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Evaluating aquatic recreation potential: A case study of Spajići Lake in Zaovine

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ABSTRACT

Spajići Lake in Zaovine represents one of the most valuable natural assets of Tara National Park in the Republic of Serbia, although it remains relatively under-recognised by the public. The potential of this lake for recreational and economic development is substantial, yet it remains largely unexploited. Through a comprehensive geospatial analysis of the Zaovine region and Spajići Lake, a proposal has been formulated to introduce water-based recreational activities such as kayaking, canoeing, stand-up paddling, sailing, and canyoning. The necessary infrastructure, equipment, and safety measures have been defined as essential steps to expand the offerings in Zaovine and at Spajići Lake, thereby further popularizing it. Potential investment in new recreational facilities would enable additional development of adventure tourism and create a number of jobs in the tourism industry of this region.

Keywords: nautical tourism, geospatial analysis, recreation, paddling, Tara

INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of tourism, including both supply and demand, are in constant change and adaptation driven by the development of new technologies. Tourism satisfies the needs for rest and recreation, healing and recovery, while also being a way to experience nature, connect, and bring people closer together (Leiper, 1979). Water-based tourism facilitates a diverse array of recreational activities catering to both domestic and international visitors. Broadly speaking, this form of tourism is called nautical tourism. Nautical tourism is complex and includes various forms of organized or self-organized tourism that involve riding smaller or larger vessels and staying on the shores for sports and recreational purposes (Martínez Vázquez et al., 2021; Spinelli & Benevolo, 2022).

In the tourism strategy of the Republic of Serbia, weekend, business, mountain, lake, rural, and health tourism, as well as camping and rafting have been identified as the national tourist products of interest (Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications, 2016). Despite abundant water resources, nautical tourism remains insufficiently developed in Serbia, presenting substantial growth potential. A large number of domestic and foreign tourists would spend their vacation on a river or lake, but the activity offerings are scarce. Specifically, on Mount Tara, in Zaovine, there are several lakes that could be used for nautical tourism, providing a diverse range of activities. The subject of this paper is the organization of water activities at Spajići Lake.

TOURISM AND RECREATION

Various definitions of tourism highlight their different segments (Getz, 2008; Hall & Saarinen, 2010; Kohen, 1974; Rosalina et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2012). Tourism can be defined as the temporary travel and stay of individuals to destinations that serve to satisfy diverse needs, foster new experiences, and facilitate engagement with local culture and tradition, thereby generating a complex set of relationships and phenomena that both reflect and contribute to a country's social and economic development. In that regard, tourism is based on activities between people and between people and nature, that occur during their stay away from

their place of residence, and that tourism is a humanistic activity in which a person, by socializing with others, affirms and enhances their human qualities.

Recreation is a freely chosen, rather than imposed, activity that is primarily carried out during leisure time. Although it is mostly associated with free time, it increasingly appears in specific programs as a significant element of the modern scientific organization of work and rest. It enriches, relaxes, and rejuvenates a person mentally and socially, helping them to develop into a well-rounded individual (Lackey et al., 2021). Modern perspectives acknowledge sports recreation's complexity beyond mere leisure and entertainment. Several motivations contribute to the development of tourism, including psychological (Filep & Laing, 2019; Pearce & Packer, 2013), cultural (Romão et al., 2013), health (Figueiredo et al., 2024; Godovykh & Ridderstaat, 2020), and sociological (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Zhu et al., 2025). Overall, sports recreation is increasingly integrating into all dimensions of tourism, becoming a significant factor in leisure and work time, education, and health (Ilić et al., 2025).

WATER ACTIVITIES

The activities that can be organized and carried out on water surfaces are extremely numerous. Open water swimming is a competitive swimming discipline and recreational activity performed in open water surfaces such as rivers, lakes, and seas (Baldassarre et al., 2017). It represents a mental and physical struggle for the swimmer, as they encounter various obstacles such as wind, aquatic wildlife, waves, and more, in addition to the distance they need to swim (Overbury et al., 2023). The requisite equipment encompasses a wetsuit, goggles, and a swimming cap, all of which are indispensable for ensuring both performance and safety in open-water environments.

Windsurfing is a water sport that, despite its allure, demands a higher degree of technical proficiency due to its complexity. In this case, the main driving force is the wind, which propels the board thanks to a specially designed sail. The surfer can maneuver the board in three directions. The basic equipment consists of the board and the rig, which is a system made up of sail, mast, boom, and universal joint (Wheaton, 2000).

