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Assessing the relationship between biodiversity conservation and slow food culture in selected protected areas in Albania

SPASE SHUMKA[1,♥], ENKELEDA BERBERI[1], MANJOLA KULICI[1], SUADA MUÇAJ[1], FLORJAN VLADI[2]

[1]Department of Food Science and Biotechnology, Faculty of Biotechnology and Food, Agricultural University of Tirana. Rruga Paisi Vodica 1025, Tirana, Albania. Tel./fax.: +355-47-200-874, ♥email: sprespa@gmai.com

[2]GIS Consultant, Abkons. Rruga Themistokli Gërmenji 6, Tirana, Albania

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Abstract. *Shumka S, Berberi E, Kulici M, Muçaj S, Vladi F. 2022. Assessing the relationship between biodiversity conservation and slow food culture in selected protected areas in Albania. Biodiversitas 23: 1319-1326.* Information on the knowledge, uses, and abundance of natural resources in protected areas can provide insight into conservation status and strategies in these locations and human attitudes. The slow-food concept is introduced to accommodate agriculture and food production with strong consideration on environment sustainability, biodiversity conservation and social justice. This paper investigates the slow food knowledge, perception, and contribution to nature conservation in Albania's five protected areas. The performed work is based on a field survey and structured questionnaire aiming to link the current stands within slow food, biodiversity conservation and perceptions of the tourism sector in the protected areas. Our integrated analysis found that the coverage of food biodiversity items related to slow food culture that are relevant to prescribed management plans of the protected areas was at the low level from 4-9 out of 17 considered categories. This was directly related to the low level of conservation at the mid-term assessment that varied from 0 to 62% of originally planned ones. The data also confirmed that the visitors were imposed to a situation of readiness for paying extra for the consumption of the locally based product (i.e., in line with slow food concept) within a specific protected area with their response ranging from 0 to 18%. The information can be used towards generating sustainable use and conservation plans that are appropriate for the local communities and protected areas.

Keywords: Biodiversity loss, conservation, habitat fragmentation, heritage

INTRODUCTION

Biodiversity loss on various ecosystems and agricultural lands across the world has been a serious concern in recent decades (Donal et al. 2001; Brunetti et al. 2019). Recognizing the fact that biodiversity crisis and the climate crisis are interlinked, global communities, including European Union (EU) have pledged various commitments to address the main drivers of biodiversity loss, and put in place an enhanced governance framework and filling policy gaps, for example through the new "EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 - Bringing nature back into our lives" (EU 2021). Nonetheless, with the current situation of the COVID-19 crisis, conserving and restoring biodiversity will be a critical element considering the efforts for economic recovery in Europe following the pandemic, which poses additional challenges for transitional countries on the continent.

There is a general consensus that biodiversity enables agricultural systems to overcome environmental shocks, changing climates and pandemics (CBD 2002; Dickinson et al. 2011; Barbeito et al. 2020). Further, it provides ecosystem services that are essential to life, like pollination and non-timber forest products (Rahawarin 2017). It allows the production of food with a minimal impact on non-renewable resources (water and soil above all) and with less need for external inputs that are costly and harmful to the environment, like fertilizers and pesticides for plants and antibiotics for livestock.

Due to the growing interest in the effects of agriculture and tourism on the surrounding environment and biodiversity (Brunetti et al. 2019), there are several approaches and models of integrating tourism, farming activity and biodiversity conservation (Green et al. 2005; Baumgartner and Quaas 2010; Conde et al. 2017). This includes consideration of conservation from landscape-scale biodiversity to genetic diversity present in crop varieties (Brunetti et al. 2019). Particularly on genetic diversity to produce food resources (often called 'genetic resources'), it mainly refers to domesticated biodiversity and is developed for agriculture (Conde et al. 2017; Baumgartner and Quaas 2010; Fontes and Groom 2016; Green et al. 2005). The issue of genetic resources is directly interlinked with food availability and security, demonstrating the importance of development policy through its conservation (Bommarco et al. 2013). One approach in the conservation of genetic resources is by naming the agricultural product and food generated from it after the place where it has a long domestication and cultivation history (Callon et al. 2002). Product differentiation based on the place of origin is increasingly promoted as a strategy to grow the market and address different sectors of the economy (Tregear et al. 2007; Paul 2014; Voinea et al. 2016).

