SPECIAL NATURE RESERVE AREA DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT

– Path dependence and co-evolution in the case study of “Carska Bara”, Vojvodina Province, Serbia –

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ABSTRACT

The study focuses on the development path of a tourism destination area centered around a special nature reserve and adjacent rural communities in the northern part of Serbia. Utilizing evolutionary economic geography (EEG) as an increasingly present theoretical and conceptual framework in the studies of tourism, this research project employs key EEG concepts of ‘path dependence’ and ‘co-evolution’. ‘Path dependence’ examines different social, economic, institutional and sectoral factors that direct, propel and/or hinder destination development, while ‘co-evolution’ analyzes causal and relational exchanges of stakeholders within and associated with the destination. The objective of this study is to trace developmental and relational trajectories of the nature reserve, tourism enterprises in its vicinity, and the place and role of public sector in these processes. The study, therefore, aims to analyze: (1) how the concept of ‘path dependence’ applies to the tourism development path of the nature reserve; (2) the dynamics of co-evolutionary and relational exchange processes in the nature reserve destination area, namely those occurring between actors operating in both public and private sectors. The two combined EEG approaches, previously not applied within the outlined geographical context, serve to illustrate and explain overall development mechanisms within a tourism destination, relevant economically, socio-culturally as well as environmentally for its region and on the tourism market of Serbia. When methodology is concerned, the study is in form of a case study, with primary data drawn from semi-structured, in-depth interviews and supported with complementary data from relevant scientific articles, government documents, web sites and other publications. The study findings show that the nature reserve in its tourism growth displays a path dependence determined by two seemingly diverging factors: (1) rules and regulations pertaining to protected areas such as nature reserves dictate tourism development and (2) the reserve management entrepreneurial skills play a noteworthy role in shaping its tourism growth. Apart from path dependence, the tourism development path associated with the nature reserve displays path plasticity, which represents a new direction in tourism growth based on the existing infrastructural and managerial framework. Moreover, the study outcomes indicate that levels, directions and intensity of co-evolutionary and relational exchanges among all stakeholders included demonstrate several different patterns. While there is detectable relationship between the nature reserve and most local tourism-related stakeholders, relationships among local stakeholders themselves are rather uneven. Similar patterns are found regarding the involvement of public sector. Public sector is closely linked with the nature reserve, however, its association with other tourism stakeholders in the destination area is uneven. These findings support the idea that each destination area stands as a unique and complex entity, with various endogenous and exogenous factors shaping its growth.

Keywords: tourism destination, special nature reserve, evolutionary economic geography, path dependence, path plasticity, co-evolution
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1. INTRODUCTION

“Geography matters, not for the simplistic and overly used reason that everything happens in space, but because where things happen is critical to knowing how and why they happen.”

(Warf and Arias, 2009, p.1)

The quote by Barney Warf (2009), one of the editors to the volume ‘The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives’ anew summarizes the significance of geography, in the context of the spatial turn and its influences across an array of social sciences and humanities (Warf and Arias, 2009). Space, place and spatiality have become increasingly significant in the fluid, globalized contemporary world, and as the quote above reads, they hold the key to comprehending in what manner and for what reason things happen.

Against this geographical backdrop, tourism certainly holds its place. Geographically bound, tourism has been progressively viewed as a phenomenon that generates spaces – tourism destinations. The notion of ‘a tourism destination’ or ‘a tourism resort’ has held a ubiquitous presence in the research of tourism focusing on the provision of goods and services that are spatially fixed (Urry, 1990; Hjalager, 2000). Furthermore, tourism destinations have also been characterized as socially constructed and evolving over time (Saarinen, 2004; Sanz-Ibáñez and Clavé, 2014). Evolution of tourism destinations, and processes behind the ‘where’, and, to different extents, the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ of these evolutionary changes have long been analyzed by tourism scholars (see for example Christaller, 1964; Butler, 1980). In recent years, however, academic discourse on evolution of tourism destinations has been expanded by introduction of evolutionary economic geography (EEG) into the studies of tourism. Evolutionary economic geography centers on how spatial economies transform themselves over time through irrevocable and active processes, causing the rise and fall of industrial areas, which in turn resembles the rise and decay of tourism destinations in the studies of tourism (Ma and Hassink, 2013). EEG utilizes concepts of ‘path dependence’ – developmental trajectory influenced by an array of institutional, economic, social circumstances, and ‘co-evolution’ – relational and causal development within the same industry (e.g. tourism) or different industries (e.g. tourism and agriculture). With these two concepts EEG links the spatial ‘where’, the somewhat elusive ‘how’ and ‘why’ as well as temporal dimension of ‘when’ in depicting tourism destination development.

EEG therefore, arguably rather well, advocates for Warf’s “Geography matters”, the ever-present ‘History matters.’ as well as C. M. Hall’s “Tourism matters!” (Page and Hall, 2014, p.28). As theoretical and conceptual framework, it has become increasingly present in tourism studies (Brouder and Eriksson, 2013; Brouder, 2014b). Published studies that engage EEG and tourism have been focusing on a variety of destinations, ranging from resorts to rural and peripheral regions, however, the obvious restraint has been the focus on developed countries such as Sweden, Australia and Canada with recent additions from Spain and China (Brouder, 2014b).
This study focuses on Serbia, as a recently emerged and rather under-researched tourism destination within Anglophone tourism studies (Dwyer, Dragičević, Armenski, Mihalič and Knežević Cvelbar, 2014). Hence this study fills a geographical gap in EEG-related tourism literature. Analogous to the low presence of Serbia as a researched destination, its northern province of Vojvodina – where the case study destination area is located – also bears little acknowledgment in this respect, despite the tourism potential owing to its natural landscapes, multicultural legacy, and gastronomical varieties (Mulec and Wise, 2013).

