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**DEVELOPMENT OF TOURS TO NATIONAL PARKS AS THE MOST
EFFECTIVE DIRECTION OF ECOTOURISM ON THE EXAMPLE
OF THE «ILE-ALATAU» NATIONAL PARK**

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the research is to assess the current state of ecotourism in the Ile-Alatau National Park, including an analysis of the material and technical base of tourism in the park and the existing regulatory systems.

Methodology – synthesis, analysis, deduction, comparison were used as the main research tools.

The originality / value of the research is an objective assessment of the current state of ecological tourism, in particular, tours to protected areas, in Kazakhstan and the United States of America (USA), as a foreign example, which allows creating a basis for the formation of effective methods of organizing and developing tourism in national parks.

Findings – Analyzing the unique natural resources of the Almaty region, the authors justify its high potential for the development of inbound and domestic tourism. Based on the contrast with the United States of America, the authors have estimated the material and technical base of tourism in the Ile-Alatau National Park. The authors give several recommendations for improving the current program for the development of ecological tourism.

Keywords: sustainable development, ecological tourism, competitiveness, tourist facilities, natural potential, tourism infrastructure.

INTRODUCTION

In the modern world, «overtourism» is observed in many countries, due to a significant number of tourist arrivals. This term has become popular in the last decade. It refers to the overload of tourist destinations by guests. It is apparent that it has a negative impact both on the environment and on the cultural and historical heritage of states. Prevention of such an outcome is possible only with the assurance of sustainable tourism development. Sustainable tourism is a form of tourism that meets the needs of tourists and local communities and sets the main goal of optimizing the use of natural resources, preserving biological diversity and reducing the negative impact on the environment. It is crucial to stimulate the improvement of ecological tourism in the country to achieve sustainable development.

Originally the term «sustainable development» was first introduced in the report by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987. According to the given definition sustainable development is «the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs» [1].

In 2015, the United Nations organization set an Agenda-2030, which included 17 sustainable goals. All goals concern three main aspect of sustainable development of industries, including tourism, such as economic, social and environmental [2]. Therefore, the issue of implementing sustainable development in local tourism sector imposes special requirements for estimation, monitoring and management the natural, human, financial and other resources.

In Kazakhstan, ecotourism is still not the leader of the tourism industry, although, it is becoming more and more popular around the globe. In 2018, the Kazakh Tourism organization adopted the Concept of

«4Е: eco-tourism, ethno-tourism, entertainment, events», where ecotourism is one of the priority fields for the country [3].

When considering the development of sustainable tourism in the Almaty region, special attention should be paid to tours to national parks. National parks are the key link in the development of eco-tourism, due to the presence of unique natural complexes and objects of historical and cultural heritage on their territories. Moreover, it has opportunities for tourist activities, unlike, for example, nature reserves. Moreover, to make the detailed analysis of ecotourism in Kazakhstan, particularly, tours to protected areas, it is needed to compare the object under study with a similar object in the United States, as the most successful example of sustainable tourism.

Initial data and research methods. Representatives of various scientific fields (geographers, economists, ecologists, sociologists, etc.) are engaged in the issues of research of ecological tourism, systematization and assessment of the economic, natural, and social potential of protected areas. Scientists defined their methods for the systematization of recreational activities to reduce the load on natural resources. The position of Russian scientists (S. N. Bobyleva, A. B. Preobrazhensky, T. V. Guseva and others) is the closest to the authors'. They state that nowadays the development of protected areas is one of the main tools for sustainable development of tourism and a promising source of income. According to the scientists, the development of protected areas has some potential benefits for the economy, politics, society and other fields. However, the economic potential of protected areas should be assessed comprehensively, taking into account all structural components. It will make it possible to consider the object, including the peculiarities of regional location, problematic aspects and prospective development.

S. N. Bobylev, in his work, emphasized that despite the well-established opinion of the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries that protected areas are unprofitable objects for investment, examples are proving the opposite. The scientist provides the example of the United States, where tourism revenues in protected areas amount to billions of dollars annually [4, p. 45]. At the same time, the main problem of the post-Soviet countries is the adequacy of taking into account the economic value of biological resources in the regions. It will help to improve the efficiency of the use of natural resources. Therefore, modernized methods will increase the competitiveness of the region.