There is emerging interest that combines the conservation of the genetic resource and food production on the slow food concept. There are various definitions of slow food concepts and practices. Still, it can basically be

defined as agriculture and food production with strong consideration for environmental sustainability, biodiversity conservation, and social aspects. The biodiversity and environmental consideration encompass various organisms including edible plant species and varieties, domesticated animal breeds, insects (including pollinators), the invertebrates and microorganisms that guarantee soil fertility and hold up the food chain in the oceans, the micro flora that live in the digestive systems and those that enable fermentation processes in many foods (bread, cured meats, cheeses, etc.). The social aspect emphasizes the diversity of knowledge that has allowed farmers and food producers to select and adapt plants, animals, and farming techniques to different environmental contexts and transform and preserve foods (Barbeito et al. 2020). Nowadays, the slow food concept has become an international movement being advocated to satisfy culinary pleasure, protect biological and cultural diversity, spread taste education, link green producers to consumers and believe that gastronomy might intersect with politics, agriculture and ecology (Voinea et al. 2016). The considerations of incorporating the local food biodiversity resources and slow food concept are in line with biodiversity conservation, food provision and local traditional knowledge (CBD 2002). In short, slow food concept proposes a holistic approach to food problems, where the economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects are interlinked, being pursued as part of overall development.

The methodological approaches and systems for assessing the effectiveness of management in protected areas provide a vital tool for assessing how well sites are being managed and to provide an informed base for adaptive management (Cook et al. 2014). The evaluation of management effectiveness began to be applied to protected areas in the mid to late 1990s (Hockings 2004), and it has now become an important tool to monitor management systems, provide for adaptive management, and assess conservation outcomes (Cook et al. 2014; Coad et al. 2015). Such evaluation is important since there is a considerable increase in tourism development within protected areas, which has different biases refereeing to income generation and nature conservation. Hall (2010) has argued that within tourism there are primarily two ways to encourage a reduction of the environmental footprint of tourism. The first is the efficiency approach, which seeks to reduce the rate of consumption by using materials and resources more productively. Eco-efficiency stresses the technological link between value creation in economic activities and environmental quality. This approach places more focus on recycling, using energy more efficiently, eco-innovation, and reducing emissions, but otherwise operating in a 'business as usual' manner. The second approach has been referred to as 'slow consumption' (Cooper 2005; Voinea et al. 2016), also closely related to the concepts of 'degrowth' (Bourdeau and Berthelot 2008; Flipo and Schneider 2008; Hall 2009), and includes consumer activism as well as industry and public policy initiatives. According to Hall (2007) these include: (i) the development of environmental standards at the regional, national and international scales; (ii) re-localization schemes such as farmers markets and 'local diets' that reinforce the potential economic, social and environmental benefits of purchasing, consuming and producing locally; (iii) ethical consumption, through ethical and responsible tourism and (iv) the so-called 'new politics of consumption' such as anti-consumerism and culture jamming.

The increasing activities of tourism in protected areas have been observed, particularly within areas of the Albanian Alps as Valbona Valley, Thethi, Gashi and Vermosh. Despite the fact that Albania is a small country, it is rich in biological landscape and is ranked among countries with high biodiversity in Europe. From the geophysical perspective, Albania is dominated by hills and mountains in the North and East and the lowlands in the West. Recreational values related to biological and landscape diversity represent an asset that may be used for tourism development (MoT, 2015). This is a task and responsibility for the protection and development of these values and passing them on to current and future generations. If we are not able and not responsible for protecting biological diversity, there is a risk for loss of these values that help tourism as an instrument for fostering development in Albania. Hunting, fishing, alpinism, and other tourism-related activities require the country to take the necessary measures to protect the environment and its biodiversity. Recently, the concept of ecotourism has turned into an important domain, which is generating financial benefits, in particular regarding protected areas, but not only, and which generates sustainable use of biodiversity components. The size of protected areas has been considerably increasing. Following MoE (2015) since 2005, the number of protected areas has more than doubled, out of 5 % to over 16 %. The current network of protected areas includes 119.401 ha coastal areas and 13.261 ha marine areas.