The delineated destination area for the purposes of this study comprises Special Nature Reserve “Carska Bara” and rural settlements encompassing or in the immediate proximity of the Reserve. The study centers on the tourism development path of the “Carska Bara” reserve, which is analyzed utilizing the concept of ‘path dependence’. Relational exchange between the Reserve and local tourism businesses located in the designated rural settlements is analyzed utilizing the concept of ‘co-evolution’. Furthermore, the case of “Carska Bara” Reserve is conspicuous, since the Reserve represents a protected area which is a public good. As such its operation falls within the scope of rules and regulations of public sector. However, due to its specific historical background, “Carska Bara” is managed by a privately-owned enterprise, which in turn needs to coordinate with authoritative institutions in the public sector. Additionally, local tourism businesses that interact with the Reserve predominantly operate within private- but also communicate with public sector. This tourism destination area exhibits a complex web of public and private stakeholders, where interaction is pivotal. Therefore, the overall relational dynamics between the sectors in the destination area will be examined with the application of the ‘co-evolutionary’ concept as well. This is relevant since there has not been much research on how these interactions affect stakeholder behavior and tourism development outcomes from a co-evolutionary stance (cf. Gill and Williams, 2011; Brouder and Fullerton, 2015). Also, the choice of this tourism destination area is supported by the notion that EEG concepts of ‘path dependence’ and ‘co-evolution’ can serve as useful tools in scrutinizing varied and divergent tourism economies within regional economies, alike ones in rural areas (Brouder and Fullerton, 2015).

To summarize, the research problem that underlies the above-presented facts can be defined by the following arguments. Small-scale, nature-based tourism destinations such as special nature reserves which are invariably found in rural and/or peripheral areas, alike in Serbian Vojvodina Province, have not been given sufficient academic attention, although they possess opportunities for tourism development and face various challenges in that regard. Since they are situated in localities with often declining socio-economic conditions, tourism is commonly seen as the panacea for the overall unfavorable circumstances. Nevertheless, due to the small scale of these destinations, limited tourism attractions and accordingly not many tourism entrepreneurs operating, these destination areas typically rely on public sector and assets. Hence, to understand the tourism potential of these destination areas as well as factors that influence it, an array of natural, historical, social, economic, sectoral, institutional and other aspects need to be analyzed. Such analysis can be facilitated well by EEG frameworks. This is particularly the case when public and private interactions are concerned, as the dynamics of these interactions and levels of co-evolution play an important role and determine the overall tourism...
development of these rural and/or peripheral areas. Therefore, exposing and examining tourism developmental trajectories via ‘path dependence’ and existing as well as potential interactions among stakeholders via ‘co-evolution’ in the setting such as the “Carska Bara” destination area can contribute to understanding not only how tourism emerges and develops in such areas but also how it affects wider socio-economic circumstances in both space and time.

1.1 Aim of the study and research questions

The first aim of the study is to examine of what has occurred along the tourism development path of Special Nature Reserve “Carska Bara” given its unique context as a protected area with specific natural resources, and relevant operational, institutional and policy-oriented settings. The second aim relates to identify mechanisms behind the evolutionary processes in the destination area around the Reserve, i.e. and explaining why these processes have developed the way they did, and particularly how the interactions between public and private sectors shaped and influenced these developmental courses in the “Carska Bara” destination area.

Tackling this two-fold aim, this study is to utilize the EEG concepts of ‘path dependence’ and ‘co-evolution’ stemming from the work of Ma and Hassink (2013). The concept of ‘path dependence’ will be used to portray the way tourism has developed chronologically in the Reserve and identify what natural preconditions, social, and economic factors were crucial along that process. The concept of ‘co-evolution’ will facilitate scrutinizing main features and dynamics of relational exchanges between the Reserve and tourism-related businesses located within the destination area. Also, with the intention of depicting a well-rounded representation of the tourism supply in this destination area, the study examines the level and character of interchange among tourism-oriented businesses as well. Additionally, as prescribed by Ma and Hassink (2013), since one destination comprises various elements such as products, institutions and sectors, the involvement of the public sector and its interaction with the Reserve, and private sector, i.e. the tourism-related businesses, is to be examined.

The following research questions and sub-questions are to be addressed:

1) How does the concept of “path dependence” apply to Special Nature Reserve “Carska Bara”?
   - What has been the development path of tourism in the Reserve?

2) What are the inter-relational mechanisms between public and private sectors in the “Carska Bara” destination area, and how have they shaped tourism development in the destination area?
   - What is the extent of co-evolution and interactive exchange between the Reserve and local tourism-oriented businesses?
   - What is the extent of co-evolution and interactive exchange among the local tourism-oriented businesses themselves?
- What is the extent of co-evolution and relational exchange between the Reserve and public sector?
- What is the extent of co-evolution between local tourism businesses and public sector?

The first research question and sub-question hence inquire about the tourism development path of the Reserve as the core of the tourism activity in the destination area, which invariably influences other tourism-related activities and stakeholders. Consequently, the second set of research questions adds yet another exploratory layer to the aim of the study. These questions help in understanding how and why tourism in this area evolved by focusing on interactions between all the relevant stakeholders.

1.2 Significance of the study

The importance of this study is manifold. First, the significance is mirrored in the geographical extension of the study as it focuses on Serbia, a destination under-present in the Western tourism literature (Dwyer et al., 2014). The Serbian context is valuable since literature on tourism in this geographical setting emphasizes the influence and consequences state government has in its development (cf. Muhi, 2013) and the urgency in better interaction between private and public sector (Pavlović, Medić and Tešić, 2015). When the application of EEG concepts within tourism studies is concerned, the geographical spread is expanded beyond studies which are largely based in developed countries as recognized by Brouder (2014b). Also, albeit altered, the alternative path dependence model and the co-evolutionary framework proposed by Ma and Hassink (2013) find new application with this empirical study, as called for by the authors (Ma and Hassink, 2013).