Rowing and paddling are widely recognized as highly beneficial forms of physical exercise, offering both cardiovascular and muscular conditioning benefits (Gavala-González et al., 2021). They are practiced on water, in the tranquility and greenery of nature, in fresh, clean air (Ho et al., 2013). There are several forms of rowing and paddling, such as kayaking and canoeing on flat and wild waters, academic rowing, rafting, stand-up paddleboarding, Va'a and kayak sailing. Rowers steer the boat with oars attached to the boat, while kayakers and canoeists hold the paddles freely in their hands. Stable tourist vessels allow paddling with stops and different enjoyment in nature.

GEOSPATIAL AREA OF ZAOVINA

The geospatial area of Zaovina and the Zaovina Lakes encompasses a part of the territory of Tara National Park (Brankov et al., 2020; Nedić et al., 2022), characterized by its unique relief and aquatic environments of the lakes located in the Zaovina area, its flora and fauna, specific climatic conditions, as well as cultural and historical sites. The village of Zaovine is in the southern part of Mount Tara and is part of the national park of the same name. Zaovine area connects Tara with the Zlatibor massif and the Mokra Gora Basin (Kovačević-Majkić et al., 2022). From an administrative perspective, the region is incorporated within the municipality of Bajina Bašta (Vučetić, 2018). The area comprises 28 hamlets, Zaovine Lake, and the Beli Rzav River, which forms Sklopovi canyon. It covers an area of 5,593.61 hectares. The highest elevation is 1,412 meters above sea level (Radović et al., 2005). Zaovine are famous as the place where a living fossil of the plant world, Picea omorika, was discovered, specifically in the hamlet Đurići in 1875 (Dell'Oro et al., 2020; Djurdjević et al., 2003; Mataruga et al., 2020). It is worth mentioning that 50% of the flora of Mount Tara is in Zaovine area. In addition to this, the diverse animal life further enriches this National Park, which is considered one of the richest in the region. Many species are protected, and the most famous animal resident of Tara is the brown bear (Radović et al., 2005). The area of Zaovine is exceptionally rich in pure mountain springs such as "Hajdučka voda" below Guvaništa, the spring in Trifkovići, the spring in Rujevice, the spring in Paljevine, and the strong and good spring in Gornji Rajci. Zaovine Lake is an artificial lake created by the demolition and submergence of a part of the village called Vežanja and the construction of the Lazići Dam on the River Beli Rzav. The lake was built from 1976 to 1983, and local residents were involved in its construction. This lake was made for the needs of the Bajina Bašta hydroelectric power plant and is used as a reversible lake, meaning that excess water from the River Drina, which fills Perućac Lake, is pumped through a piping system up the mountain to fill Zaovine Lake. When the water level of the Drina is low, water from the lake is released back into the Drina. It is supplemented by the Konjska River and Beli Rzav. This is how the now well-known Zaovine Lake among tourists was created. The lake is located at an altitude of 900 meters, has an area of 4.30 km^2, a depth of up to 130 meters, and is surrounded by dense pine forests. Aerial views reveal a distinct star-shaped morphology of the lake. There are a few unregulated beaches that are filled with bathers during the summer. This lake is extremely rich in wildlife because of the clean water (Nikolić et al., 2020), and it is home to significant specimens of trout, catfish, chub, pike, bleak, and young salmon. It is currently interesting for tourists, fishermen, and divers because of the remnants of the former village that was located at the site of the lake, where the ruins of an old church, school, etc., can be seen underwater.

LAKE SPAJIĆI

Lake Spajići is an artificial, elevated reservoir formed from the filtered water of Zaovine Lake. It is named after the hamlet of the same name, Spajići. It is one of four auxiliary lakes to the artificial Zaovina Lake, significantly smaller in area. It is located on the other side of the Lazići dam and is also dammed, with its only inflow being the River Beli Rzav. Though relatively unknown, Lake Spajići offers exceptional natural appeal within Tara. It is surrounded by dense forest and is characterized by clean water, allowing visitors to seek refuge from the summer heat. This lake has a total area of 11 hectares, surrounded by hills and forests. Its water exhibits exceptional transparency, allowing for the clear visualization of the lakebed. The lake has an elongated shape. Swimming is allowed, although the water is relatively cold in summer, and there is even a smaller arranged beach in one part of it. Besides swimming, fishing is also permitted, exclusively with lure and fly-fishing gear using barbless hooks. Large specimens of chub can be caught in the lake (Nikolić et al., 2020). At the lake, there is also a designated area for visitors, featuring a covered dining table and a waste container. A significant advantage that this lake has over Zaovine Lake is that the water level here is almost constant. The variations are very small, in contrast to Zaovine, where water level fluctuations can be several dozen meters, making it difficult to use it adequately for water activities.