This research aimed to evaluate the uses of slow food resources, knowledge, and conservation of biological diversity in the selected protected areas. We used a combination of biodiversity conservation, considerations of slow food categories into management planning and achievements assessed through UNESCO toolkit. The research looked on the interrelationship among conservation efforts, tourism development and readiness of visitors to support nature conservation against use of naturally generated food.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study area

This study encompassed study areas of five protected areas in Albania (Figure 1), namely: Albanian Alps National Park, including National Park Lugina e Valbones, Thethi National Park and Lumi i Gashit Strict Reserve (42.2619.7°N and 19.521.6°E); Korab-Koritnik Nature Park (40.5848°N and 20.1632°E); National Park of Hotove-Dangëllija (40.1928.9°N and 20.216.5°E); National Park of Prespa (41.756.3°N and 20.1936.5°E) and National Park of Shebenik-Jabllanica (40.1450.3°N and 20.2649.9°E).

The total area covered in this study was 165,218 ha including all considered protected areas.

Evaluation of management effectiveness

Surveys were conducted in the five selected protected areas in Albania based on the Assessment of Management Plan Implementation adapted from Tool 9 of the Enhancing our Heritage toolkit (UNESCO 2008). This tool aims to assess the progress in implementing the protected area management plan. The tool allows for an assessment of the implementation both at a general level and at the level of individual objectives of the management plan. The adaptations of this assessment consisted of reviewing each action specified in the plan and assigning it to a status category (e.g. from 'Action has not commenced' to 'Action has been completed') and added following components as 'slow food', 'use of local food resources', "food resources management". The methodology provides a way of verifying that protected area objectives are being developed around the management plan.

It is very useful that incorporating the food resources component in line with the entire biodiversity conservation worksheet will provide a way to record analysis, gaps and conclusions, and to model current and future trends of tourism development, particularly within rural areas fitting with the current PA system. The methodology used in this tool makes it possible to see trends in the rate of implementation of the management plan and to assess if this rate is satisfactory or ways how it should be improved.

Data collection and analysis

The research methodology combined the structured interview method to reveal consumer perception regarding the slow food concept and the covering degree method to analyze the nutritional value. The structured interview (Appendix 1) involved drawing up a list of questions to which a number of possible responses were formulated, so that interviewers could easily note in which category the answer of each respondent falls. The investigated sample consisted of 363 visitors in the five protected areas. The research was conducted in the period of 2018-2019, taking place in the areas of focus.

The data were analyzed by employing Box Plot and analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine whether there are any statistically significant differences between the means of two independent treatments.

