Effects of Tourism Concessions in Protected Areas around the world

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate tourist concessions around the world and their main effects. To do so, we explored the descriptive information according to specific variables and the existing balance between positive and negative effects. We found that the concessions fulfill their economic role through the development of tourist activity, but they have deficiencies in social, environmental and procedural parameters. The most significant positive effect especially concerns the economy and tourism. On the other hand, the negative social effect showed a higher percentage and is related to the lack of partnership with the community. Most concession types are strictly linked to tourism by large companies. The local population is not fully included in the processes or considered partners, and they only participate in the provision of services. We also found an imbalance between positive and negative effects, with evidence of inconsistency in the processes. The processes considered inconsistent compromise local sustainability, the management objectives of the areas, and generate unequal opportunities. This scenario reveals that tourism concessions are still fragile and can compromise sustainable tourism development and nature conservation in PA. Furthermore, processes based on economic policies when implemented in conservation efforts only guarantee the maximization of economic benefits, disfavoring social and environmental objectives. We defend the control and continuous monitoring of concessions in order to maintain more consistent and effective processes.

Introduction

Concessions for tourism in Protected Areas (PAs) represent the mechanism by which the public authority grants a private entity the right to use land or offer specific services. They occur by providing support services for visitation, accommodation, food, recreation, and education (among others) (Spenceley et al. 2017), and have been encouraged as a strategy to finance and improve tourism implementation in these areas (Gorini et al. 2006; Thompson et al. 2014).

PAs are historically publicly funded and have government budgets as their main source of income (Silva et al. 2021). The average budget for PAs in 2002 was about 30% of the minimum amount required for the conservation of these spaces (Spergel 2002). The values became even lower in 2017, and in 2018 the reduction became negative for the areas. For example, budget cuts to conservation resources in Brazil have been drastically reduced, with values falling from around R$5.9 billion to around R$3.2 billion in 2018 (WWF 2018; Silveira Júnior et al. 2019).

Following the world trend, the resources destined to environmental protection had considerable losses, reducing the capacity of public entities to act in preserving nature. Governments began to allocate less human and financial resources to cover management costs, causing areas to frequently present financing deficits (Watson et al. 2014; Silva et al. 2019). It is worth noting that PAs considerably spread on a global scale between 1992 and 2016, reaching approximately 200,000 (Salvio and Gomes 2018). The number of areas in the world had doubled by 2018, reaching more than 230 thousand, and approximately 270 thousand in 2022 (UNEP-WCMC et al. 2018; WCPA 2022).
In this scenario, tourist concessions act as an alternative to maintain these spaces in guaranteeing the provision of services while contributing to their maintenance (Spenceley et al. 2017). Governments have reduced their role in biodiversity conservation and are still facilitating participation of the private sector and civil society, creating market structures, incentives and other forms of support (Hodge and Adams 2012).

However, the debates mainly concern the capacity of local governance to direct the processes in a transparent and equitable manner. They are strategies based on economic policies that must generate multiple benefits, whether economic, commercial and social, and meet the main objective of PAs, namely preserving nature (Eagles et al. 2009; Dinica 2016; Brumatti and Rozendo 2021).

According to Rodrigues and Abrucio (2019), the issue of partnerships raises different positions on the way in which the public good should be managed and used. For example, there are still weaknesses related to local populations which were already supported by permits and other types of use, which in turn regulated aspects of environmental preservation, local businesses and issues related to land regularization (Stone and Nyaupane 2015; Zhang and Liu 2018).

This theme brings up the important discussion about the way concessions are carried out and the effects they cause. Debates are still incipient regarding their contribution to conservation in fulfilling the objectives of the PAs and for the surrounding communities (Rodrigues and Godoy 2013; Matheus and Raimundo 2017; Rodrigues and Abrucio 2019). However, it has aroused scientific interest (Ojeda 2012; Vuohelainen et al. 2012; Coghan and Castley 2013; Dinica 2016; Rylance 2016; Spenceley et al. 2017; Zhang and Liu 2018; Rodrigues and Abrucio 2019), seeking to understand the vulnerabilities of processes and public policies related to tourism concessions.