Moreover, according to V. N. Tyrlyshkin, the problem of the development of ecological tourism in protected areas is mostly based on insufficient support from the state. The scientist claims that support at the regional and local levels is limited because protected areas are not integrated into a single socio-economic system [4, p. 25]. This point of view is supported by the authors and investigated by comparing the management systems in Kazakhstan and the USA. Subsequently, the results of the study should be taken into account and detailed at the subsequent stages of designing recreational activities in the national parks of Kazakhstan.

Valentina Burksiene and Jaroslav Dvorak state that protected areas depend on municipalities a lot. It requires specific management leading both to sustainability and dynamic development of the region. When it comes to the choosing the most suitable management system it seems to be a quite controversial issue, since administration of protected areas and local ecologists are focused on the conservation and protection of nature, while municipalities are more targeted towards the social and economic development of the particular region [5, p. 107].

However, according to Gerrish this issue may be solved with the help of benchmarking as a feasible approach to implement the most effective management systems. By benchmarking the scientist means learning from previous performance, analyzing, comparing and grading it with the object of studies [6, pp. 8-22]. However, Zope et al. argue that such attempts may not be reliable if policies are compared directly across different contexts [7, p. 50]. It is impossible due to the fact that every protected area differs in culture, local communities, networks, etc.

The information and analytical basis of the study are official statistics in the field of tourism, nature management and the environment, collections of works of the Ile-Alatau State National Park edited by the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Kazakhstan, data received from local government and representatives of ministries, as well as collections of works of the World Wildlife Fund.

The research is based on logical thinking methods such as deductive reasoning, analysis of scientific literature, comparison of foreign experience in the development of ecotourism with the Kazakh experience. Private scientific methods include econometric analysis of statistical information.

The study includes two parts. In the first part, the authors consider the current situation of eco-tourism in Kazakhstan. In the second part, the authors conduct a comparative analysis of the national parks of Kazakhstan and the USA.

1. The current state of ecological tourism in Kazakhstan, in particular, tours to national parks

Travelling to nature reserves is a type of ecological tourism within the boundaries of protected areas and in «wild» or little-changed nature. There are protected areas in almost all countries of the world, and each of them establishes a set of laws and acts, regulating the use of these lands and protecting them from the negative influence of people, industry and other factors. There are 13 state national nature parks, 10 state nature conservancies, 6 state nature reserves, 50 state game reserves in Kazakhstan. In Kazakhstan, protected areas occupy about 24.7 million hectares, which is equal to about 9 % of the total area of the country [8, p. 1].

In total, according to the former Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2016-2019) Bakytzhan Sagintayev, in the period from 2008 to 2018, the total area of protected zones increased by 2,392.7 thousand hectares. However, despite the general increase in the territory of protected areas in Kazakhstan, considering each protected natural area, one can notice the opposite trend (see table 1).

Table 1 – Reduction of the area of the Protected Areas, 2008-2018

The name of protected territory	«Ile-Alatau» National Park			«Sairam-Ugamsky» National Park	Nature Reserve «Semei ormany»	«Burabai» National Park
Reasons for the reduction of the territory	Kaskelen water pipeline	Objects of the state border of Kazakhstan	«Kok-zhailau» Ski Resort	Objects of the state border of Kazakhstan	Counterre-gulator of the Bulak Hydropower plant	Free economic zone «Burabai»
The amount of reduction , hectares	29,5	2,5	1002	15,9	804	370
Total, hectares	1034			15,9	804	370
Total within the country, hectares	2223,9					
Note – compiled by the authors based on [8, p. 5]						

It can be seen from table 1, by 2018, the total reduction of four protected areas of Kazakhstan reached 2223.9 thousand hectares. The largest area, equal to 1002 hectares, was withdrawn for the construction of the «Kokzhailau» Ski Resort. Thus, the largest reduction in protected areas is observed in the Ile-Alatau State National Park.

