

Evaluation of recreation activities in nature parks and tourism potential*

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Nature park,
Recreation,
Ecotourism,
Sport tourism.

The desire of people to escape from cities to rural areas for various reasons increased the importance of ecotourism in general, nature parks and recreational activities. In this study, it is aimed to determine the recreational activities in nature parks and to shed light on the tourism potential of nature parks. In this context, 33 nature parks located in the Eastern Marmara Region focused in the study. The focus is on the eastern Marmara region, as it is a region with the potential to attract more tourists due to its close location to large cities with high populations. The distribution of the nature parks by the cities examined and specifically, which recreational activities could be carried out in each nature park determined and conducted a content analysis with the help of secondary data. The intensity of recreational activities mapped according to the cities, and the richness of recreational activities in nature parks compared within itself. Findings obtained from the research shows that among the cities in the Eastern Marmara Region, the most nature parks are located in Bolu. The nature park with the most activities is Harmankaya Canyon in Bilecik with 15 different activities. The most common activities in the nature parks are listed as; hiking, photography, picnic, cycling.

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1. Introduction

The increase in migration from rural areas to the cities and the intense tempo brought by the complexity of urban life revealed and nurtured the need for people to turn to natural areas (Long & Lane, 2000; Johnson & Beale 2002; Walmsley, 2003; Çelik & Göçmen, 2013; Sop, Ongun & Abalı, 2020; Kılıç & Buzlukçu, 2021). The desire of people who migrated from rural areas to repeat their past natural life practices, and those who want to rest, find peace, do sports or have different experiences with various activities became inevitable today (Özgen, 2010; Bozok & Kahraman, 2015; Batman & Demirel, 2015; Akyol & Uygun, 2017; Erken, Atanur & Tanrıöver, 2019; Kumlu, Altıntaş & Özkul, 2019). Nature parks stand out as important recreation areas with their clean air, vegetation, wildlife, and suitability for various nature sports and activities in parallel with the fact that nature-based sustainable approaches are frequently on the agenda in the world and the increase in studies on this subject (Mann & Absher, 2008; Koynova, Koleva, Dragoeva & Natchev, 2019; Aliyeva, Sakypbek, Aktymbayeva, Assipova & Saidullayev, 2020; Olenych, 2020).

Nature parks, which have suitable areas for many alternative tourism types –especially ecotourism and sports tourism– and various recreational activities, are very popular destinations for nature-friendly visitors. The areas separated as nature parks in accordance with the criteria

determined by the law became destinations offering touristic attractions by offering the opportunity to see the unique flora and fauna, geographical features, and the other values it reserves (Wood, Guerry, Silver & Lacayo, 2013; Oktay, İşlek & Yaşar, 2016; Koday, Kaymaz & Kaya, 2018). Identifying touristic and recreational activity opportunities in these destinations would play an important role in the development and sustainable protection of nature parks.

The aim of the study is to shed light on the tourism potential of the nature parks in the Eastern Marmara Region by analysing these areas and the recreation activities offered. As alternative tourism types become more important over time, it is thought that studies revealing and analysing nature-based tourism and recreation activities contribute the field more. As a matter of fact, such studies can provide readers information about nature parks that creates a driving force for future touristic activities. This research is unique in that there is no study in the literature dealing with the nature parks in East Marmara within this framework. In addition, detecting deficiencies and propose various measures and standards against negative situations in more extended and comprehensive studies would also be beneficial for destination stakeholders.

Research paper

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2. Literature

According to the definition of the The International Ecotourism Society/TIES, ecotourism is; responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education” (TIES, 2015). The increase in the importance of the concept of sustainability has paved the way for the proliferation of nature-based activities in tourism and the emergence of alternative tourism types that care about nature (Kasalak, 2015, p. 20).

As an important form of the sustainable tourism approach, ecotourism is a tourism type grows three times faster than tourism in general and includes nature-friendly activities and visiting natural areas to contribute to environmental care. It also promotes natural and cultural diversity by providing a solution for sustainable social, economic, and environmental development (Carrascosa-López, Carvache-Franco & Carvache-Franco, 2021).