In this scenario, it is essential to highlight that PAs are protected spaces with specific objectives which are managed by effective means to achieve the conservation of biodiversity, ecosystem services and associated cultural values (Dudley 2008). Tourism management in these places can occur through the action of the public power, of shared management, with governance by indigenous peoples and traditional communities, which can (for example) guarantee Community Based Tourism (CBT) and support tourist services from the concessions (Leung et al. 2019). PAs enable the protection of nature and economically and socially promote local development, as well as enable participation in local realities and in the appreciation of the production of knowledge, whether traditional or produced by academic efforts (Salvio and Gomes 2021).

In this context, we investigated concessions for tourism in Pas around the world and their main effects (negative and positive). To do so, we extracted descriptive information related to its effects through content analysis. With this, we seek to answer how the trend of concessions related to economic policies influence conservation results.

Material And Methods
Data collection

We searched on Google Scholar, Web of Science and Science Direct platforms using the Boolean terms “AND” for the keywords “concession”, “protected area”, “effect” and “tourism”. The articles found based on the keywords were grouped by year with a cut-off between 1980 and 2021. A total of 72 articles were initially found.

Articles which did not have all the keywords searched, did not show the universe of concessions for tourism and did not present the PA in their study area were considered as exclusion criteria. Thus, we kept 26 articles (SM 1).

It is important to highlight that the word “concession” was considered in a generic and comprehensive way, without direct linkage to any specific law or regulation. It is the most widespread concept that represents the idea of partnership for the use of services between the public power and the private initiative and civil society. The term “concession” was considered the most appropriate in the search for keywords.

Content and data analysis

We used the Content Analysis methodology (Bardin, 2011) to identify variables from the data collection, and then group categories from them. Information on countries was obtained from the “Materials and methods” and “Results” sections in the selected articles. Therefore, the existing spatial pattern in relation to PA partnerships related to continents was analyzed to understand which countries most consistently have concessions or studies on the subject.

The variables of PA category, concession model, partners, community participation, and positive and negative effects of the concession processes were identified and we subsequently determined categories based on them, grouping themes by similarities.

The data for the analysis of the type of protected area were described, observing the typology of the areas presented in the articles. All models and typologies found were analyzed according to their management objectives to prove the area specification and classified according to the System of Management Categories of Protected Areas of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), in order to guide the definition, classification and organization of these areas by defining different categories and conservation objectives (Dudley, 2008) (SM 2).

For the type or model of concession, the content analysis was performed with the presence and absence of tourism indicators, generated from similar keywords found, in which analysis categories were generated (unspecified tourist concessions; tourist activities and leisure; accommodation; food; commerce; management; civil construction; monitoring; and partnership with the community, which corresponds to the indication that there was a concession with the objective of community-based tourism). In addition, we added the category “not mentioned” when the type of grant was not mentioned in the study.
The partners were considered based on the agents responsible for carrying out the concession and grouped by similar terms, such as: private companies (“private companies” and “tourism companies”); community (“local communities”, “local residents” and “indigenous peoples”); “non-governmental organization”; associations’ category (traders’ association, as mentioned in one of the studies); and others.

Next, two aspects were evaluated for the participation of local communities: (i) whether the article included or considered local communities in the study; and (ii) If so, how do these communities participate? Thus, the first aspect was comprehensive in order to observe which articles addressed communities, whether in terms of the concession directly, the influences that these communities had on the process, the effects of the concession on populations or other forms of inclusion.

