historical National Park was established by the Ministry of Culture.

In order to maintain natural and cultural heritage properties, their singularity and attractiveness, it is important to harmonise preservation of landscape and biological diversity in national parks and other protected areas with conditions for living and conducting business activities in those areas.

The audit of the performance of national parks is part of an international cooperative audit involving the supreme audit institutions of Bulgaria, Denmark, Croatia, Poland, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden, and the Ukraine. The supreme audit institution of Estonia has been taking part in the audit as an observer. The objective of this audit is to analyse similarities and differences between the conservation of biological diversity and performance of the national parks, to share audit experience, and to apply the gained know-how.

The objective of the Lithuanian audit carried out in accordance with the plan of the cooperative audit was to evaluate the performance efficiency of the national parks in ensuring the conservation of biological diversity, namely, to see whether:

- the authorities taking part in the management of the national parks ensure mutual cooperation and help achieve the objectives of the national parks;
- the conservation of biological diversity is ensured in the national parks;
- the funding of the national parks ensures implementation of the objectives of the national parks.

The audit entity was the Ministry of Environment, which forms the state policy in the areas of environmental protection, environmental monitoring, protection of landscape and biological diversity, spatial planning, as well as organises, coordinates and monitors the implementation of this policy. The audit covered the period 2010-2012. Information was gathered from the Ministry of Culture, the State Service for Protected Areas and the administrations of five national parks.

The following public audit conclusions and recommendations were drawn upon the assessment of the audit findings.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Lithuania has not yet updated its Biodiversity Strategy adopted in 1998, some of the threats and measures identified in the Strategy have become obsolete and some new ones have not been assessed. The authorities responsible for the maintenance of the national parks know which conservation measures are important and relevant in the national parks; however, decisions necessary for the management of the protected areas can be taken only in case information is available on which measures are the most important and urgent at the national level.
2. The number of the employees in the administrations of the national parks has been going down, meanwhile the area supervised by one employee, the number of additional functions and areas assigned to the staff have been increasing, without allocating additional resources for this purpose. This may cause threat to the maintenance of some areas, protection of species or habitats in the areas under the care of the administrations of the national parks.
3. Nature management plans have not been developed for all national park areas, which have different environmental protection requirements. Activities aimed at improving the state of biodiversity in the national parks can be carried out not only under nature management plans; however, the absence of plans leads to a failure to evaluate the state of the areas and to provide for specific measures for their maintenance and conservation of biodiversity.
4. The administrations of the national parks are unable to regulate the flow of visitors, it is difficult for them to assess the impact of visitors on the landscape and biodiversity:
 - 4.1. the most accurate count of visitors is carried out by the Administration of Kursiu Nerija National Park; however, it is not able to regulate the entire flow of visitors, limiting it only in certain parts of the park, because the park entrance fee is set, collected and used by Neringa municipality;
 - 4.2. the areas of other four national parks are not closed, there are many settlements therein, so the administrations cannot count the exact number of visitors and therefore are not always able to assess whether it would be appropriate to limit the number of visitors and the impact of tourism on biodiversity.
5. The administrations of the national parks carry out monitoring and inventory of wildlife, develop monitoring reports and provide these to the State Service for Protected Areas. The Environmental Protection Agency processes the monitoring data and develops summary reports on the state of the whole country containing information on each species subject to monitoring; however, the administrations of the national parks lack summary findings and recommendations on how to implement biodiversity conservation in the national parks.
6. The funding of the administrations of the national parks from the state budget is planned on the basis of the appropriations allocated by the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Culture, and these appropriations are sufficient only for implementing the basic functions of the administrations. The administrations are involved in various projects funded by the EU and international organisations, they are also looking for other additional sources of funding, however, the additional funding represents only 6.3 per cent of all funds received by the administrations of the national parks for their activity.
7. The administrations of the national parks collaborate with other institutions in order to implement the objectives of the national parks; however, not all residents of the national parks, companies or entrepreneurs operating therein always receive relevant information about the benefits of the parks and restrictions applied in the parks, they are not included in the park management and decision-making, municipalities do not always contribute to the protection of the national parks and development of infrastructure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Ministry of Environment

1. To update the Biodiversity Strategy identifying the main directions and measures for preserving EU and national biodiversity, as well as ways for implementing these measures.
2. To draft new legislation or to amend the existing legal acts in order to promote and ensure participation of the public and municipal representatives in the management of the national parks and in the activities of joint councils.

To the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Culture

3. To revise the legislation currently in force and to take relevant decisions, if necessary, in order to encourage the administrations of the national parks to provide new services and to obtain additional income for the maintenance of the parks.
4. To analyse the capacity of the administrations and to take relevant decisions taking into account the available human and financial resources prior to delegating additional functions and maintenance of additional areas to the administrations of the national parks in order to avoid threats to the maintenance of certain areas and protection of certain species or habitats.

To the State Service for Protected Areas

5. To analyse and evaluate the need for nature management plans and to develop such plans for the national parks or parts thereof in order to determine the state of species and habitats or natural landscape complexes and measures for its improvement.

To the State Service for Protected Areas, including the administrations of the national parks

6. To develop public education and to apply preventive measures in order to ensure more effective management of visitor flows and to reduce the negative impact on biodiversity and landscape,

The measures and time limits for implementing the recommendations are given in Annex 5 hereto, Plan for Implementing the Recommendations.