Tourism and sports are related and complementary concepts. Sports tourism includes traveling to different destinations for the purpose of attending or watching competitions as a professional, amateur or leisure activity. Today, regardless of whether the main purpose of travel is sports or not, it is possible to say that more and more tourists are interested in sports activities on their trips (World Tourism Organization/UNWTO, 2022). It is possible to perform many nature-based sports activities in nature parks. For example, at least 25 of the 54 activity categories determined for nature parks in protected areas are direct sports activities. These include hiking, cycling, mountaineering, rock climbing, swimming, rafting, archery, horseback riding, rope course and pentathlon, volleyball, basketball, and canoeing (T.C. Tarım ve Orman Bakanlığı Doğa Koruma ve Milli Parklar Genel Müdürlüğü, 2022a).

There are a total of 262 nature parks in Türkiye (T.C. Tarım ve Orman Bakanlığı Doğa Koruma ve Milli Parklar Genel Müdürlüğü, 2022b). Based on the content of ecotourism and sports tourism, it is possible to say that nature parks are natural areas suitable for many alternative tourism types under the roof of ecotourism and sports tourism. According to the National Parks Law No. 2873 dated 1983 in Türkiye, the legally protected areas within the forest area are national parks, nature parks, nature monuments and nature protection areas. Areas that can be used for recreation/tourism purposes within the protected areas; national parks, nature parks (especially different and rich in terms of outdoor recreation) and forest resting areas (open air recreation at local level) (Milli Parklar Kanunu, 1983; Gül *et al.*, 2005, p. 424; İnandır & Ongun, 2019).

According to the National Parks Law No. 2873 and the 6/B Article of the Forest Law No. 6831, the places to be allocated as a nature park must have the following features:

- 1- It should have a superior natural physiogeographic structure, vegetation and wildlife characteristics, landscape

beauties and recreation potential at national or regional level.

- 2- It should be large enough to provide source and landscape integrity.
- 3- It should have a different and rich potential, especially in terms of outdoor recreation.
- 4- It should also contain interesting examples of local customs, traditional land use patterns and cultural landscapes.
- 5- It should be state-owned.

There are many national and international studies on nature parks in the literature. For example; Deng *et al.* (2002) emphasized that as nature-based tourism grows, protected areas will be subject to increasing pressure from tourists and the quality of destination attributes will have a significant impact on tourists' experiences. Huayhuaca *et al.* (2010) examined the Frankenwald Nature Park in Germany and the relationship between the inhabitant's perceptions of the four dimensions of sustainability (environmental, economic, socio-cultural, and institutional) and tourism development. Stankov *et al.* (2011) presented alternative ecotourism projects for the Stara Planina Natural Park in Serbia and highlighted that ecotourism can have a positive impact on other tourism development approaches in this area. Akten and Gül (2014) determined the resource values where the adverse effects of recreational activities in Gölcük Nature Park are likely to be "vegetation, visual quality, water quality, soil quality, noise pollution, air quality and fauna" and suggested measures and standards. Armaitiene *et al.* (2014) highlighted new initiatives in health tourism for the development of protected areas in Europe and for utilizing the health benefits of natural heritage and resources. Lee (2015) demonstrated the success of the Regional Nature Park in preserving and presenting the richness of natural and cultural heritage, forest management, recreational development, and tourism.

While examining the literature, it is also found that there are studies breaking the perception that ecotourism forms are shaped in the focus of nature parks and ecotourism can only be done in rural areas. The thought of ecotourism and recreation activities can be done in cities as well, is highlighted through these studies. One of them is the study of Kaae *et al.* (2019) in which the main focus is the transformation of the urban wastelands into areas suitable for recreation and urban ecotourism. In the study, it was determined that Nature Park Amager, which was originally an urban wasteland, is a good example of its transformation into a nature park with recreational experiences, facilities and guided ecotourism tours for tourists. Duglio and Letey (2019) revealed in their study that a protected area does not always contradict the tourism industry, but can support local development by adopting sustainable development.



Figure 1. Nature park distribution map by cities

Source: Wikipedia, 2022.