The second aspect indicated their participation form, observing the following categories: (i) Management: Articles that include populations and if they act directly or indirectly in planning levels of protected areas or their public use; also includes mediation and management through community-based institutions; (ii) Services: Articles that include communities and if they act as service providers, either for the concessionaires responsible for public use or independently provide various services related to public use directly or indirectly; (iii) Partnerships: Articles that include populations and if they act as partners of the person responsible for the management of public use, whether the public agency, or private company, or NGOs, which can be done through assigning of public-private, community partnerships or other initiatives for the development of key activities; (iv) Others: Other forms of participation which do not apply to any of the above categories; (v) Not applicable: Articles which do not include populations or do not specify about it not being possible to analyze how the participation is.

The effects (positive and negative) found were organized into pairs with 7 categories (SM 3) from the content analysis: Environment (-) and Environment (+), Economy (-) and Economy (+), Local Economy (-) and Local Economy (+), Social (-) and Social (+), Inconsistent Processes (-) and Consistent Processes (+), Conflicts (-) and Conflicts (+), and Tourism (-) and Tourism (+).

Then, we built a map with the collected data representing the locations, as well as quantifying the representativeness (%) of the categories of protected area, concession models, partners and participation forms by the population. Finally, we explored the descriptive information according to the variables and the existing balance between positive and negative poles to understand the global patterns related to tourism concessions and how they influence conservation results.

Results

The search resulted in 26 studies, most of them located on the African continent. The most identified PAs were National Parks (IUCN Category II) (17 PAs) (Fig. 1). We identified two areas together in one study, indicated by categories II and VI (Protected area of sustainable use of natural resources). Two studies did not provide information on the type of PA.
Regarding the concession model (Fig. 2), we highlight those focused on tourist activities, mentioning ecotourism, photographic tourism, diving, skiing, fishing and hunting, as well as the lodging and food categories, which together represent 48.9%. In addition, 21% of studies represent concessions for tourism, but the type was not specified. Only 4.6% of the studies indicated that there was a partnership with the community for Community Based Tourism.

Private companies are the main partners, present in 84.6% of the studies considered. Most of the studies evaluated did not include local populations (30.8%) (Fig. 3). When they are included, they qualify as service providers. This means that most concession services are linked to tourism to the detriment of partnerships with communities.

We found considerable imbalance between the effect pairs (positive and negative). The biggest percentage difference between the negative and positive effects is in the processes. The studies indicated legal, financial or resource weaknesses that could compromise sustainability, the management objectives of the areas and inequality of opportunities between those involved. We also identified that the processes considered consistent had the lowest percentage, behind the tourism and environment categories.

A total of 23.08% of the works found present benefits driven by tourism. From a negative point of view (indicated in 3.85% of the studies), it is pointed out that the tourist experience mainly presented weaknesses in relation to access to tourist services and activities. These values represent the second largest difference found in the effects, generating a 19.23% percentage difference between positive and negative effects. The negative effect on the environment represented 30.77% of the studies to the detriment of 15.38% of positive effects, evidencing the imbalance of 15.38% between the poles.

We emphasize that only the economic effects and tourism showed a higher positive percentage in the studies found. The other categories evaluated showed greater negative percentages than positive percentages. The main negative effects are those related to social (42.31%) and environmental (30.77%) categories (Fig. 4), which reveal the scope of local communities and environmental parameters in the implementation of processes.

The effects for the economy on a macro and local scale showed a considerable positive percentage, with the local economy having the most significant positive result. Regarding the economy on a macro scale, the concession processes provided movement in the tourist market, offering quality services and economic benefits cited in 26.92% of the studies.

Discussion

Main positive effects of concessions and their consequences

The results showed that the main positive effects in the concession processes are related to economic aspects and tourist activities, as presented in the effects matrix obtained for the evaluated studies (SM...
The positive effects reveal that the concession processes provide movement in the tourist market, generating economic benefits for the management of the area and also for the communities. In addition, they enable an increase in revenue from the area and those destined for the government, increase in agricultural productivity and generate better conditions for employment, housing, food security, quality of life and social cohesion in the community (Geoghegan 1994; Martin and Chehébar 2001; Saporiti 2006; Boer et al. 2007; Wilson et al. 2009; Gardner 2012; Ojeda 2012; Saayman et al. 2012; Stone and Nyaupane 2015; Rylance 2016; Trihatmoko 2018; Rodrigues and Abrucio 2019).