Furthermore, the focus on a special nature reserve is of relevance in the context of regional development (the province of Vojvodina) and on a national level. This is because special nature reserves together with their wetlands – such as SNR ‘Carska Bara’ represent areas of environmental, economic, scientific as well as cultural importance (Stojanović, 2005). The development of tourism relates to these realms as well. Moreover, for this development to be sustainable in the long term, joined and coordinated forces of stakeholders in both public and private sectors are of importance as well (Gill and Williams, 2011; 2014). Potential benefits of sustainable tourism activities – such as eco-tourism and rural tourism, which are most often associated with areas comprising special nature reserves (Stojanović, 2003; 2005a, 2005b) are, in turn, often seen as having a significant role in advancement of sustainable rural communities and the prosperity to ailing agriculture and economy in Vojvodina. This is widely recognized in the literature pertaining to causal relations between the growth of tourism in rural Serbia and particularly agricultural Vojvodina (Jegdić, 2010; Pajvančić and Markov, 2011; Muhi, 2013; Mulec and Wise, 2013; Novković, Mutavdžić and Vukelić, 2013). Nevertheless, still little is known about how sustainable tourism grows in destination areas which include nature reserves and rural communities, and how certain institutions and stakeholders influence the tourism development trajectory, which is where this study aspires to contribute.
When special nature reserves in Vojvodina are concerned, among five of them, the “Carska Bara” reserve has made most progress in terms of tourism (Stojanović, 2003). Therefore, tracing and presenting its development path as well as elucidating on relational interactions between the Reserve, local tourism businesses, and the overall place of public sector within the destination area may serve as an example of tourism-related practices that can be improved, emulated, or even avoided by tourism stakeholders in other destinations with similar characteristics.

2. THEORETICAL SETTING

The section first provides an outline of evolutionary economic geography and its approaches relevant for this study, namely ‘path dependence’ and ‘co-evolution’. That subsection is followed by a discussion on how these concepts have been applied within tourism studies, with a focus on the theoretical frameworks proposed by Ma and Hassink (2013). The last subsection provides the framework that is to be utilized in describing the tourism evolution and relational exchange in the “Carska Bara” destination area.

2.1 Evolutionary economic geography – an overview

Economic geography as a study domain examines uneven economic activities that occur across space (Boschma and Frenken, 2006a). Evolutionary economics appeared in the 1980s as a new strand in the realm of economic geography. That was the result of stepping away from previously entrenched economic analysis and the introduction of the more interdisciplinary approach with contributions from political, social, cultural and natural sciences (Boschma and Frenken, 2006b). Evolutionary economic geography (EEG) has, in turn, stemmed from evolutionary economics, as a new paradigm which sees economy as an evolutionary process that happens in both space and time (Boschma and Frenken, 2006a). As such, it adds the importance of the time dimension to the dimension of space and consequently deals with “the processes by which the economic landscape – the spatial organization of economic production, circulation, exchange, distribution and consumption – is transformed over time” (Boschma and Martin, 2010, p.6).

The literature on EEG recognizes three main theoretical and conceptual frameworks of EEG (Boschma and Martin, 2010): Generalized Darwinism, Complexity theory, and Path dependence. Generalized Darwinism draws on modern evolutionary biology and posits that the evolution of regions is determined by variety, novelty, selection, adaptation of competing agents. Complexity theory regards economic landscapes as multifaceted systems which evolve through emerging, adapting, and self-organizing processes (Sanz-Ibáñez and Clavé, 2014). Arguably, the most commonly used framework is ‘path dependence’ which contends that the evolution of the economic landscape is place-dependent and that previous, historic, developments shape its consequent growth. This growth may, but does not
necessarily have to lead to or include a state of ‘lock-in’ (Martin, 2010; Sanz-Ibáñez and Clavé, 2014).

The concept of ‘lock-in’ as arguably the central idea in the ‘path dependence’ framework, implies the inability of the economic landscape to break away from its previous development path. This leads to inventive, competitive accomplishments, if the ‘lock-in’ is positive as is the case in newer industrial regions, or the ‘lock-in’ represents a negative feature which deems mostly older industrial regions as self-reinforcing, inflexible, and unable to adjust to changing, competitive circumstances (Martin, 2010). The idea of ‘lock-in’ is widely present in the literature on economic geography as well as EEG (Martin and Sunley, 2006; MacKinnon, Cumbers, Pike and Birch, 2007; Martin, 2010). ‘Lock-in’ is defined with three dimensions. The first is functional – which refers to a lock-in, i.e. strong tendency in using certain forms of production, working, or relations to certain suppliers or clients. The second one is cognitive – which implies inability of firms to learn collectively, recognize signs of exogenous change and react to it via innovation or experimenting. The third dimension is political – as such it mirrors the failure of different regional political, business and labor actors to alter policies in order to boost learning and innovation processes (MacKinnon et al., 2007). Although the concept of ‘lock-in’ serves as a viable explanation to declining industries such as, for instance, the steel, coal and iron complexes in the Ruhr region, Germany, during the 1970s and 1980s (MacKinnon et al., 2007), Martin (2010) argues that the idea of ‘lock-in’ restricts the evolutionary approach to ‘path dependence’. He contends that the canonical ‘path dependence’ model (‘Historical accident’ triggers initial firm location > ‘Early path creation’ > ‘Path dependent lock-in’ > ‘Path de-locking’ and possible disappearance of industry) can be replaced with an alternative model where ‘lock-in’ is exchanged for a ‘stable state’ along the development trajectory, still leaving room for evolutionary changes (for more see Martin, 2010).