Yener (2021), on the other hand, evaluated the nature parks in Türkiye and examined the recreational activities offered to the visitors in these parks.

Literature shows that the studies on nature parks are handled by different disciplines and are the subject of rich research. In this study, nature parks are discussed in the context of tourism and recreational activities, and the research is detailed in the following part.

3. Method

In the study, it is aimed to determine the recreational activities nature parks provide and to shed light on the tourism potential of the parks. Since there are 262 nature parks throughout Türkiye, the nature parks located in the Eastern Marmara Region were considered in order to limit the research. Therefore, the population of the research is nature parks located in Türkiye, and the sample is 33 nature parks located in the Eastern Marmara Region. The focus is on the eastern Marmara region, as it is a region with the potential to attract more tourists due to its close location to large cities with high populations.

The data about nature parks retrieved from the official website of Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, General Directorate of Nature Conservation and National Parks. For the nature parks that are not included in the aforementioned website, different websites were also examined. In this context, the nature parks was examined by the cities they are located and the recreational activities that can be carried out in each nature park were determined, and related frequencies, percentages, and tables were given with the help of secondary data. In addition, the cities in the Eastern Marmara Region were coloured and mapped according to the intensity of recreational activities. Finally, the richness of the recreational activities in the nature parks of the Eastern Marmara Region has been compared within itself and tried to shed light on the tourism potential of the nature parks.

4. Findings

The cities in the Eastern Marmara Region which constitute the sample of the research are Bursa, Eskişehir, Bilecik, Kocaeli, Sakarya, Düzce, Bolu, and Yalova. The distribution of 33 nature parks in 8 cities in the Eastern Marmara Region; in Bolu (8), Kocaeli (7), Bilecik (4), Düzce (4), Sakarya (3), Bursa (3), Eskişehir (2), Yalova (2) respectively.

The distribution of nature parks in the Eastern Marmara Region by cities is given in Figure 1. Colouring was done on the map according to the number of nature parks. While the cities with the least number of nature parks are shown in lighter colours, the cities with the same number of nature parks are shown in the same colour tones, and the cities with the most nature parks are shown in the darkest tone. Accordingly, Bolu, as the city with 8 nature parks, is coloured in the darkest tone.

The distribution of nature parks by cities is given in Table 1. The names of the nature parks and the city they are located are grouped under the table.

Table 1. Distribution of nature parks by cities

Location	Nature Parks
Bursa	Suuçtu, Sadağı Kanyonu, Sansarak Kanyonu
Eskişehir	Musaözü, Yunus Emre
Bilecik	Küçükelmali, Harmankaya Kanyonu, Kınık Şelalesi, Erikli
Kocaeli	Ballıkayalar, Beşkayalar, Suadiye, Erikli-tepe, Kuzuyayla, Ormanya, Gazilerdağı
Sakarya	Kuzuluk, İl Ormanı, Poyrazlar Gölü
Düzce	Kurugöl, Güzeldere Şelalesi, Aydınpınar Şelaleleri, Geyiklibel
Bolu	Göksu, Beşpınarlar, Bolu Karagöl, Sünnet Gölü, Bolu Gölçük, Sülüklügöl, Kargalı Gölçük, Ayıkayası
Yalova	Harmankaya, Delmece Yaylası

Source: T.C. Tarım ve Orman Bakanlığı Doğa Koruma ve Milli Parklar Genel Müdürlüğü, 2022b.

The nature parks in 8 cities in the Eastern Marmara Region and the recreational activities in these parks are given in Table 2. According to Table 2; a total of 33 nature parks and 35 different recreational activities were identified.

Although there is a significant number of common activities in recreational activities, some specific activities can be done only in a single nature park.