Meanwhile, in the USA, the territory allocated for protected areas is much larger than in Kazakhstan. According to the data of the main body for regulating the activities of all protected areas of the country, the National Park System, on January 1, 2020, 62 national parks were registered in the United States, occupying 61 % of the country's territory [9, p. 71]. At the same time, the attendance rate of national parks in 2018 in this country amounted to 318 million tourists [9, p. 78].

In comparison with America, a country with extensive experience in the development of ecotourism, Kazakhstan has pretty low indicators. The dynamics of the number of visits to protected areas can be traced in figure 1.

According to the data from figure 1, the total number of arrivals to specially protected areas of Kazakhstan increased from 1 191 773 to 1 501 625 people from 2016 to 2019 years. However, the tourist flow has sharply decreased due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the number of arrivals is characterized by low growth.

It demonstrates the current situation in the country – the need to increase the popularity of ecological tours, in particular to protected areas. To analyze the state of ecological tourism in the Republic of Kazakhstan, in particular, tours to protected areas, this article analyzes the Ile-Alatau State National Natural Park (SNNP) as an example.

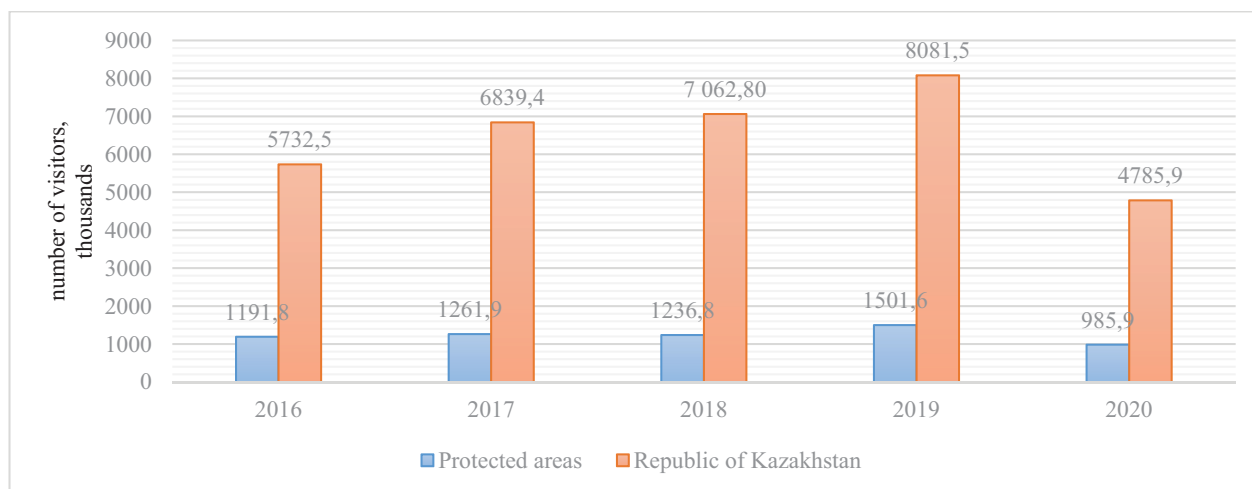


Figure 1 – The share of visits to protected areas in the total indicator of visitors in the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2016-2020

Note – compiled by the authors based on [10]

2. Comparative analysis of national parks of Kazakhstan and the United States

The Ile-Alatau SNNP was formally dedicated on February 22, 1996, and covers about 200,000 hectares. The National Park is located 32 km south of Almaty, between the Turgan Gorge in the east and the Chemolgan River in the west. The Almaty Nature Reserve is located next to the National Park, around Talgar Peak (see figure 2).