In relation to ‘lock-in’, the concepts of ‘path creation’ and ‘path plasticity’ are also present in the EEG literature. ‘Early path creation’, as a vital part of the above-mentioned canonical ‘path dependence’ model, implies choosing firm/industry locations by geographic differences in appearance and development of self-reinforcing processes – agglomeration economies (Martin, 2010). Furthermore, along the evolutionary trajectory of a firm/industry ‘path creation’ can also imply a radical, all-encompassing change in an economic landscape. As such, ‘path creation’ concentrates on ‘creative destruction’ and features the break-up of existing institutional stability and the formation of institutions which can ensure further innovations (Strambach, 2008). In the literature on EEG it is also recognized that ‘path creation’ presumes that actors can intentionally create new paths if they can put in motion resources which are necessary for breakthroughs (Strambach, 2008). Conversely, ‘path plasticity’ stands for an incremental, endogenous, more delicate modification in an economic system, where human factor plays an important role in utilizing the existing resources in the process of adjustment of the economic landscape (Strambach, 2008; Sanz-Ibáñez and Clavé, 2014). Strambach’s study on German software industry is one of the most prominent studies where the concept of ‘path plasticity has been applied (2008). While iterating that ‘path plasticity does not dispute ‘path dependency’ or deliberate ‘path creation’, Strambach examines entrenched, unfavorable institutional settings of the national innovation system in German software industry, and the slow evolution of these institutions. They do not break from their path, but over time institutional dynamics change, new
elements are added, which in the context of German software industry leads to the international recognition and competitiveness of customized business software, a sub-sector of this industry. Ultimately, the customized business software industry serves as an illustration of innovation and effective change in the otherwise disadvantageous institutional circumstances (Strambach, 2008).

Nevertheless, ‘path dependence’ persists as the most prominent concept in EEG (Strambach, 2008; Martin and Sunley, 2006; Martin 2010). It has been widely applied across different industrial areas with the aim of analyzing and understanding the mechanisms and dynamics of change at levels of firms, sectors, and on different spatial scales (Strambach, 2008). This concept has especially been applied to describe why certain industrial areas decline (Martin and Sunley, 2006). One such explicit example is the overall regional decline surrounding the Detroit automobile industry, which depended exclusively on three firms - Chrysler, Ford and General Motors, and few industrial sectors. These circumstances eventually caused a lock-in, failure to diversify, the all-embracing loss of dynamism and competitiveness of the industry and the decline of the encompassing region (Breinlich, Ottaviano and Temple, 2013).

Along with ‘path dependence’, the notion of ‘co-evolution’ is also significant, as co-evolution itself always appears alongside evolution (Schamp, 2010). Schamp (2010) contends that ‘co-evolution’ can be viewed from two perspectives. The first one sees ‘co-evolution’ as emergence of populations on the smaller, micro-economic level, while the second one perceives the whole economy as one evolving system, on the macro-economic level (Schamp, 2010). In the context of economic geography, the first perception of ‘co-evolution’ is more relevant, since here, ‘co-evolution’ demands a clear-cut distinction of ‘what is co-evolving with what’ (Schamp, 2010, p.432) and ‘how intense the process is and whether there is a bi-direction of causality’ (Malerba, 2006, in Schamp, 2010, p.436). As such, it focuses on relatively simultaneous and causal development paths of structures, such as firms, institutions or even regions, that are space-bound (Schamp, 2010). This concept has, similarly to ‘path dependence’, been so far applied in various industrial sectors with the aim of analyzing the development of competing technologies, organizations and institutions (Schamp, 2010). Like the application of the ‘path dependence’ concept, ‘co-evolution’ has been employed in old industrialized areas such as the German Ruhr region as well as German, British and Italian textile industries, where sectors are historically co-localized within local systems of production (Schamp, 2010). More recently, ‘co-evolution’ has been analyzed within firms in the ‘core sector’ of a local production system, and in the increasingly present concept of ‘clusters’, such as the German packaging industry, Silicon Valley in California, US, or the Cambridge phenomenon, UK (Schamp, 2010), where a cluster of high-technology firms, focusing on electronics, biotechnology and software is located. To sum, in evolutionary economics, the ‘co-evolutionary’ approach has been suitable in integrating both micro- and macro-processes. Hence, it has been providing a better understanding of complexities of socially embedded changes (Dietz, Burns and Buttel, 1990) alike ones occurring across economic landscapes and proving to be a significant tool of analysis within EEG.

The relevant EEG literature also recognizes certain issues regarding the concepts of ‘path dependence’ and ‘co-evolution’. Issues around ‘path dependence’ for instance, relate to
notions whether there are different types and degrees of path dependence, and how new
paths emerge/are created (Martin and Sunley, 2006). When ‘co-evolution’ is concerned, it
is recognized that a more detailed, exclusive approach to the analysis of inter-relations
between populations/firms is necessary, which in turn implies a better thought-through
selection of cases where this concept can be applied. This indicates that co-evolution does
not occur among all actors involved, but rather where this process is visibly mutual
(Schamp, 2010).

Notwithstanding these matters, ‘path dependence’ and ‘co-evolution’ have been employed
in in EEG as relevant concepts that can elucidate on dynamic development processes of
economic landscapes wherein these processes are spatially and temporally dependent. As
such, ‘path dependence’ and ‘co-evolution’ have successively found their new avenues of
application. This is evident in the studies of tourism where potential for exploring tourism
industry paired with economic development has been recognized (Milne and Ateljevic,
2001), and development of conceptual links between research in tourism and economic
geography has been encouraged (Ioannides, 2006).

2.2 Evolutionary economic geography and tourism studies

Building on the proposed linking of tourism and economic geography, Hjalager (2000)
draws a comparison between tourism destinations and industrial districts acknowledging
some elementary spatial and structural similarities between the two. In a similar manner,
Ma and Hassink (2013) recognize that, in line with manufacturing industries, tourism is
also resource-based, and its economic activities are grouped in accordance with the relevant
market. Hence, the authors support the complementarity of economic geography, and
subsequently EEG with tourism geography, where tourism geography focuses on tourism-
induced dynamics within destinations that happen in time (Ma and Hassink, 2013).