Table 2. Nature parks and recreational activity opportunities

Nature Parks	Activity Opportunities
Suuçtu	Picnic, wildlife watching, canyoning, hiking, rock climbing, photography, birdwatching
Sadağı Kanyonu	Picnic, wildlife watching, canyoning, hiking, rock climbing, photography, birdwatching
Sansarak Kanyonu	Wildlife watching, hiking, photography, tent camping, scenery watching
Musaözü	Hiking, angling, caravan camping, tent camping
Yunus Emre	Picnic, hiking, photography, tent camping
Küçükemah	Picnic, wildlife watching, hiking, photography, birdwatching, angling, orienteering, horseback riding
Harmankaya Kanyonu	Picnic, canyoning, hiking, rock climbing, photography, caravan camping, tent camping, mountain biking, mountaineering, skiing, cave exploring, scenery watching, daily use, rafting, skiing
Kınık Şelalesi	Picnic, hiking, tent camping, cycling
Erikli	Wildlife watching, trekking
Ballıkayalar	Picnic, wildlife watching, hiking, rock climbing, photography, scenery watching, daily use, pond, excursion route, nature/outdoor sports area, climbing track
Beşkayalar	Wildlife watching, hiking, tent camping, cave exploring, scenery watching
Suadiye	Picnic, hiking, cycling, mountain biking, skiing, nature/outdoor sports area
Eriklitepe	Picnic, hiking, photography, caravan camping, tent camping, scenic watching, accommodation, village market
Kuzuyayla	Picnic, wildlife watching, hiking, photography, biking, daily use
Ormanya	Picnic, wildlife watching, hiking, daily use
Gazilerdağı	Picnic, hiking, photography, tent camping, cycling, horseback riding
Kuzuluk	Hiking, photography, cycling, nature-themed festivities
İl Ormanı	Hiking, photography, cycling, nature-themed festivities, accommodation
Poyrazlar Gölü	Photography, birdwatching, cycling, nature-themed festivals, ATV safari, lake tour by train, lake tour by horse, paintball
Kurugöl	Wildlife watching, hiking, photography
Güzeldere	Hiking, photography, tent camping, cycling, horseback riding
Şelalesi	Hiking, photography
Aydınşınar Şelaleleri	Hiking, photography
Geyiklibel	Picnic, hiking, angling, cycling, photo safari
Göksu	Hiking, cycling
Beşşınarlar	Rope course and pentathlon, nature/outdoor sports area
Bolu	Picnic, hiking, photography, angling, cycling, nature/outdoor sports area
Karagöl	Picnic, hiking, angling, cycling, nature/outdoor sports area
Sünnet Gölü	Picnic, hiking, angling, cycling, nature/outdoor sports area
Bolu Gölük	Picnic, hiking, photography, angling, cycling, nature/outdoor sports area
Sülüklügöl	Picnic, hiking, angling, tent camping
Kargalı Gölük	Wildlife watching, hiking, tent camping, scenery watching
Ayıkayası	Hiking, photography, cycling
Harmankaya	Picnic, hiking, photography, angling, tent camping
Delmece	Picnic, wildlife watching, hiking, photography, tent camping, orienteering, cycling, highland tourism, Botanical excursion
Yaylası	

Source: T.C. Tarım ve Orman Bakanlığı Doğa Koruma ve Milli Parklar Genel Müdürlüğü, 2022a; Beşkayalar Tabiat Parkı, 2022; Erikli Tabiat Parkı, 2020; Geyiklibel Kanyonu Tabiat Parkı, 2022.

In order to understand which activities are repeated more frequently among the activities carried out in 33 nature parks, in other words, which activities are performed more frequently in nature parks, frequency analysis is performed and percentage rates are calculated. According to Table 3, the activity with the highest frequency is “hiking” (F: 30, M: 16.76%). It is understood from this that only 3 nature parks do not specify "hiking" as an activity opportunity. These nature parks; Harmankaya Kanyonu, Poyrazlar Gölü, and Beşşınar.