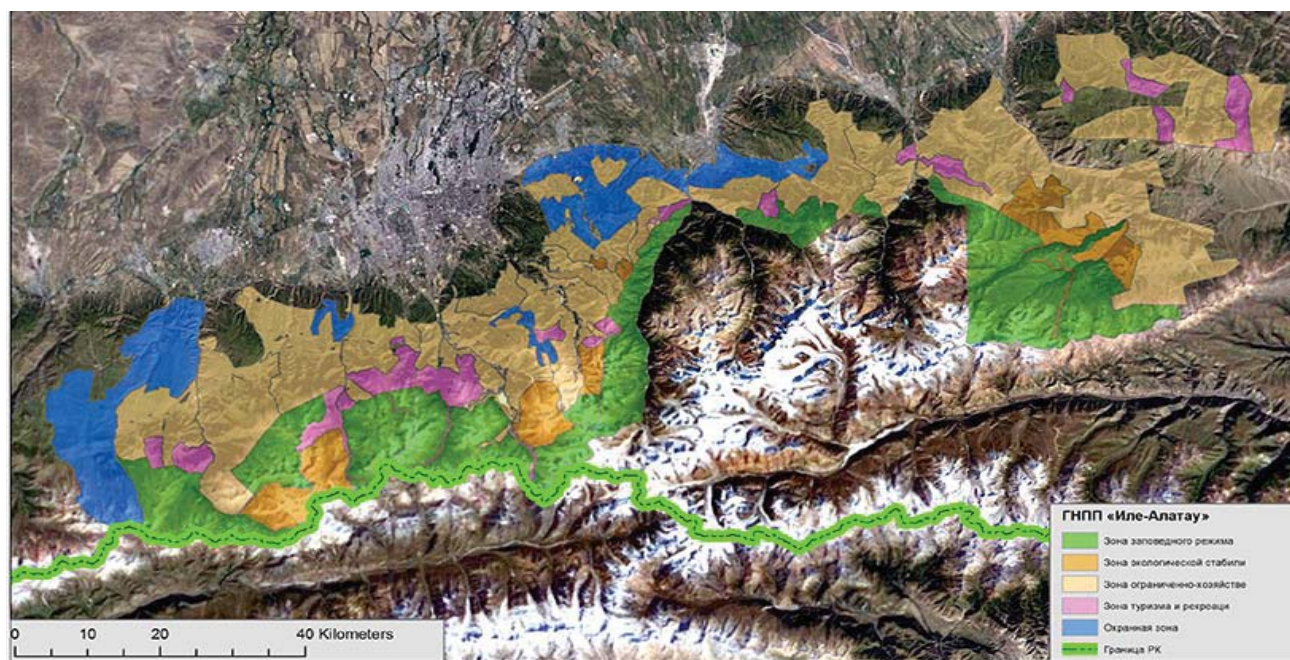


Figure 2 – Map of the Ile-Alatau National Park

Note – compiled by the authors based on [11]

As can be seen from figure 2, the national park is located mainly in mountainous terrain (600 to 4540 m above sea level). This location has favourable natural and climatic conditions of the foothill area, which assures the high attractiveness of the destination.

An additional advantage of this national park as a tourist destination is the diversity of natural landscapes and, consequently, the rich flora and fauna. In the vicinity of the park, there are more than 1000 species of plants and rare animals. The flora consists of many medicinal herbs, which creates conditions for the development of aerophytotherapy. 37 plant species are listed in the Red Book of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The animal world is represented by many species of insects, rodents, birds, herbivores and predators. Moreover, there are such large predators as snow leopards, Turkestan lynxes, listed in the Red Book of Kazakhstan [12].

The National Park is also rich in unique natural monuments. Now there are 42 tourist routes and training trails in the national park. The locations of the objects of the national park are indicated on the map (figure 3).



Figure 3 – Map of objects of the Ile-Alatau SNNP

Note – compiled by the authors

The illustration shows that there are many natural, cultural and historical monuments in the national park. The main objects of the visit are Lake Issyk and the Big Almaty Lake, waterfalls on the Turgen River (Bear and Kayrak), stone and ice glaciers. Among the objects of cultural and historical heritage, the Saka mounds, as well as the open-air museum «Altyn Adam» can be highlighted.