This highlight of the tourist and economic scope from the positive effects found in the research reveals that when they are destined to occur in conservation spaces, they are delivered to the private sector with the aim of strengthening the economy (Araújo Junior 2005), constituting a result of the neoliberal bias consistent in the public policies related to concessions. The establishment of concessions occurs as a strategy to involve the private sector in the maintenance of PAs (Thompson et al. 2014; Bertolin 2020), since governmental fragility lies in the lack of financial and human resources to efficiently manage these places (Rodrigues and Abrucio 2019).

For Saayman et al. (2012), the concession fulfills its economic role through the development of tourist activity. There are significant improvements in tourist structures and equipment, which results in the effective provision of services and strengthening of the visitor experience in the PAs (Wells and Sharma 1998; Kirkby et al. 2011; Stone and Nyaupane 2015; Pereira et al. 2021). The commitment to tourism management in these places increases the possibility of satisfying the expectations and motivations that lead the visitor to select a certain area as a destination. Quality experiences and structures are essential since satisfied visitors are those who return and economically contribute to the region, and can become conservation supporters (Coelho 2015; Gomes et al. 2021).

It is worth considering that PAs have a responsibility to maintain the quality of the visitors’ experience while contributing their full potential to society, since high quality experiences arouse the support of tourists in conserving the environment (Manning 2002). By encompassing the complete tourist experience, it is possible to guarantee improvement of the tourist experience, meet the needs of the communities and guarantee effectiveness in the processes (Riva et al. 2014; Godoy and Leuzinger 2015).

Low participation of local communities in concessions and expected consequences

Our results showed that the participation of communities in the concession processes is low. They are little included or considered partners, with the main participation being the provision of services. The lack of local participation can generate social exclusion, intensify territorial conflicts and compromise livelihoods, tourism management and nature conservation itself (Mbaiwa et al. 2008; Kirkby et al. 2011; Gardner 2012; Vuohelainen et al. 2012; Dinica 2016; Stone and Nyaupane 2016).

The negative social effect presents itself with a considerable percentage, especially if we compare it with the positive social effects found. This result may possibly be related to the incipient partnership with
local communities. Such an imbalance can rescue results similar to the social exclusion that occurred in different periods in the history of the PA (Dowie 2011), since the distance of the populations from the process generates numerous weaknesses in the social sphere, such as a lack of financial and human resources (Rodrigues and Abrucio 2019; Wells and Sharma 1998); increased underemployment and poor working conditions (Christian and Mwaura 2013; Ojeda 2012); livelihood impacts (Mbaiwa et al. 2008); among others. This factor also leads to environmental problems (Geoghegan 1994; Sloan et al. 1994; Kirkby et al. 2011; Christian and Mwaura 2013; Pereira et al. 2021), conflicts (Gardner 2012; Vuohelainen et al. 2012; Stone and Nyaupane, 2012; Stone and Nyaupane, 2016) and lack of responsibilities with management plans (Wells and Sharma 1998; Dinica 2016).

These data consolidate the fact that the main partners considered are usually large private companies based on the premise that they have experience and economic movement in relation to tourist services. These arrangements generate unequal opportunities with local companies and make processes inconsistent.

According to Zhang and Liu (2018), it is essential to involve small and medium-sized entrepreneurs in concessions, which must be effectively included in addition to just providing services in order to encourage and strengthen the production chains of surrounding communities (Thompson et al. 2014) and allow more investment in conservation projects (Stone and Nyaupane 2015). It is not just about generating employment and income through concessions, but especially certifying the quality of the benefits generated, the involvement of the population in decision-making and the socioeconomic impact in the local context (Botelho and Rodrigues 2016). Moreover, we understand that partnerships with local communities can also strengthen and maximize positive effects. According to Ojeda (2012), the inclusion of local communities in the concession process should appear more clearly in the proposals.