At Lake Spajići, there are no organized tours for kayaking, canoeing, or stand-up paddleboarding to explore the lake. The current offer is limited to canoe rentals available only on weekends, with a maximum of three canoes for rent. This can be done from 12 PM to 5 PM, and the rental price is 1000 dinars per hour. Insufficient promotional activities compel tourists to seek information from accommodation providers or local residents. It is also important to note that there are no safety measures in place. Those who rent a canoe do not receive life jackets, which are necessary for this type of activity. There are also anglers who fish at the lake using only spinning and fly-fishing tackle with barbless hooks. Fish wardens regularly conduct inspections. Tourists can also use their own floating objects on the lake.

PROSPECTIVE FRAMEWORKS OF NAUTICAL PROGRAMS AT SPAJIĆI LAKE, ZAOVINE

Irrespective of its natural or artificial origin, the tourism value of a lake is principally determined by its objectively perceived quality, which, in turn, elucidates the dialectical relationship between the observer and the environment. Natural and artificial lakes, as hydrographic objects, condition sports-recreational, sports-manifestation, stationary, excursion, and nautical tourism, as well as fishing. People favor summer stationary tourism, especially when the surface water temperature and the quality rating of the first and second class allow for a bathing season (Falk, 2014). The most important condition for the realization of nautical tourism is the existence of an adequate nautical environment. The concept of nautical tourism is interpreted by many from their own perspective. The broadest understanding could be represented by special infrastructure, implementation, and services (Martínez Vázquez et al., 2021).

Prior to a detailed analysis of water activities, it is imperative to underscore the advantageous presence of a dense forest surrounding the lake, which is a factor that significantly augments opportunities for diverse health and ecological programs (Ohe et al., 2017).

In addition to the dense forest, the environment of high and steep cliffs is conducive to the organization of climbing activities and courses, which can provide an excellent contrast to water activities in terms of varying levels of difficulty and exposure to high temperatures (Hardiman & Burgin, 2011).

As previously mentioned, a large number of water activities can be carried out at Lake Spajići. In order to implement any of these activities, it is necessary to first obtain permission from the Tara National Park. The use of any type of vessel on the lakes in Tara is prohibited unless permission is previously obtained from the National Park. The permit is granted after the request is approved, which must be submitted to the authorities in the National Park and must specify the purposes for which the vessel will be used. Given that these activities would significantly contribute to the development of tourism, and thus the municipality of Bajina Bašta, obtaining a permit should not be in question. Additionally, it is necessary to have adequate infrastructure, which includes space for storing boats, kayaks, canoes, boards, vests, and other equipment. The ideal location for this is the beach in close proximity to the dam at Lake Spajići. There is enough space on this beach to set up a few modular containers that could serve as storage. An additional advantage is that the entrance to the water is concreted for a length of 8 meters from the shore towards the middle of the lake, so there is no need for further investment in a pontoon platform that would serve as a place to enter the vessels. Access to the beach is also secured, with a 20-meter gravel road leading to it. There are already tables and benches for tourists, as well as a covered area. Permanent presence of a park ranger is necessary to supervise storage and maintain lake order.

The planned activities at the lake include a range of similar but also different activities that can be used multiple times or combined. Kayaking, canoeing, and stand-up paddleboarding are outdoor activities where users face the direction of travel and are propelled by paddles with two blades (kayak) and one blade (canoe and SUP), which are not supported by the boat but are held freely in the hands. The kayaker sits in the kayak, the canoeist kneels in the canoe, while the SUP user stands on the board while paddling. When paddling in a kayak, canoe, or SUP, predominantly the upper body is used; the technique is symmetrical in the kayak and asymmetrical in the canoe and SUP, with the forces applied to the paddle being relatively small, while the duration of the activity requires a certain level of endurance (Spittler et al., 2020). In windsurfing, the surfer controls the board-rig system powered by the wind (Sevinç & Güzel, 2021), while canyoning involves descending using combined (hiking, swimming, jumping, diving, climbing) techniques down river gorges or canyons (Hardiman & Burgin, 2011).