The Ile-Alatau National Park is visited primarily by residents of the nearest settlements, including the city of Almaty. In total, according to Kazakh Tourism, 288 thousand Kazakhstanis visited the Ile-Alatau National Park in 2019. According to Alexander Guzhavin, the head of the organization «Turanga Group», which is engaged in the development of the park, the attendance of the national park is expected to increase to 5 million people by 2024 [13].

To achieve this goal, Kazakh Tourism specialists, together with Turanga Group, are currently implementing a project to improve the infrastructure of the park, which is the main factor in increasing the number of visitors. On January 25, 2020, on behalf of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kazakh Tourism National Company created a joint project office for tourism development in the Almaty region to effectively implement «the tourism development program 2025». According to the press centre of the Ministry of Ecology, Geology and Natural Resources of Kazakhstan, the main task of the project office is to conduct coordinated work with stakeholders by providing all necessary information on the national parks of the Almaty region, including the Ile-Alatau National Park.

According to the project on sustainable development of eco-tourism in the Ile-Alatau State National Park, the territory will be divided into 34 sections. 7 visitor centres will be built in the park, navigation signs will be

provided throughout the whole territory, new hiking trails will be developed, two camping sites, one ethnical, one caravanning, 10 glamping sites will be built. Also, work is underway to digitalize the park (organization of wi-fi zones, video surveillance, alarm buttons) [13].

An especially important role in digitalization is assigned to the installation of Eco-Sergek cameras. It is assumed that the system will be provided with solar energy and wind turbines. Signals and videos will be sent by Eco-Sergek to a special Operational Control Centre. Among the main functions of this system are:

- Monitoring of visitors to the National Park (detection and suppression of cases of vandalism, violations of law, and cleanliness of the park);
- Rapid detection of fires;
- Control of tree felling and detection of traces of poaching;
- Ensuring transparency of eco pass activities.

In addition to the digitalization of the park, it is planned to train professional personnel in ecological tourism - ranger services, mountain tourism instructors, mountaineering instructors. Thus, according to Kazakh Tourism experts, at the end of the project (in 2024), it is possible to attract up to 5 million tourists to the Ile-Alatau Park, of which almost 25 % will use paid services of the park [13].

Also, there are paid services in the park such as a visit to the snow leopard exposition, mountain guides, a souvenir shop, a tourist equipment store, as well as, the main tourist services - catering and accommodation in glamping (a mountain shelter with a capacity of up to 15 rooms).

The whole project, in general, requires more than 12 billion tenges of investments over 4 years of its implementation. Investments for the project on improving the infrastructure of the Ile-Alatau National Park are carried out by leasing 32.6 hectares of land of the national park to the private company «Kultau and K» (now «Turanga Group») for 49 years, including the territories of the Great Almaty Lake, the Asa Plateau, Alma-Arasan (Ausai), Turgen, Issyk gorges, Maralsay, Soldier Gorge, Butakovka, etc. [14]. The measures taken by the state to develop ecotourism in the Almaty region have caused a controversial opinion among society, environmentalists and entrepreneurs. Thus, the chairman of the association «Green Salvation», ecologist Sergey Kuratov said that the main task of national parks is the preservation of unique natural resources and the construction of tourist facilities should be designed at the state level together with specialists in ecology, geography, geology and other fields, and not private organizations [15].

However, is the adoption of such measures a guaranteed solution to all the problems of the park? Is an undeveloped infrastructure the only obstacle to improving arrival rates?

For comparison, it would be advisable to give an example of one of the largest national parks in the USA – the Great Smoky Mountains Park. This national park was chosen due to the following reasons:

- Firstly, this park is located approximately at 35 degrees north, while Ile-Alatau is at 43 degrees north, which means the parks are located in similar natural zones;
- Secondly, as well as the Ile-Alatau SNNP, the American park is located in a mountainous area, in the central part of the Appalachian mountain system, which ensures the similarity of the relief and, respectively, climate conditions;
- Thirdly, the territory of this park slightly exceeds 210,800 hectares. Thus, the American park has the same size as the Kazakh example;
- Fourthly, the similarity of landscapes ensures the presence of similar natural tourist sites: 4 waterfalls, mixed and coniferous forests, mountain trails, etcetera. In addition, in the Big Smoky Mountains Park, there are natural objects of inspection for tourists and scientists just like in Ile-Alatau. Among them, the following four main historical districts should be mentioned: Cades Cove, famous for the presence of fossils in the valley of the same name with an age of 450 million years, as well as discovered Indian settlements; Elkmont; Roaring Fork, and Noah Ogle, famous for the finds of archaeologists of settlements of ancient Native Americans.