Table 3. Frequency and rate distribution of recreational activities

Activity	Frequency	Rate (%)	Activity	Frequency	Rate (%)
Hiking	30	16,76	Mountain biking	2	1,12
Photography	21	11,73	Cave exploring	2	1,12
Picnic	19	10,61	Accommodation	2	1,12
Cycling	15	8,38	Rafting	1	0,56
Tent camping	13	7,26	Rope course and pentathlon	1	0,56
Wildlife watching	12	6,70	Pond	1	0,56
Angling	8	4,47	Excursion route	1	0,56
Nature/outdoor sports area	6	3,35	Climbing track	1	0,56
Scenery watching	6	3,35	Highland tourism	1	0,56
Rock climbing	4	2,23	Mountaineering	1	0,56
Daily use	4	2,23	Botanical excursion	1	0,56
Birdwatching	4	2,23	Village market	1	0,56
Canyoning	3	1,68	ATV safari	1	0,56
Horseback riding	3	1,68	Lake tour by train	1	0,56
Nature-themed festival	3	1,68	Lake tour by horse	1	0,56
Caravan camping	3	1,68	Paintball	1	0,56
Skiing	3	1,68	Photo safari	1	0,56
Orienteering	2	1,12	Total	175	100

Source: T.C. Tarım ve Orman Bakanlığı Doğa Koruma ve Milli Parklar Genel Müdürlüğü, 2022a; Beşkayalar Tabiat Parkı, 2022; Erikli Tabiat Parkı, 2020; Geyiklibel Kanyonu Tabiat Parkı, 2022.

Other activities with the highest frequency; “photography”, “picnic”, “cycling”, “tent camping”, “wildlife watching”. The frequency value of the remaining activities is below 10.

14 activities with a frequency of 1; rafting, rope course and pentathlon, pond, excursion route, climbing track, highland, mountaineering, botanical excursion, village market, ATV safari, lake tour by train, lake tour by horse, paintball, photo safari. This means that these activities are held in a single nature park in the Eastern Marmara Region.

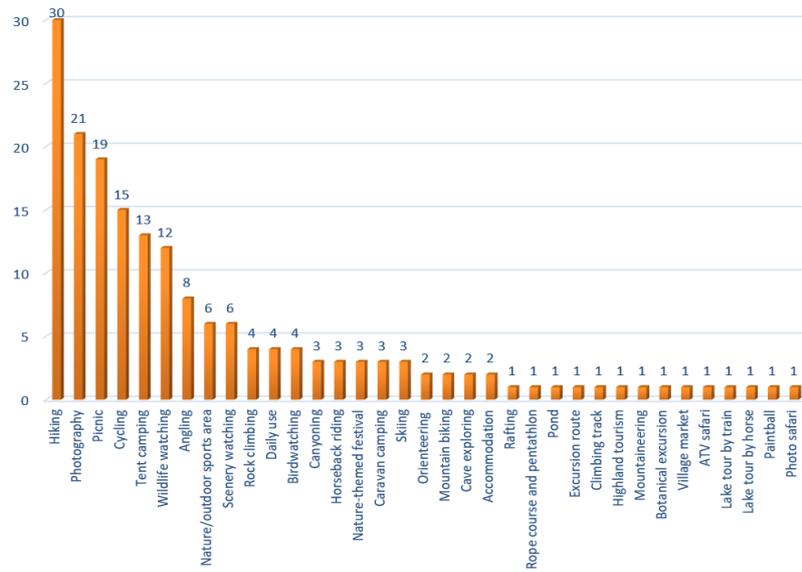


Figure 1. Frequency distribution of activities

Source: Created by the author.

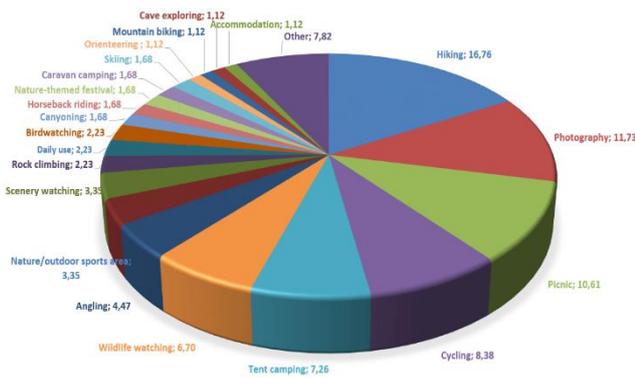


Figure 2. Rate distribution of activities

Source: Created by the author.