We also found that concession processes focused on tourist activities, accommodation and food prevail in the international scenario. On the other hand, there is a low percentage for those in which the focus is the connection with reality and local experience.

As highlighted by Botelho and Rodrigues (2016), there is considerable potential in inserting community initiatives in tourism management in PAs. Community-based tourism (CBT) diffuses the social dimension of tourism practice, in which the local community has substantial control and management involvement (WWF 2001). However, while concessions are established as an important strategy for tourism management, CBT is a mechanism for promoting the development of local tourism, but still receives minimal attention in government programs (Rodriguês and Abrucio 2019). Most concession models are especially linked to tourism activities linked to large operators to the detriment of partnerships with communities.

These results indicate that concessions created only under economic policy criteria reflect the weaknesses in designing and implementing complete concession projects, since under this bias they are excluding environmental and social processes. According to Holmes and Cavanagh (2016), conservation
under this bias promotes market movement, however, it can modify local particularities, create impacts and cause inequalities.

**Imbalance between the effects of concessions and their consequences**

We verified that there is an imbalance in the effects generated by the concession processes, in which the positive ones are mainly economic ones (on a macro and local scale) and tourism; on the other hand, the other evaluated categories (environment; social; processes and conflicts) have more negative effects. Our results demonstrate that concessions still need to be adjusted. They present considerable gaps in social, environmental and procedural parameters, mainly related to consistency and local opportunities. This imbalance results in inertia in the development of PAs and points to the need for improvements in the concession structure.

This result corroborates the structure presented by Salafsky (2010), in which he understands that in order to integrate development with conservation projects, it is necessary to consider previous objectives, effective means and broad ends to be achieved. The distance between conservation and local development objectives depends on the balance between the effects they generate (Grandia 2007; Büscher 2010), otherwise it may delegitimize the sustainable models available to projects (Fay 2013). The context in which we find the concessions incorporates models which highlight economic issues, but distance social actors (Kline and Slocum 2015).

We found that the largest percentage difference between the negative and positive effects is in the processes. The results showed legal and financial weaknesses and deficiencies in the elaboration and inspection of contracts, as verified by Haukeland (2010), Christian and Mwaura (2013), Dinica (2016), Zhang and Liu (2018), Spenceley et al. (2017), and Rodrigues and Abrucio (2019), factors which reflect in the inconsistency and unsustainability of the processes. For Zhang and Liu (2018), inconsistent processes can promote failures in environmental protection and ineffective projects in terms of providing social support, monitoring and safety.

In order to generate stability in the process, we emphasize the importance of continuous monitoring of concessions to maintain more consistent processes. To do so, control and inspection programs are essential to ensure compliance with previously known and established agreements and objectives and thus guarantee the development of best practices in relation to concessions (Saayman et al. 2012; Stone and Nyaupane 2015; Wyman et al. 2011; Dinica 2016; Rodrigues and Abrucio 2019; Bertolin 2020; Brumatti and Rozendo 2021; Pereira et al. 2021).

**The effects of concessions and conservation objectives**

An important result that we identified concerns the imbalance between the negative and positive effects on the “environment” when the former was higher. This imbalance shows us that nature conservation is not a key element of tourism concession projects. When economic policies are exclusively considered in conservation efforts, they only guarantee the maximization of economic benefits to the detriment of other
objectives, which should be considered because they occur in PAs (Büscher and Fletcher 2015; Fletcher 2010; Montes 2019).

It is important to say that the PAs represent a strategy for the conservation of biodiversity, however their implementation is more comprehensive than just considering a single bias in the demands. The dynamics of tourism in these places should be developed as a conservation strategy, and also as a tool for integrating social, economic and environmental policies (Bushell and Bricker 2017; Leung et al. 2019).