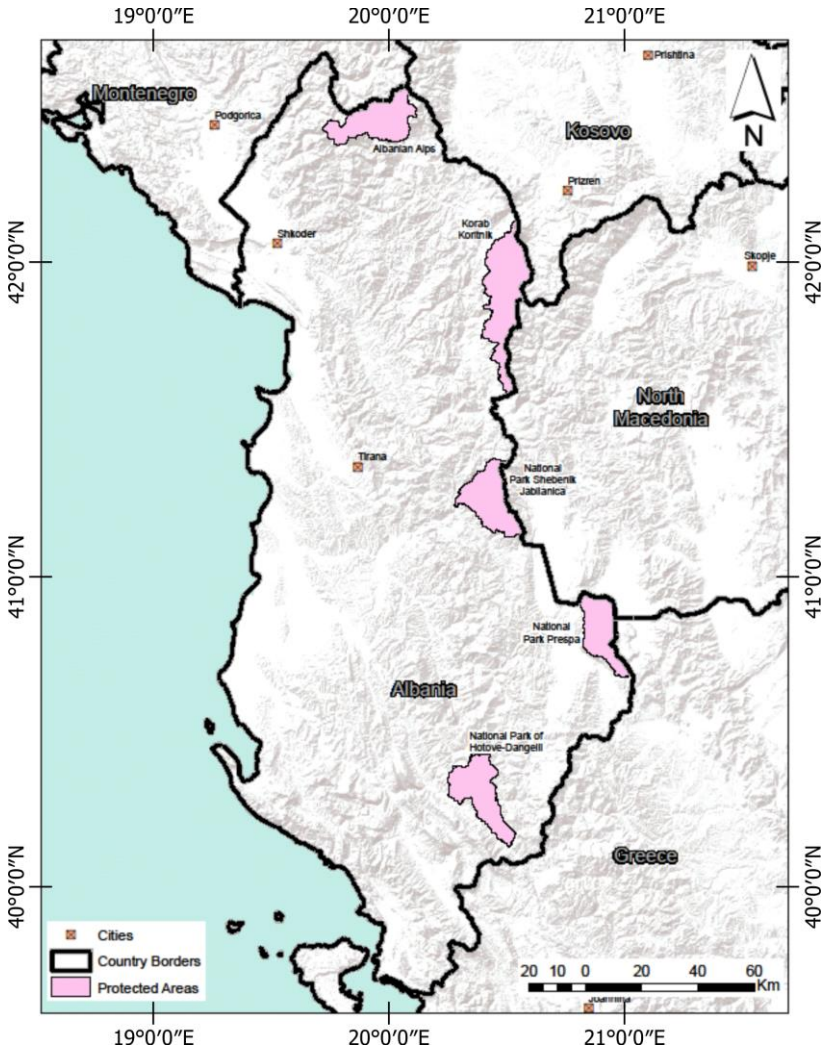

Figure 1. Map of the protected areas in Albania where the survey has been conducted

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

State of management of the protected area and knowledge dynamics

The result of the assessment of the management plan implementation in each protected area is presented in Figure 1. The collected data generated from field works and questionnaires in the five protected areas in Albania exposed the different knowledge dynamics and gaps that characterize visitors' knowledge and perception on slow food and natural values conservation. Meanwhile, following the ground analyses, differences among foreign and domestic consumers were less clear-cut than expected.

The results presented in Figure 2 shows that the implementation of management plans has not fully accomplished the five management objectives. In some extends, during the analyses of the management plans of the selected protected areas, this was not an easy judgment since some of the objectives were not clearly stated or too specific and not proportionally related to the associated determined measures. For example, one of the objectives is to preserve or enhance the species populations (both plants and animals), yet the only foreseen measure is to keep humans or disturbance out. Considering the foreseen measures, numerous activities are carried out by the park administration to control human activities and access within the park, for instance hunting. Meanwhile, in several extends (almost in all protected areas), there is no indication about the status of the defined species population. One of the limitations is that the species population and associated habitats state are only partly monitored by responsible authorities since it requires particular expertise and monitoring protocols that are not developed or lack staff. Therefore, it can be assumed based on the toolkit of assessment (UNESCO 2008), the implementation status of this objective is considered as not commenced.

Given the focus of this survey, the situation is more complex on the other two objectives related to the conservation of natural collectible products like mushrooms and medicinal plants that are subject of slow food approaches. In this case, the only measure foreseen by the management plan (Albanian Alps, Korab-Koritnik and Prespa) is to provide permissions to the collectors. Meanwhile, the mushroom collection is important for some families within the Prespa National Park. It is estimated that about 25 tons of mushrooms are collected each year (ANPA 2019). However, the management authorities consider that there is low pressure on the mushroom population within the park, especially within the core zone. The situation is almost similar with medicinal plants. Still, it seems that in other protected areas (Albanian Alps and Korab-Koritnik), the collection of the European blueberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) and other medicinal plants is more complicated. So, the authorities claim that it is practically impossible to license all local collectors, since they need to be registered to the tax office. It normally works that some businesses get the license and then use (employ) local collectors. Licensing requires collectors to get together and share a common interest.