Figure 3 shows the proportional distribution values of the activities that can be done in nature parks. Accordingly, "hiking" is the activity with the highest percentage with 16.76%, while 14 activities have the lowest percentage with a value of 0.56. In order to show Figure 3 more clearly, these 14 activities were named as "Other" and their percentage values were added together and given as 7.82.

As can be seen in Figure 4, the richness of nature parks in terms of recreational activities is listed; offering 15 different activities, Harmankaya Kanyon in Bilecik ranks first. Ballıkayalar with 11 different activity opportunities and Delmece Yaylası with 9 different activity opportunities are followed.

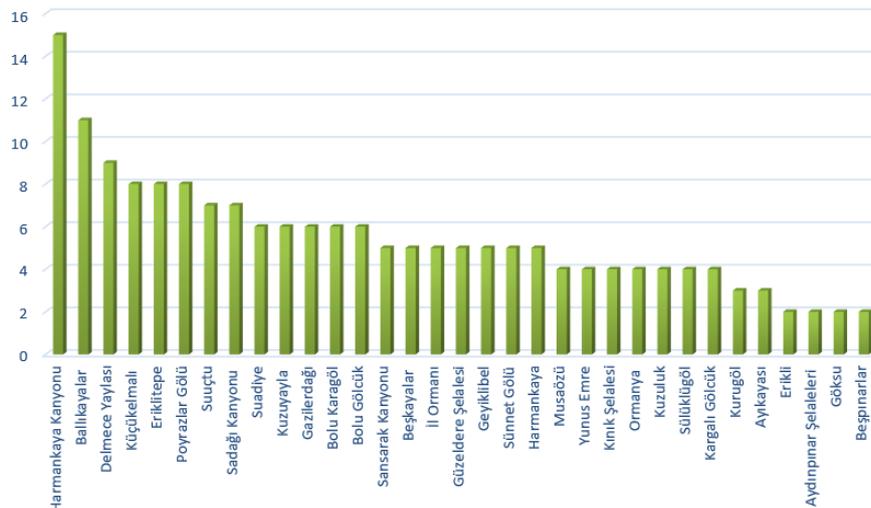


Figure 3. Distribution of the number of activities in nature parks

Source: Created by the author.

When the findings are evaluated in general; in the Eastern Marmara Region, the most nature parks are in the city of Bolu, a total of 35 different recreational activities are carried out in all the parks in the region, the most frequent recreational activity is hiking, and when the nature parks are compared within themselves according to the number of activities, Bilecik Harmankaya Kanyonu has the most activities with 15 different activities. It was understood that the least activity was done in Erikli, Aydınpınar Şelalesi, Göksu and Beşpınarlar nature parks with 2 different activities.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Today, many reasons such as escaping from the suffocating environment of cities, the desire to listen to oneself, and the fact that healthy life becomes a popular lifestyle paved the way for people to be more interested in sports activities on their trips, as well as touristic trips. In addition to this, by evaluating the suitability of nature parks for nature/outdoor sports and various recreational activities and presenting these opportunities to tourists as an attraction factor, it became possible to increase the awareness of destinations and to host more and more visitors every day. In this context, thanks to the number, prevalence, and daily transportation opportunities of nature parks in Türkiye, favourable conditions have developed for them to be visited by more people.

When the activities carried out in nature parks with important tourism potentials are examined, it is understood that the potential of ecotourism and sports tourism is quite strong in these destinations. The fact that hiking is the most prominent among the recreational activities in the nature parks that are subject of the research, can be associated not only with the fact that these natural areas are suitable for walking, but also walking is the most common activity carried out in destinations today. As a matter of fact, today, the tourism perception of the visitors and the content of tourism are gradually changing and becoming to reflect more unusual patterns. One of the most popular ways to experience a destination is now seen as walking tourism. It also becomes possible for tourists to interact better with local people, nature, and culture through walking tourism. Because outdoor activities in general meet the increasing nature-based activity demand of travellers (UNWTO, 2019).