2.2.1 ‘Path dependence’ and ‘co-evolution’ in tourism studies

In their study, which empirically illustrates the case of the Gold Coast, Australia, Ma and
Hassink (2013) contend that the combined EEG-based concepts of path dependence and co-
evolution provide a substantial move forward when tourism area evolution as proposed by
Butler’s model (Butler, 1980) is concerned. The authors maintain that EEG literature which
addresses rise and decline of industrial areas bears similarities with the rise and decline of
tourism areas, as analyzed in the relevant tourism literature, and most notably via Butler’s
tourism area life cycle model (TALC) (Ma and Hassink, 2013). Butler’s TALC model is
originally based on the concept of the product life cycle (Butler, 2006a) and comprises six
stages: exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, and stagnation, which leads
either to the destination rejuvenation or decline (Butler, 1980). Although widely applied,
the TALC model has also been theoretically expanded and criticized (see, for example,
Butler 2006a; 2006b). It is along these lines that Ma and Hassink propose EEG concepts of
‘path dependence’ and ‘co-evolution’ as viable frameworks in settling certain TALC
shortcomings.
They argue that the application of ‘path dependence’ and ‘lock-in’ can more effectively explain destination area decline than the concept of ‘carrying capacity’ which is utilized in the original TALC model. This is since ‘carrying capacity’ serves better as the tool in planning and management activities in older destinations with the aim of alleviating grave environmental effects tourism activities pose, rather than justifying the overall decline of the destination areas (Ma and Hassink, 2013). In addition, ‘path dependence’ and ‘lock-in’ are useful in delineating tourism destination area decline since ‘lock-in’ can offer three rationales. The stagnation or fall of destination may be due to the cognitive ‘lock-in’ – negative destination image; political ‘lock-in’ – strict policies or unfavorable role of the government; or functional ‘lock-in’ – supplier-consumer relations in the tourism supply chain which have certain hierarchy (Ma and Hassink, 2013).

‘Co-evolution’, on the other hand, can assist more successfully in defining the ideas of ‘life cycle’ and ‘evolution’, as these concepts are not delineated in the TALC model. Still, Butler himself notes that destination evolutionary processes are continuous, and may involve different life cycles, some of which emerge, while others may cease to exist (Singh, 2011), which is reminiscent of the idea of ‘co-evolution’ in EEG. Finally, as the TALC model does not clarify the distinction between ‘tourism area’ and ‘tourism product’, ‘co-evolution’ is deemed as an appropriate framework again, since it implies a series of interrelated populations, which destinations apparently are because they comprise various natural, economic, political and other elements (Ma and Hassink, 2013). Moreover, the idea of ‘co-evolution’ takes into consideration intricate development processes on both micro- and macro-levels (Ma and Hassink, 2013). Hence, both ‘path dependence’ and ‘co-evolution’ may represent feasible conceptual tools in describing and comprehending complex processes along tourism destination area developmental trajectories.

Therefore, integrating the EEG concepts and the TALC model the authors offer two conceptual frameworks which describe tourism area development. First, they draw on Martin’s (2010) work where he proposes four stages and two potential ones when industrial path dependence is concerned: preformation, path creation, path development and path which leads to either a stable state or a dynamic process (Martin, 2010; Ma & Hassink, 2013). Martin (2010) himself deliberates that the model he proposes diverges from the established ‘path dependence’ design applied in spatial industrial evolution. As mentioned in the previous section, Martin (2010) argues that the concept of ‘lock-in’ restricts the actual evolutionary approach in the original model, because it implies a stable and continuous stage, rather than ‘change’ which is again crucial within the idea of ‘evolution’. Hence, instead of integrating the notion of ‘lock-in’ in his altered model, Martin (2010) introduces two optional stages following the development phase, noting that should ‘lock-in’ if utilized would be valid only in the ‘path as movement to stable state’ stage. Ma and Hassink (2013), however, do not discus Martin’s above-mentioned reasoning behind the alternative model and they proceed in proposing their alternative path dependence concept in the context of tourism area development (Figure 1, p.13).

The theoretical frame schematizes how and under what conditions destination areas evolve, starting with given preconditions (e.g. spatial, natural, economic). The ‘preformation phase’ is characterized by the given preconditions, policies, locational advantage and experiences
of adventurers. This phase is followed by ‘path creation’ and ‘path development’ phase, respectively. The ‘path creation’ phase denotes involvement of local residents, entrepreneurs and governments, who join in on establishing new tourism paths. These paths evolve further and result in increasing return effects and spatial dispersion of local tourism paths during the ‘path development’ phase. One of the following phases is movement to ‘path as dynamic process’ leading to incremental path-dependent evolution, adaptive and innovative processes which consequently result in creation of new cycle. The second option is ‘movement to stable state’, which implies entrenchment of main tourism products and institutions, eventually leading to the stasis or decline of local tourism paths (Ma and Hassink, 2013).

The authors argue that this ‘path dependence’ model is applicable in two respects. The first utilization is within the destination itself and it explains the creation and evolution of tourism products, industry or institutions in a given area, while the second application focuses on how a certain type of tourism product or sector develops across manifold destinations (Ma and Hassink, 2013). Everything considered, growth of tourism destination areas represents an active, path-dependent progression by which different tourism products, sectors and institutions potentially co-evolve along their unraveling courses (Ma and Hassink, 2013).

Thus, as tourism destination areas are complex systems that comprise elements such as products, sectors and institutions which all exist, operate and interact on macro-, and micro scale (Ma & Hassink, 2013) the authors also propose a co-evolutionary framework of a tourism destination (Figure 2, p.14). By iterating that the co-evolutionary approach serves well in analyzing the complex co-existence and development of products (comprising attractions and services), institutions (with their endogenous and exogenous environment),

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**Figure 1: Alternative path dependence model**

*Source: Ma and Hassink (2013), based on Martin (2010)*
as well as sectors (private, that of firms, and public, i.e. the government), Ma and Hassink (2013) argue that the three categories with varied levels of interaction are also path-dependent and specific to each destination.