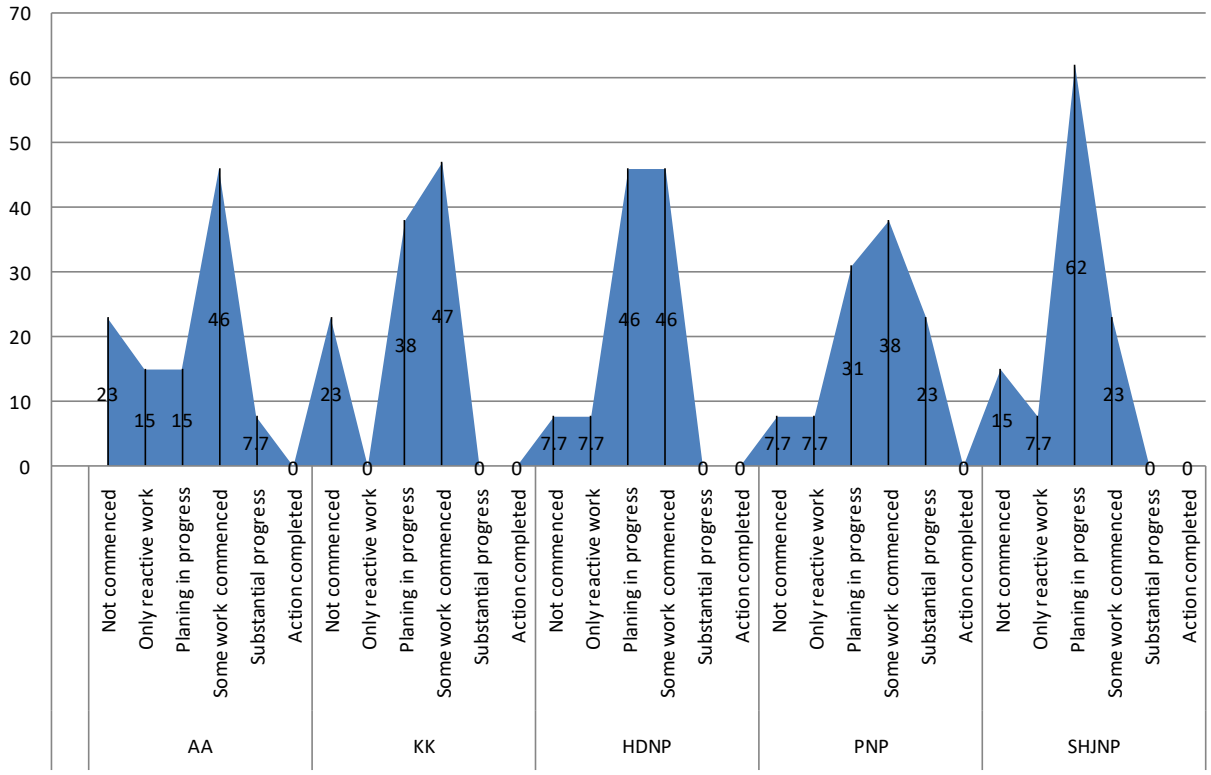

Figure 2. The state of an implemented conservation plan in mid-term assessment (% of entire conservation plans). Note: AA: Albanian Alps, KK: Korab Koritnik, PNP: Prespa National Park, HDNP: Hotove Dangëllija National Park, SHJNP: Shebenik Jabllanica National Park

Slow food culture: a gap between production and consumption in the protected areas system

The slow food movement and concept approaches are directly linked with biodiversity conservation (Barbeito et al. 2020). Figure 3 shows the relevant staff's limited knowledge, and concerns in all considered protected areas related to slow food categories. So, only two protected areas (Albanian Alps and Prespa) implemented specific projects and devolved ideas. Further on specific important categories of the slow food as: The role of indigenous people, biodiversity and pandemics, biodiversity in soil, etc., are not considered at all. It is worth mentioning that the poor integration of slow food categories into management planning is also reflected in the lack of knowledge by visitors (both domestic and foreigners) and low awareness for additional commitments once they consume recourses generated from protected areas (Figure 4 and 5). According to the MoE (2015), the concept of ecotourism has turned into an important domain, which is generating financial benefits and sustainable use of biodiversity components. The research analyses revealed that this is not in line with the ground state and visitor's attitudes.

Biodiversity allows agricultural systems to overcome environmental shocks, changing climates and pandemics. In Albania, conservation actions are in line with the new EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 (EU 2021). It provides ecosystem services that are essential to life, like pollination. It allows the production of food with a minimal impact on non-renewable resources (water and soil above all) and with less need for external inputs that are costly and harmful to the environment, like fertilizers and pesticides for plants and antibiotics for livestock (Barbeito et al. 2020).

Conservation culture: Gap between conservation of natural values and associated tourism developments

Figure 4 presents different issues related to food biodiversity, coverage of the management plans of the protected area, mid-term implemented conservation measures and slow food awareness of the interviewed consumers (i.e. visitors). It is worth mentioning that the coverage of food biodiversity items (Figure 4 and 5) is at the low level from 4-9 out of 17 considered categories. This is also directly related to a low level of conservation at the mid-term assessment that varies from 0 to 62 % of originally planned ones.