Among the cities in the Eastern Marmara Region, the fact that the most nature parks are located in Bolu is related to the geographical and climatic characteristics of the city. The fact that the nature park offering the most activity possibilities is Harmankaya Kanyonu in Bilecik with fifteen different activities, is a good example that activities can be diversified in other nature parks, and can be shown as a remarkable result of the research. Hiking, photography, picnic, and cycling are the most common activities in nature parks, and this can be associated with these activities can be easily done by anyone within a daily visit.

The fact that almost half of the nature parks in the Eastern Marmara Region host unique activities can be evaluated from different perspectives. When evaluated in terms of tourism, it is possible that the resource values making these nature parks different from the others will bring a separate attraction to the destination. In this way, nature parks could use the advantage of offering a unique experience to attract specific visitors. At the same time, it is possible to host new types of tourism by expanding and diversifying recreational activities in nature parks. Thus, it will be possible to make a significant contribution to domestic and foreign tourism movements. In this context, the point to be considered is the activities aimed at protecting the unique resource values in the nature parks. As a matter of fact, the deterioration of the biological diversity and natural resources in the nature parks will render the area dysfunctional in a short time and thus destroy its tourism potential.

As a result; it is understood that the focused nature parks offer rich recreational activities and are suitable for various types of tourism, which will respond to the changing tourism perception and needs of the visitors. When evaluated from this point of view, the inference made from the research agrees with the result of Yener's (2021) study on nature parks in Türkiye, highlighting "nature parks are used as an effective and widespread tool in meeting the recreation needs". In addition, as Akten and Gül (2014) stated in their study, the fact that the reasons for taking nature parks under protection cannot compete with recreation and tourism activities is an important threat. In addition, as Akten and Gül (2014) stated in their study, sensitivity should be paid to ensure that recreation and tourism activities do not interfere with the protection of nature parks. At this point, it is important that the activities are carried out with nature-friendly approaches in a conscious and controlled manner with a sustainable approach. It is a basic requirement to establish and develop environmental awareness not only among visitors but also in society. Until this awareness is established, the uncompromising application of the rules in protected areas and the standardization of deterrent criminal procedures are necessary. In this way, it will be possible to "really protect" protected areas. Recreational activities offered in nature parks must be fully included in the official websites. It would be useful to specify the scope of the activities and to provide general information about the relevant equipment. In addition, the promotion and advertisement of the destination managers by highlighting the activities that can be done in the nature parks will increase the tourism potential of the destination.

The scope is limited as there are enough nature parks and activity diversity in the region where the research is handled. In this direction, it will be useful to conduct studies that will examine the nature parks and activities of different regions. Moreover, in the new researches, the possible positive and negative aspects of offering recreation and tourism activities within the nature parks as

the protected areas can be addressed, various comparisons can be made between regions, and the current situation can be followed up at regular periods by interviewing the visitors participating in these activities.

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INFO PAGE

Evaluation of recreation activities in nature parks and tourism potential

Abstract

The desire of people to escape from cities to rural areas for various reasons increased the importance of ecotourism in general, nature parks and recreational activities. In this study, it is aimed to determine the recreational activities in nature parks and to shed light on the tourism potential of nature parks. In this context, 33 nature parks located in the Eastern Marmara Region focused in the study. The focus is on the eastern Marmara region, as it is a region with the potential to attract more tourists due to its close location to large cities with high populations. The distribution of the nature parks by the cities examined and specifically, which recreational activities could be carried out in each nature park determined and conducted a content analysis with the help of secondary data. The intensity of recreational activities mapped according to the cities, and the richness of recreational activities in nature parks compared within itself. Findings obtained from the research shows that among the cities in the Eastern Marmara Region, the most nature parks are located in Bolu. The nature park with the most activities is Harmankaya Canyon in Bilecik with 15 different activities. The most common activities in the nature parks are listed as; hiking, photography, picnic, cycling.

Keywords: nature park, recreation, ecotourism, sport tourism

Authors

Full Name	Author contribution roles	Contribution rate
Zeynep Yamaç Erdoğan:	Conceptualism, Methodology, Validation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data Curation, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Visualization, Supervision	100%

Author statement: Author(s) declare(s) that All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. **Declaration of**

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