The authors make clear distinctions and elaborate on what elements constitute products, institutions and sectors, and which elements are encompassed by macro-, and micro scale, respectively. Still, they do not discuss conceptual differences between ‘co-evolution’ and ‘interaction’, other than showing that interactions take place on micro-, while co-evolution occurs on macro-levels in tourism destination area development. As previously seen in the EEG outline section, Schamp (2010) regards ‘co-evolution’ as a ‘bi-causal’, i.e. mutual development of involved populations, however, this is not elaborated on in the Ma and Hassink’s (2013) theoretical ‘co-evolutionary’ frame. In the subsequent application of the ‘co-evolutionary’ concept for the purposes of this study however, ‘co-evolution’- and ‘interaction’-related processes will be delineated in an altered manner, as the destination area in this study comprises one main unit of analysis (the nature reserve) and several sub-units (rural settlements in the vicinity) and because the study focuses on sectoral (public, private) aspect of the destination.

![Co-evolutionary process of Tourism Area Development](image)

**Figure 2: Co-evolutionary process of Tourism Area Development**  
*Source: Ma and Hassink (2013)*

2.2.2 Further applications of EEG concepts in tourism studies

The previously delineated alternative ‘path dependence’ and ‘co-evolutionary’ models are applied in the case of Gold Coast, Australia (Ma and Hassink, 2013), while the proposed
‘path dependence’ framework alone is applied in identifying the evolution of tourism products, sectors and institutions in the Guilin tourism destination area in China (Ma and Hassink, 2014).

In the Australian destination, the path phases of preformation, creation, lock-in, development, new path creation and another development phase have been detected throughout the course of over a century, starting in the 1880s. Its path development has been characterized as non-linear, with continually changing evolutionary trajectories and varying levels of co-evolution and interaction among tourism products, sectors, and institutions (Ma and Hassink, 2013). The product variety in the Gold Coast destination area had increased throughout its path stages, nevertheless, the attractiveness had decreased. In the realm of sectors, both firm size and the government involvement had grown. When institutions are concerned, unsurprisingly, informal rules had evolved into standardized and formal regulations among internal institutions, while external environments had turned into competitive market in the latest development stage (Ma and Hassink, 2013). Although the methodological approach was not indicated in the case of Gold Coast, it can be argued that the analysis was conducted based on the existing secondary data, whereas, information obtained by stakeholders experienced in the Gold Coast tourism industry would have given a more dynamic and comprehensive insight into the evolutionary trajectories of this destination.

The case of Guilin, China (Ma and Hassink, 2014), however, compensates in that regard, and offers a comprehensive description of the path-dependent processes in this destination area. Rich natural and cultural assets of Guilin represent a strong, resource-based path dependence of this tourism destination area, which followed respective development trajectories, and were both enhanced with man-made products in the process. The intensive establishment and promotion of natural assets was prominent in the early stages of path dependence, which had started in the late 1970s, while cultural product development, and contribution of man-made products in this tourism area followed in the subsequent decades (Ma and Hassink, 2014). The study results imply a noticeable institutional path dependence, administration- and policy-oriented, present in both public and private sectors (Ma and Hassink, 2014). Public sector had been involved in the destination development from the very beginning of tourism growth in Guilin, and had evolved with occurrence of state-owned, collective-owned and finally limited- or stock tourism businesses, denoting administrative path dependence. Policy incentives had, in turn, prompted increasing emergence of small private and joint venture firms, consequently resulting in diversified private as well as foreign businesses (Ma and Hassink, 2014). Summarizing the overall progression in Guilin tourism development, the authors contend that external influences, such as policy regulations, need to be given more consideration in analyses of tourism destination development, as they can impact destination areas as much as endogenous factors (Ma and Hassink, 2014), which is evident in the case study of Guilin.

Apart from the above research studies, there are a number of empirical case studies which have employed EEG notions within a tourism setting (for an overview list of tourism studies utilizing EEG see Brouder, 2014). For instance, Pastras and Bramwell (2013) in the case study of Athens, Greece explore the significance of government involvement and institutionalism in the context of co-evolution of mechanisms of ‘path dependence’ and
‘path creation’ that shape tourism policies and measures relevant in the period prior to, during and after the Athens Olympic Games, between 2000 and 2008. The Greek case identifies ‘path dependence’ in the often-unfavorable social interactions between the state government and actors from public and private sector during the processes of tourism marketing of the post-Olympic Athens (Pastras and Bramwell, 2013). Furthermore, ‘path creation’ in these interactions is also detected, as the government made strategic preferences and chose certain marketing strategies over others, frequently failing to produce feasible results (Pastras and Bramwell, 2013).

Similarly, Gill and Williams (2011, 2014) longitudinally investigate the role of governance and management applying ‘path dependency’ and ‘new path creation’ framework in the mountain resort of Whistler, Canada. In the Canadian case, the path-dependent, pro-growth oriented governance subsequently evolves and creates a new, sustainable tourism development path which is more in tune with community-led governance (Gill and Williams, 2011). In their latter work (2014), the authors noted the importance of entrepreneurs in creating new paths for destination development in the same Canadian resort destination. This is again in line with Brouder and Fullerton (2015), who in the Canadian context, respectively, find that knowledgeable, experienced and actively involved private-sector based entrepreneurship can make a difference in co-evolutionary destination development. In the case study of tourism development of the Niagara region, for instance, Brouder and Fullerton (2015) note that the presence of an iconic sight such as Niagara Falls, represents an opportunity as well as a hindrance for the involvement of a larger number of tourism stakeholders, especially the peripheral ones. The same is true for potential development of a more diversified tourism offer, which can go beyond the well-established path dependence on the emblematic Falls. It is found that proactive involvement of certain local stakeholders in administrative positions of the region turns out to be the key in connecting smaller tourism businesses and enhancing their mutual communication, which eventually results in a more integrated and diversified tourism offer, where tourism- as well as lesser known industrial- and agricultural industries can co-evolve (Brouder and Fullerton, 2015).