Following analyses of the data presented in Figure 4, besides that the management plans are foreseen for a period of 10 years, after seven years only 12 % (Albanian Alps) to 22% (HDNP) of the actions has been achieved, that shows poor implementation of considered measures. Further on it is worth to mention that refereeing to the slow food categories out of 17 (Figure 3) only an average of 7 of them are part of the daily activities. Therefore, besides generating incomes from the protected areas, visitors have poor knowledge of slow food and resource use and limited readiness for paying a higher price for food products originating from protected areas.

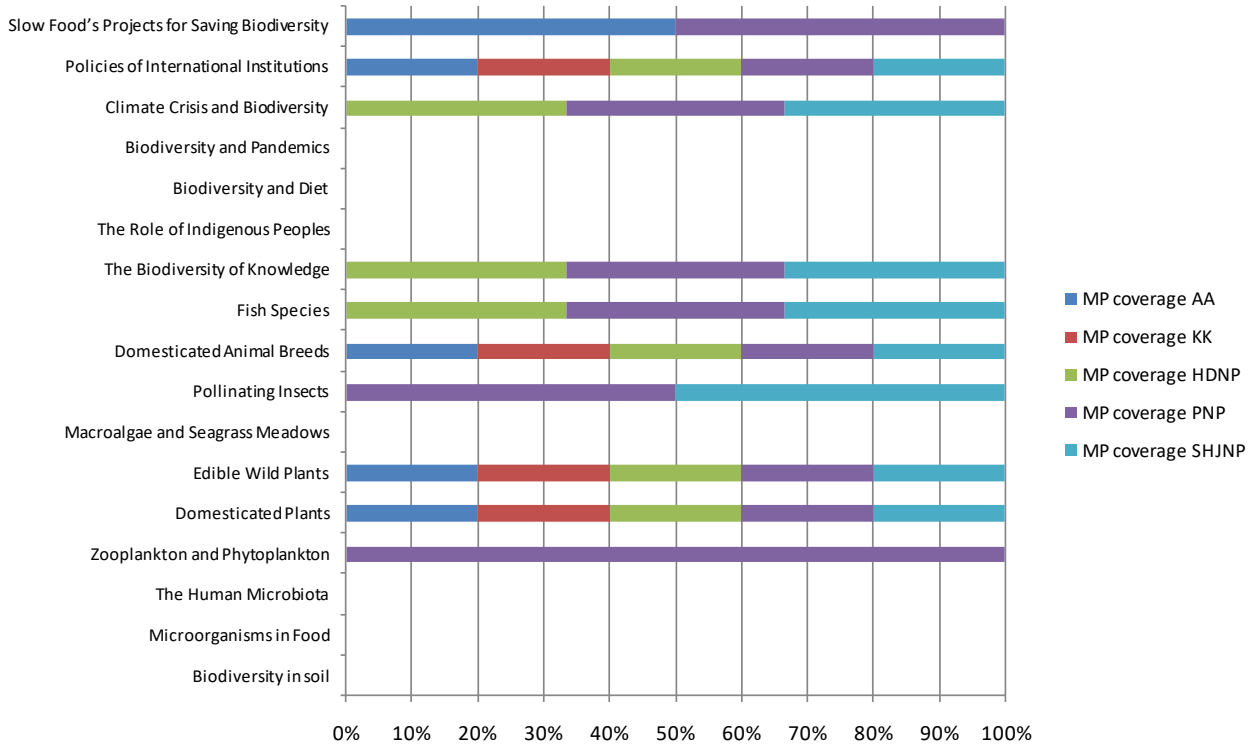

Figure 3. The coverage (%) of management plans related to biodiversity and food in five protected areas. Note: MP: Management plan, AA: Albanian Alps, KK: Korab Koritnik, PNP: Prespa National Park, HDNP: Hotove Dangëllija National Park, SHJNP: Shebenik Jabllanica National Park