PAs have broad and widespread sustainability goals. According to Rodrigues and Abrucio (2019), public-private action in these places must guarantee environmental, social and educational objectives, since one of the functions of the PA is also to promote socio-environmental benefits and provide society with access to nature. It is worth mentioning that our results showed that the management category in which the concession processes for tourism most occur are National Parks (IUCN Category II), which is the most well-known and traditional protected area category in the world (Cunha and Spinolla 2014), aimed at protecting natural biodiversity, ecosystems, their ecological structures and environmental processes. It should be used for tourism promotion, environmental education, recreation and research, with all nature conservation activities (Dudley 2008).

The creation of parks has become the conservationist mechanism to act against nature degradation situations throughout the history of PAs (Davenport and Rao, 2002). The possibility of creating them for tourism gained strength at the 10th IUCN General Assembly in India, where the permission of visitors to these places was recommended (Terborgh and Van Schaik 2002; Machado 2014; Godoy 2015).

It is worth mentioning that the guidelines for sustainable tourism in Parks refer to the ideal prerogative in which there is integration between economic, sociocultural and environmental issues. In this sense, concessions must provide benefits for all interested parties, including stable jobs, appreciation of local businesses, and assessment of environmental impacts, meaning a complete, participatory and integrative structure (Spenceley et al. 2017).

We understand that it is critical to balance institutional, social and environmental issues with economic policies in order to improve the concession structure (Shanee et al. 2020). Thus, this work shows the urgency of considering comprehensive and effective public policies in relation to communities and ensuring inspection and monitoring of processes, so that pre-established agreements and PA management objectives are fulfilled.

**Conclusions**

Concessions for tourism represent an important trend in the management and promotion of tourist activity around the world. They are designed for Protected Areas based on economic policies, as alternatives for financing and maintaining these spaces. They fulfill their economic role, generating positive results for the economy and for tourism; however, they still have imbalances, generating negative results in the social context.
The results of this work alert us to the significant risks of only focusing concession processes on economic benefits. We consider that this arrangement of tourist service concessions has considerable influence on the results of conservation in the sense that the effects generated from a social, environmental and procedural point of view still have unsatisfactory results, and leads us to an antagonistic model in relation to comprehensive and participatory conservation initiatives.

We suggest studies and investments in methodologies for evaluating concessions to make the processes more complete and evaluate each case in particular, weaknesses and local particularities. It is essential to advance in studies to develop public policies and direct processes in an equitable and comprehensive manner. Consistent processes are more likely to balance environmental protection, social support and economic development.

**Declarations**

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**Ethical Approval**

Not applicable

**Competing interests**

There are no personal, scientific, commercial, political, or economic conflicts of interest in the manuscript. All authors assume intellectual and legal responsibility for the results and considerations presented.

**Authors’ contributions**

- Carolina Ribeiro Gomes: Conceptualization; Data collection; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Writing, review and editing
- Wanderley Jorge da Silveira Junior: Data collection; Investigation; Methodology; Supervision and review
- Cleber Rodrigo de Souza: Supervision; Methodology; Formal analysis; Investigation
- Geraldo Majela Moraes Salvio: Investigation; Supervision and review
- Aloysio Souza de Moura: Literature review; Data collection and Investigation
- André Luiz Ferreira da Silva: Literature review; Data collection and Investigation
- Carolina Costa Rodrigues: Literature review; Data collection and Investigation
- Felipe Santana Machado: Literature review; Data collection and Investigation
- Gabriela Furbino Brêttas Lana: Literature review; Data collection and Investigation
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**Figures**

**Figure 1**

Geographical distribution of protected areas present in the surveyed studies, organized according to their IUCN category.
Figure 2

Percentage representation of the types of concession found in the studies.

Figure 3

Percentage representation of the participation form of the local population.
Figure 4

Representativeness of the effects (%) observed in the studies surveyed.

Supplementary Files

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- SupplementaryMaterial3.docx
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