Although this park has a similar area as the Kazakh Park, there are more than 150 hiking trails, the total length of which is almost 1300 km. Moreover, each trail has its attractions (waterfalls, climbing mountains, watching blooms, panoramic views, etc.). In addition, all routes are divided according to the degree of difficulty (light, moderate difficulty, requiring an effort) [16].

As for the infrastructure of the park, 10 stationary campsites are already open for tourists. Each camping area is equipped with places for tents and bonfires, a picnic table and an asphalt driveway. Also, some parking lots are available for caravanning, though, only large campsites have shops. There are no showers or laundries in the park. However, there are special camps for visitors on riding tours. Besides that, there are additional areas where it is allowed to set up tents and have picnics. Generally, there are 4 information centres on the territory of the Big Smoky Mountains, where tourists can visit a museum of local lore, a mountain farm and a cinema hall with short films about the nature and history of the park [17].

Thus, a well-thought-out system of trails and signs in the park, transport accessibility and, most importantly, infrastructure designed around the perimeter of the park are the main factors in the growth of tourist arrivals. However, despite the old infrastructure facilities in the Big Smoky Mountains, which the authorities focus much attention on, the indicators of tourist flow are increasing every year (see figure 4).

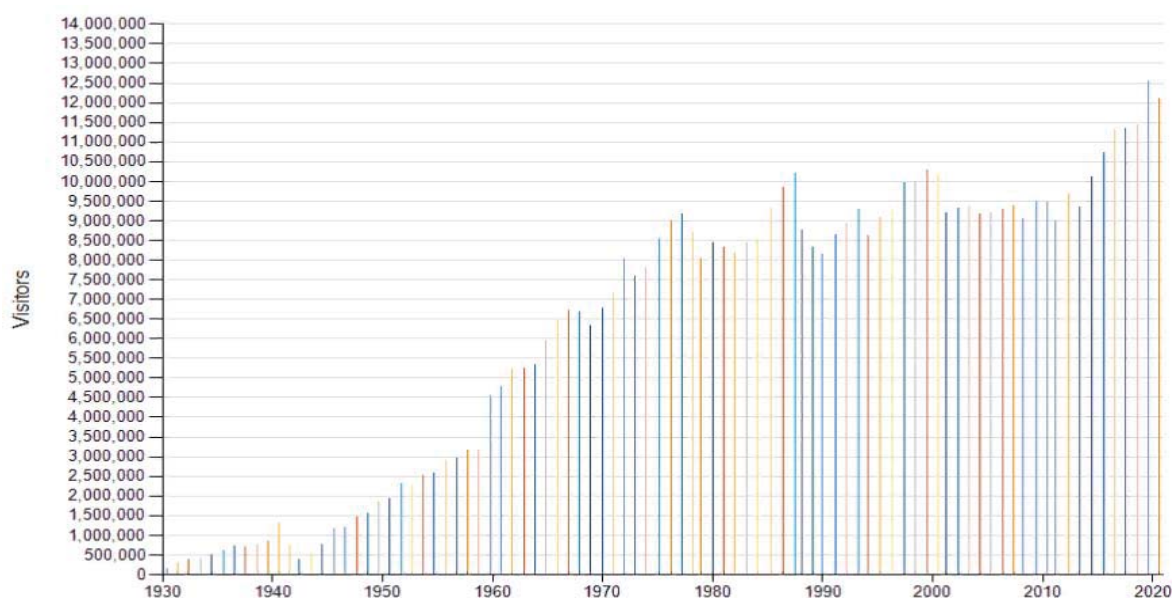


Figure 4 – Dynamics of attendance at the Great Smoky Mountains National Park 1930-2020

Note – compiled by the authors based on [18]

As it is illustrated on the figure 4, in 2020, the number of arrivals to the national park exceeded 12.5 million, which is the highest figure in the United States. It is noteworthy that the majority of tourists are citizens of the United States, since, in 2019, almost 96 % of all trips to tourist destinations in the United States were made by the residents [19].