Users often enjoy mastering the handling of watercraft, the excitement caused by a controlled dose of danger, and the connection with nature, where they often come into contact with the plant and animal life that is otherwise hidden. All of the mentioned activities can be individually tailored to users and, as such, favor a light load on the muscular and cardio-respiratory systems of the body, along with the beneficial effects of being in the sun and on the water surface.

For water activities, it is necessary to acquire: recreational inflatable or plexiglass kayaks, canoes, SUP boards, paddles for each of these vessels, sailing boards, life jackets, helmets, and ropes. Group kayaking tours can be organized, which would include a visit around the entire lake with swimming stops at one of the shores. A one-hour guided tour would initially instruct participants in essential paddling techniques, entry, exit, and docking procedures.

A particularly engaging option for groups of up to 10 tourists is a guided kayak tour encircling the lake, followed by an excursion to the proximate viewpoint Ravna Stena, which is only a 30-minute walk from the lake and offers an incredible view of Lake Spajići, Lake Lipovica, and the old elementary school in Luke.

One of the planned activities for children attending high schools in Bajina Bašta, where the school and municipality would be the organizers, is to hold a paddling training on SUP boards at Lake Spajići and practice for races that would be organized the following day. This type of activity could take a whole working week and involve all high school students from Bajina Bašta.

Considering the geographical location and surroundings of Lake Spajići, it can be noted that winds are not such a rare occurrence. Sailing training, as another interesting recreational activity during windy days, would be a perfect choice for tourists visiting Zaovine and Lake Spajići, especially for those who love good fun and adrenaline. The idea is for tourists to undergo a short sailing training, after which they could try their hand at this activity under the supervision of an instructor.

For true nature lovers, canoeing offers complete enjoyment at Lake Spajići. Just like kayaking, these tours can be both group and individual. Canoes are designed for two people. Before starting this type of excursion, a 15-minute canoeing training session should be included. The minimum duration of this tour is one hour. This can be a special activity, and it can also be enhanced by hiking to the nearby school in Luka after the canoe ride, which is located in close proximity to the River Beli Rzav that continues through the Sklopovi canyon. The only place to start during the Beli Rzav and enter the canyon is by the elementary school. From here, the canyoning tour continues, lasting approximately one and a half hours, with breaks for swimming along the way. Tourists can rent canyoning equipment at Lake Spajići, where the water activity center is located.

The surroundings of the lake also favor the organization of occasional and short-term camps, which can be organized as trips for the existing traditional educational camp of students from the Faculty of Sport and Physical Education in Belgrade (Dabović et al., 2009). Additionally, if minimal infrastructure is established, the location can serve for organizing short-term stays in nature for all other groups of the population, specifically for cross-border cooperation projects and camps (Miletić & Trivun, 2014).

In 2021, the municipality of Bajina Bašta granted the facility of the primary school in Luka to the local community of Zaovine for the purpose of renovating this school. One part of the school has already been organized, and meetings of the local community, workshops, and presentations are held there, while the other part is in the process of renovation, with plans to create an ethnographic museum that would showcase exhibits significant to the history of this village, which is indeed rich. In addition to the importance of preserving local history, the authorities wish for this space to be a point where tourists can learn more about the past of Zaovine and the numerous activities this part of Tara offers. The conceptual design of the future appearance of the school after complete renovation has been thoroughly prepared.

CONCLUSION

Nautical tourism in Serbia remains underdeveloped, particularly when juxtaposed with the extensive water resources exploited in larger European nations. Serbia primarily exploits the tourism potentials of the Sava and Danube Rivers while neglecting lake tourism. Lake Spajići, located in Zaovine within the Tara National Park, holds enormous potential for the development of this type of tourism. Rowing, paddling, sailing, diving, canyoning, recreational swimming, and nautical camping, along with activities like hiking, alpinism, and ecological activities, are just some of the activities that can be offered to tourists visiting this part of Serbia through various forms of tourist arrangements. From recreational activities for employees and school competitions to classic individual or group excursions, these water activities can significantly contribute to people's mental and physical health. Benefits include increased accommodation demand, cultural and historical site visitation, and economic gains for the region, notably supporting local agricultural producers. Moreover, because the local school near Lake Spajići is being renovated and turned into an ethnographic museum and because there are well-known viewpoints and lakes nearby, it is clear that this place deserves more attention and investment in nautical tourism.

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