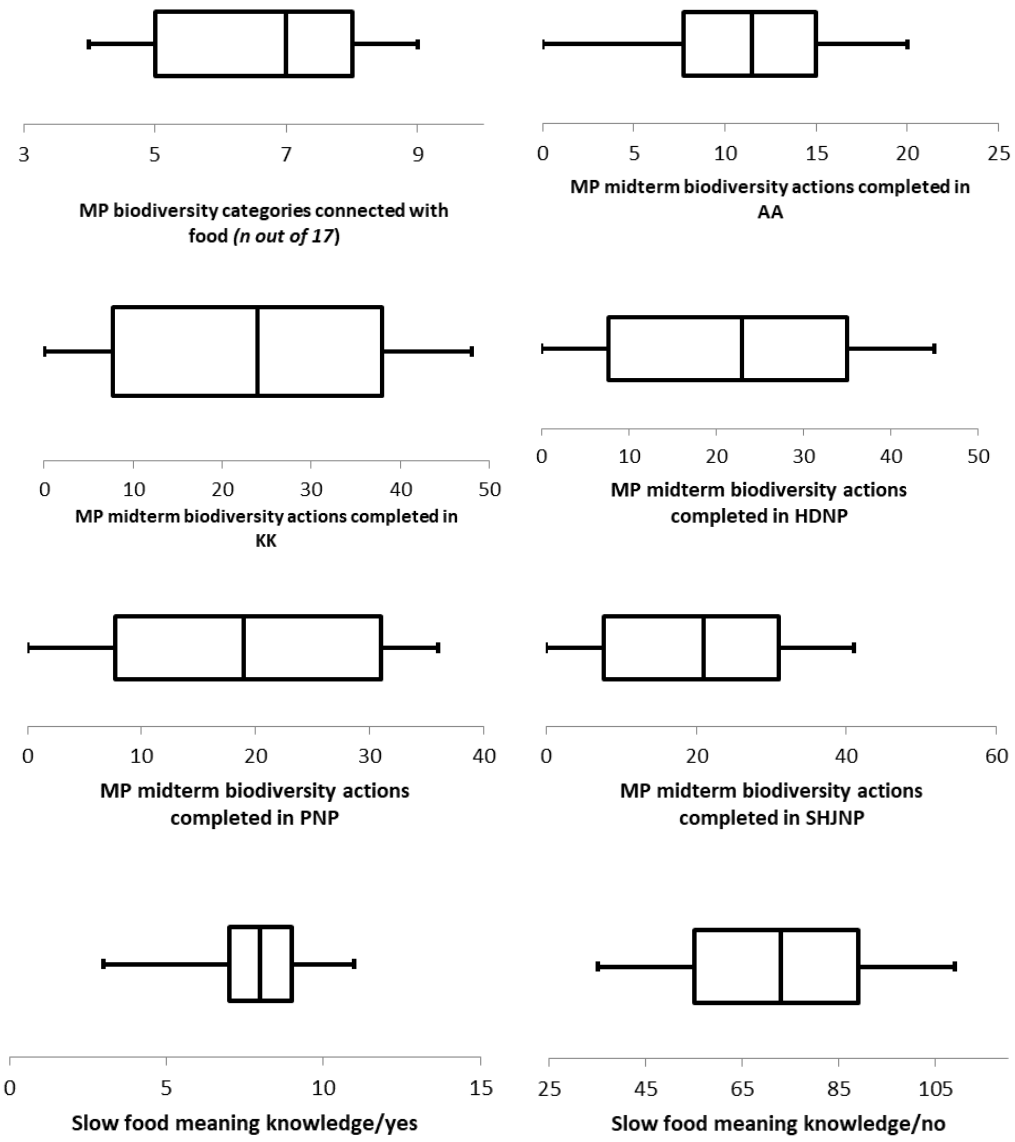

Figure 4. Box-plot of biodiversity coverage within protected areas, conservation measures and consumers/visitors food awareness. Note: MP: Management plan, AA: Albanian Alps, KK: Korab Koritnik, PNP: Prespa National Park, HDNP: Hotove Dangëllija National Park, SHJNP: Shebenik Jabllanica National Park

Following the questionnaire, the visitors were imposed to a situation of readiness for paying extra for the consumption of the locally based product within a specific protected area with their response ranging from 0 to 18% (Figure 5).

The ANOVA Post-Hoc analyses in multiple comparisons for the dependent variable slow food readiness for extra payment for local traditional food across protected areas showed a difference in which the situation in Albanian Alps was statistically different with Prespa National Park ($p=0.019$) with confidence level $\alpha=0.05$ (Table 1). Similarly, Prespa National Park also differed statistically from Korab Koritnik ($p=0.021$).