In the presence of similar natural resources and infrastructural opportunities, a controversial question arises about what could have caused such a big difference in the arrivals of 300,000 tourists in the Ile-Alatau Park and 12.5 million in the Big Smoky Mountains.

The results of the study. As noted earlier, Kazakh Tourism experts claim that infrastructure development plays the main role in attracting tourists. However, this statement can be supplemented. Ecological tourism and, particularly, hiking, can be improved not only by developing the infrastructure of the national park but mainly via organized management approaches. For instance, the hiking routes should be targeted (with visits to historical monuments, waterfalls, ethnic places, etcetera) and arranged in such a way as to affect all the main objects of display in the park.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, the flow of tourists in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park is largely provided by domestic tourists. This indicator demonstrates the high activity of residents of the country. The development of domestic ecotourism is important for many reasons:

- Increasing the level of environmental education among the population, and changing the stereotypes of their behaviour towards nature are the main functions of eco-tourism.
- The development of domestic tourism ensures the flow of monetary currencies within the regions and between the regions of the country. Also, it stimulates the development of small and medium-sized businesses, which leads to the overall economic growth of the destination.
- Tourist activity among the population, in particular in ecological tourism, provides high-quality and healthy leisure for citizens
- Also, an increase in the flow of tourists provides cash receipts to destinations and is a source of financing for further environmental measures.

Thus, it is essential to develop ecotourism, starting with increasing the level of domestic tourism. Based on the analysis, the success of domestic tourism in America is not just a consequence of a well-developed infrastructure but has deeper reasons. The dissemination of information about national parks in the media space (films, shows and broadcasts). Considering that many people, one way or another, form their opinion based on information in the media space, it is crucial to disseminate information about national parks. Another reason is the spread of the tradition of visiting national parks from school years. For example, excursions for students to national parks can be an effective and feasible way to achieve this goal. Apparently, excursions for older students will be safer. The introduction of at least several trips into the school curriculum for the entire period of study in middle and high school will have a significant beneficial effect on the attitude of children to nature. Considering that the entrance to the Ile-Alatau National Park at environmental posts costs 0.1 of the monthly calculation index (a little more than 500 tenges), including the cost of transport, it will require no more than 1500-2000 tenge per person.

Finally, the organization of state regulation and control over the work of national parks plays the main role of the promotion of tourist products. The state's decision to transfer the lands of the Ile-Alatau Park to a private company was certainly not groundless. The Government, first of all, proceeded from considerations of private investment in infrastructure development. However, citing the example of the US experience, it can be highlighted that the development of national parks is managed by a single federal agency, the US National Park Service, which is under the jurisdiction of the United States Department of the Interior. At the same time, the development of national parks is carried out at the expense of both the state budget and private investment. However, the entire process of development, modernization, reconstruction and restructuring of parks is under the strict control of the federal agency and the Ministry of the USA.

CONCLUSIONS

The development of sustainable tourism is the only and most effective way to create a competitive tourism product that does not harm the surrounding resources. Initially, the sustainable development of tourism sets the main goal of mitigating the impact on nature by replacing environmentally hazardous industries and ensuring direct investment in environmental protection. Due to the growing demand among consumers for «green tourism», this direction will attract a large flow of tourists and increase the popularity and competitiveness of the domestic tourist product.

The purpose of the study was to assess the current state of ecological tourism in the Almaty region, including the analysis of promising areas of recreational activities and the material and technical base of tourism in the park. In this article, ideas about the current state of ecological tourism in the world and Kazakhstan have been formed. The current systems of management and development of tourism in the territory of the Ile-Alatau National Park has been also reviewed and recommendations for their improvement have been developed.