Along with ‘path dependence’, the notion of ‘path plasticity’ is present in tourism studies and analyzed by Halkier and Therkelsen (2013) and Clavé and Wilson (2016). ‘Path plasticity’ in the tourism studies’ context represents a more refined, gradual and flexible manner of diversification of destination products, and services as opposed to a new path creation, which, while representing a fundamental focus change, also runs the risk of a new dependency and a negative ‘lock-in’ (Clavé and Wilson, 2016). It is against this background and while expanding the geographical reach that Halkier and Therkelsen (2013) and Clavé and Wilson (2016), analyze tourism evolution in North Jutland, Denmark, and Costa Daurada, Catalonia, Spain, respectively. The Danish case, for instance, concludes that ‘path plasticity’ is detectable despite the strong institutional setting, and that involved actors keenly participate in innovative developments within that setting (Halkier and Therkelsen, 2013). These conclusions are drawn upon the analysis of previously declining leisure coastal tourism in northern Denmark, where two major actions on the national level, including both public and private sector, were crucial. The first one was mirrored in government-led, incremental institutional changes which had eventually resulted in tourism rejuvenation in the destination, as new areas were designated for holiday
homes, expanding the previous limited summer-house stock, however bearing in mind environmental impacts on the fragile coastal ecological setting. The second one was the nation-based initiative which called for extending the leisure tourism season on the coast throughout the year, therefore further involving existing tourism-related stakeholders in private sector. These actors started providing new nature- and culture-related services now available outside the designated summer season, nevertheless within the existing infrastructural setting, confirming the use and development of ‘path plasticity’ (Halkier and Therkelsen, 2013).

Innovation, as a driver of positive destination development is present not only among stakeholders hailing from the same i.e. tourism industry, but also from inter-sectoral collaboration and knowledge exchange, as is the case presented by Larsson and Lindström (2014). Their study centers on Orust, the Swedish west coast community where the tradition of maritime and leisure boat manufacturing meets tourism sector and stimulates novelty in the production of experience (Larsson and Lindström, 2014). Overcoming the divide and path-dependent processes present in the ‘old’, in this case maritime industry, and the ‘new’ the tourism industry, represents an important step in improving regional economies, especially in those regions where existing, agricultural and manufacturing industries, for instance, are deteriorating (Larsson and Lindström, 2014). This notion is supported by Randelli, Romei and Tortora (2014), who examine the evolution of rural tourism in Tuscany, Italy, while employing EEG. They postulate that rural tourism represents a newly created path in the evolutionary process which is path-dependent given the strong ties to spatially and historically bound agriculture in this Italian region. Authors contend that rural tourism acts as an important drive in regional development, enhancing the multi-functionality of rural areas while generating processes on local, regional and macro i.e. European levels (Randelli, Romei and Tortora, 2014).

When protected areas are concerned, there have been few studies that employ EEG concept, however, one example is the study of Bramwell and Cox (2009). Against the backdrop of a UK-based national park, Bramwell and Cox combine ‘stage approach’ with ‘path dependency’/‘path creation’ framework and examine temporal dynamics of formal tourism partnerships evolution. The authors contend that there are two forms of tourism partnerships, namely the ones with organization based on internal arrangements and activities of the participants, and those, where there are relations between partnerships and their surrounding external environment (Bramwell and Cox, 2009). While the ‘stage approach’ depicts the phases of the partnerships from their formation to their dissolvent, the ‘path dependence’ concept examines how these partnerships evolve temporarily and whether they instigate new path creation and innovation in the process (Bramwell and Cox, 2009). Moreover, since the concept of ‘path dependence’ focuses on temporal dimensions and changes, it is utilized to detect whether these partnerships can influence decision-making and subsequently the governing and policy environment. In the research study of the UK national park, the results indicated this was the case, since the established partnership eventually contributed to meliorating disagreements regarding tourism and nature conservation in this British national park (Bramwell and Cox, 2009).

While elements pertinent to EEG and found in the above-described case studies can also relate to the case of the “Carska Bara” destination, it is the contributions of Ma and Hassink
(2013), subsequently applied in Ma and Hassink (2014), that seem to provide the most facilitating theoretical and conceptual bases. Therefore, the Serbian case study builds up on these bases, altered to fit the designated destination area.

The following arguments support the view why the conceptual framework of the “Carska Bara” destination area departs from the theoretical frame of ‘path dependency’ and ‘co-evolution’ described in the Ma and Hassink (2013) study. The first is (i) the spatial and organizational landscape of this case study. In general, considering natural, socio-economic and other factors, the Reserve destination area differs from the Gold Coast-, Guilin-, and other cases presented, however, all destinations represent unique, heterogeneous systems, where pre-existing natural resources and evolving social, cultural and economic circumstances are evident. The second argument and the third argument are interconnected and respectively refer to (ii) the role of state government and public sector in general, as well as the importance of local stakeholders for Serbian tourism in rural areas (Đenadić, Muhi and Jovanović, 2016) and (iii) much needed deepening, more productive communication and collaboration between public and private sector (Pavlović, Medić and Tešić, 2015; Đenadić, Muhi and Jovanović, 2016).

Therefore, the study firstly focuses on applying and testing the alternative path dependence model on the tourism development path in the Reserve as the epicenter of the tourism activity in the destination area. Secondly, the ‘co-evolutionary’ concept intends to explain the reasons behind the evolutionary processes in the Reserve destination area, and specifically how co-evolutionary (i.e. mutually bi-causal) and interactive exchanges between public and private sectors have come to shape the development of tourism in the “Carska Bara” tourism destination area. Prior to applying these concepts in the “Carska Bara” case, following is the description of the delineated tourism destination area.