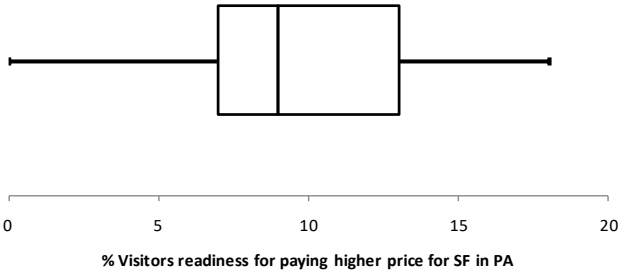

Figure 5. Readiness of visitors/consumers in paying extra for the locally originated food (i.e., slow food). Notes: SF: Slow Food, PA: Protected Area

Table 1. Multiple comparisons for the dependent variable of slow food readiness for extra payment for local commodities across protected areas using the Turkey test

(I) study area	(J) study area	Mean difference (I-J)	Std. error	Sig.	95% confidence interval	
					Lower bound	Upper bound
AA	KK	-.08791	.20521	.993	-.6779	.5021
	HDNP	.10256	.18982	.982	-.4432	.6483
	PNP	**.64423***	.19670	.019	.0787	1.2098
	SHJNP	.10256	.28038	.996	-.7035	.9087
KK	AA	.08791	.20521	.993	-.5021	.6779
	HDNP	.19048	.22060	.908	-.4438	.8247
	PNP	**.73214***	.22655	.021	.0808	1.3835
	SHJNP	.19048	.30207	.969	-.6780	1.0589
HDNP	AA	-.10256	.18982	.982	-.6483	.4432
	KK	-.19048	.22060	.908	-.8247	.4438
	PNP	.54167	.21270	.103	-.0699	1.1532
	SHJNP	.00000	.29183	1.000	-.8390	.8390
PNP	AA	**-.64423***	.19670	.019	-1.2098	-.0787
	KK	**-.73214***	.22655	.021	-1.3835	-.0808
	HDNP	-.54167	.21270	.103	-1.1532	.0699
	SHJNP	-.54167	.29635	.374	-1.3937	.3104
SHJNP	AA	-.10256	.28038	.996	-.9087	.7035
	KK	-.19048	.30207	.969	-1.0589	.6780
	HDNP	.00000	.29183	1.000	-.8390	.8390
	PNP	.54167	.29635	.374	-.3104	1.3937

Notes: *. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level. AA: Albanian Alps, KK: Korab Koritnik, PNP: Prespa National Park, HDNP: Hotove Dangellija National Park, SHJNP: Shebenik Jabllanica National Park

Challenges to maintaining cultural biodiversity

Following the analysis of the complex implication of food biodiversity, conservation approaches and slow food perception, we now conclude the interrelationship influence, while guaranteeing sustainable development in protected areas where the integration of conservation into rural development remains a challenge. Similar to other regions in Europe where it is widely recognized that the initiation and use of local food biodiversity resources are divided between the understanding and interests of different local stakeholders and institutional choices, and framed by social, technical, economic realities, it is significantly traced by the transitional economy in case of Albania.

This study highlights the fundamental dimension of biodiversity conservation that seems to be a guiding principle within contexts of securing sustainable development, a common ground on which the different actors can meet, using the same concepts while still following their specific aims and purposes. Further on, we outlined an analytical approach aiming at understanding the role of local food resources used in maintaining valuable biodiversity by considering institutional discourses and local stakeholder appropriation, without searching for a unifying vision directing the production of knowledge and action.

Following the protected areas management and institutional support for local rural development (primarily tourism sector) there are generated needs that lie in including: (i) Central and local awareness of institutions to value and preserve cultural biodiversity; (ii) Within a potential measure when updating management plans (or further on within drafting new ones), particular attention has to be given to traditional knowledge and cultural biodiversity through adaptive specifications. The research shows that the effect of these assets is highly influenced by the institutional context; (iii) This survey concludes on the need of building on empirical studies to conduct on mountain origin of food intending to establish a comparison of two Origin Food Schemes, namely the Geographical Indication and the Slow Food models; (iv) Prioritizing local consumption and local economies. The cultural biodiversity is rooted in place and culture and emerges in connection with local identities

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