

## Managing Nature and Visitors: Governance Strategies in National Parks of the Baltic States

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Natura 2000, the largest coordinated network of protected areas in the world, plays a key role in biodiversity conservation across the European Union. Beyond their ecological value, Natura 2000 sites also present socio-economic opportunities — particularly through nature-based tourism. In the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), national parks within this network are both a core element of national conservation strategies and an underutilized driver of local and regional economic development.

**Significance of the Topic** lies in its focus on the governance of national parks (Natura 2000 sites) as multi-functional landscapes where nature conservation objectives intersect with community development and tourism-based economic opportunities. In many rural areas of the Baltic States, challenges such as depopulation, limited infrastructure, and lack of economic diversification hinder sustainable development. National parks hold strong potential to act as catalysts for environmentally responsible growth through nature-based tourism and related services.

There is an established body of research on governance structures, stakeholder roles, and policy instruments in protected area management. For instance, Lockwood (2010) outlined core governance principles such as legitimacy and inclusiveness, while Borrini-Feyerabend et al. (2013) categorized governance types and emphasized co-management. Studies on Natura 2000, such as Jones et al. (2017), demonstrate that inclusive, well-structured governance improves conservation outcomes. These works stress the importance of community engagement, flexible policy tools, and aligning conservation with socio-economic development.

However, despite this strong theoretical base and examples of good practice, the Baltic States remain underrepresented in the literature, especially in terms of how these governance strategies are implemented in practice. This research aims to address this gap by examining national parks in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania through a governance lens. It explores how these parks balance ecological protection with tourism-driven development, considering both institutional arrangements and stakeholder dynamics. Without well-designed frameworks, tourism development may lead to environmental degradation or fragmented policy application. This balance is increasingly crucial as the European Union prioritizes nature restoration, green jobs, and sustainable tourism through the European Green Deal and the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030.

### Purpose of the Research

The primary objective of this study is to explore and evaluate governance approaches that enable national parks within the Natura 2000 network in the Baltic States to fulfill their economic potential — particularly through tourism service exports — while upholding conservation obligations. It seeks to identify the governance structures, stakeholder roles, and policy instruments that support integrated and sustainable protected area management.

According to national legislation, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia define national parks as protected areas established to preserve and manage natural and cultural landscapes of national significance — balancing conservation, restoration, research, heritage protection, and sustainable use, including nature tourism.

Each of the Baltic States has national parks engaged with the EUROPARC Federation's European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas (ECST), applying Charter principles through strategic partnerships, education, and best practices:

In Latvia: Ķemeri National Park and Gauja National Park (undergoing evaluation).

In Estonia: Lahemaa, Matsalu, and Soomaa National Parks.

In Lithuania: Žemaitija (Samogitia) National Park.

### **Methodology**

This research uses a comparative, multi-case study approach focused on selected Natura 2000 and EUROPARC-certified national parks. Data collection includes:

Semi-structured interviews (with park authorities, local governments, tourism operators, NGOs);

Desk research and policy analysis of national management plans, EU directives, tourism strategies, and funding instruments (e.g., LIFE, LEADER);

Quantitative analysis of tourism statistics (visitor numbers, service exports), biodiversity indicators, and socio-economic data such as employment rates.

### **Expected Results**

The study will produce a comparative overview of governance practices in Natura 2000 national parks across the Baltic States. It will map governance structures, stakeholder engagement mechanisms, and policy tools used to balance conservation and tourism. The findings will highlight both national differences and shared challenges, offering insight into how governance models shape the sustainable development of protected areas.

### **References**

Lockwood, M. (2010). Good governance for terrestrial protected areas: A framework, principles and performance outcomes. *Journal of Environmental Management*, 9.

Estonian Nature Conservation Act<sup>1</sup> (21.04.2004.) § 26; Lithuanian Law No. I-301 on protected areas. 12 Section; In Latvia, each national park is governed by its own law, which seeks to achieve a balance between conservation and sustainable use. For example, aim of the Gauja National Park law (30.04.2009.), 2nd Section

### **Keywords**

Natura 2000, governance, national parks, Baltic States, sustainable nature tourism, nature conservation, rural development, tourism export