The authors conducted a comparative analysis of the national parks of Kazakhstan and the USA, using the example of the Ile-Alatau and the Big Smoky Mountains National Parks. Based on the analysis, it was revealed that the Ile-Alatau National Park has sufficient natural and climatic potential for the development of ecological tourism. Besides that, the natural diversity and uniqueness of landscapes can allow this national park to become no less popular among tourists than the Big Smoky Mountains, and attract visitors annually while avoiding a negative impact on nature.

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«ІЛЕ-АЛАТАУЫ» ҰЛТТЫҚ ПАРКІ МЫСАЛЫНДА ЭКОТУРИЗМНІҢ ЕҢ ТИІМДІ БАҒЫТЫ РЕТІНДЕ ҰЛТТЫҚ ПАРКТЕРГЕ ТУРЛАРДЫ ДАМУ

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АНДАТПА

Зерттеудің мақсаты – парктің материалдық-техникалық базасын және қолданыстағы басқару жүйелерін талдауды қоса алғанда, Іле-Алатау ұлттық паркіндегі экологиялық туризмнің ағымдағы жағдайын бағалау.

Әдіснамасы – негізгі зерттеу құралдары ретінде келесілер пайдаланылды: синтез, талдау, дедукция, салыстыру.

Зерттеудің бірегейлігі / құндылығы – экологиялық туризмнің қазіргі жағдайын объективті бағалау болып табылады, атап айтқанда, Қазақстандағы ерекше қорғалатын табиғи аумақтарындағы турлар мен Америка Құрама Штаттарын (АҚШ) шетелдік мысал ретінде қарастыру, бұл ұлттық парктерде туризмді ұйымдастыру мен дамытудың тиімді әдістерінің негізін жасап, қалыптастыруға мүмкіндік береді.

Зерттеу нәтижелері – Алматы облысының бірегей табиғи ресурстарына талдау жасай отырып, авторлар өңірдің ішкі және келу туризмін дамытудағы жоғары әлеуетін дәлелдеді. Америка Құрама Штаттарымен салыстырмалы талдау негізінде авторлар Іле-Алатау ұлттық паркінің материалдық-техникалық базасының қазіргі жағдайына баға берді. Авторлар экологиялық туризмді дамытудың ағымдағы бағдарламасын жетілдіру бойынша бірнеше ұсыныстар жасады.

Түйін сөздер: тұрақты даму, экологиялық туризм, бәсекеге қабілеттілік, туристік орындар, табиғи потенциал, туристік инфрақұрылым.

**РАЗВИТИЕ ТУРОВ В НАЦИОНАЛЬНЫЕ ПАРКИ КАК САМОГО
ЭФФЕКТИВНОГО НАПРАВЛЕНИЯ ЭКОТУРИЗМА НА ПРИМЕРЕ
НАЦИОНАЛЬНОГО ПАРКА «ИЛЕ-АЛАТАУ»**

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Цель исследования – оценить текущее состояние экологического туризма в национальном парке «Иле-Алатау», включая анализ материально-технической базы парка и существующих систем управления.

Методология – в качестве главных инструментов исследования были использованы: синтез, анализ, дедукция, сравнение.

Оригинальность / ценность исследования – объективная оценка современного состояния экологического туризма, в частности, туров в особо охраняемые территории, в Казахстане и Соединенных Штатах Америки (США) как зарубежного примера, что в совокупности позволяет создать основу для формирования эффективных методов организации и развития туризма в национальных парках.

Результаты исследования – анализируя уникальных природных ресурсов Алматинской области, авторы доказали высокий потенциал региона для развития внутреннего и въездного туризма. Основываясь на сравнительном анализе с США, авторы оценили современное состояние материально-технической базы национального парка «Иле-Алатау». Авторы представили несколько рекомендаций для улучшения текущей программы развития экологического туризма.

Ключевые слова: устойчивое развитие, экологический туризм, конкурентоспособность, туристические объекты, природный потенциал, туристическая инфраструктура.

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