3. DESTINATION AREA SETTING

In defining the destination area for this study, the concept of ‘ecorural destination’ as proposed by Jegdić (2010) is utilized. Jegdić contends that the existence of ecological network of dispersed natural destinations surrounded with small rural settlements rich in cultural heritage facilitate the formation of ‘ecorural destination’. There are several such ecological networks in the Vojvodina Province. However, due to their rather small individual territories and the importance of the nature conservation in them, these ecological networks cannot stand alone as eco-destinations (Jegdić, 2010). Therefore, inclusion of adjacent rural communities which are spatially, historically, and socio-economically bound to these eco-networks is justified, and results in the formation of ‘ecorural destinations’. The experience offer in ecorural destinations includes a varied tourism product comprising nature, culture, arts and crafts, adventure as well as sports and recreation. Such ecorural destinations and the integrated tourism product both benefit sustainability of protected areas and contribute to the prosperity of local rural communities (Jegdić, 2010). The formation of an ecorural destination can also be supported by Stojanović (2005), who, while examining the five special nature reserves of the province of
Vojvodina, iterates that Vojvodina wetlands hold significance not only for the inhabiting species but also for adjacent communities that are historically, culturally and economically bound to these precious ecosystems. Special Nature Reserve “Carska Bara” as a UNESCO protected area and a RAMSAR site (Ramsar Sites - Wetlands of International Importance, author’s note) with the encompassing and surrounding rural communities – villages of Еčka, Lukino Selo, Stajićevo, Belo Blato and Perlez exemplifies an ‘ecorural destination’.

Geographically, the Reserve and the designated rural settlements belong to the municipality of Zrenjanin, in the Central Banat District, within the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, in the northern part of the Republic of Serbia (Figures 3 and 4, p.19). Zrenjanin is territorially the second largest municipality on the national level, comprising 23 settlements. It is the core of the Banat district, with predominantly agricultural and food industry. Although the municipality did inherit favorable infrastructure owing to its economic and industrial magnitude in former Yugoslavia, the 1990s and the deterioration of socio-economic conditions bore impact on this municipality as well, and these circumstances have since been stagnating (Generalni plan Zrenjanina, 2006). Similar trends are also detectable in the demographics of the municipality, with the obvious population decrease between the censuses of 1981 and 2011 (Table 1, p.20).
Table 1: Population in the study area by selected census years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census year</th>
<th>Zrenjanin Municipality</th>
<th>Belo Blato</th>
<th>Ećka</th>
<th>Lukino Selo</th>
<th>Perlež</th>
<th>Stajićevo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>139,300</td>
<td>1,746</td>
<td>5,293</td>
<td>703</td>
<td>4,283</td>
<td>1,993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>136,778</td>
<td>1,762</td>
<td>5,172</td>
<td>643</td>
<td>3,880</td>
<td>2,058</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>132,051</td>
<td>1,477</td>
<td>4,513</td>
<td>598</td>
<td>3,818</td>
<td>1,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>123,362</td>
<td>1,342</td>
<td>3,999</td>
<td>498</td>
<td>3,383</td>
<td>1,941</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


This unfavorable economic and political climate along with other factors, namely low investment shares, and overall declining standard of living, have left a trace in the tourism and hospitality industry of the municipality (Savet za strateški razvoj Opštine Zrenjanin, 2005). In the process of revitilizing the Zrenjanin tourism and hospitality industry, and further utilizing its capacities mirrored in its natural, cultural and historic heritage, SNR “Carska Bara” and tourist potentials located in the delineated rural settlements certainly play a role.

The epicenter of the tourist activity for the entire designated ecorural destination is certainly SNR “Carska Bara” (Figure 5, p.21) wherein the first zone to be designated as possessing exquisite natural value was assigned in 1955 (Galamboš, L., Pil, N., Stojšić, V. and Perić, R, 2010). SNR “Carska Bara” today occupies the area of 4,726ha (47.26km²) of protected land, situated on the alluvial plain between the Tisa and the Begej rivers. It comprises five cadaster communities – Lukino Selo, Stajićevo, Belo Blato, Knićanin, and Perlež. Of the entire Reserve territory 3,017ha are designated as state property and the remaining 1,709ha as private, and other forms of land property (Vlada Republike Srbije, 2011). A regime of the three-level protection is designated throughout the Reserve where the first degree of protection covers 670ha (14,18%), the second 1910ha (40,41%) and the third degree of protection is established across the remaining 2146ha (45,41%) of the Reserve (Galamboš et al., 2010). All activities within the Reserve area – agriculture, hunting, fishing, arboriculture, tourism and recreation – across the designated zones with the three degrees of protection are regulated on basis of laws on nature protection of Republic of Serbia enacted by state Ministry of Agriculture and Environmental Protection and overseen by Institute for Nature Conservation of Vojvodina Province. Commercial Fishery “Ećka” Co. is in direct charge of executing the outlined regulations and objectives while managing the Reserve (for more detailed schematic representation of hierarchical and organizational structure see Appendix, Section D). When tourism-related activities are concerned, as specified by the three-level protection regime, they are permissible within the second- (controlled movements of visitors, spatially and seasonally restricted presentation and education) and third-degree protection zone (recreational-, sport fishing, organized tour reception, development of sustainable tourism) (Galamboš et al., 2010).
Figure 5: SNR “Carska Bara” ecological map
(Red: 1st degree protection zone; Yellow: 2nd degree protection zone; Dark green/dotted tree symbol: 3rd degree protection zone)
Source: www.zrenjanin.rs

The following table (Table 2, p.22) summarizes main features of the five rural settlements of Lukino Selo, Ečka, Stajičevo, Belo Blato and Perlez in relation to their respective general characteristics and tourism-related aspects (for maps and photographic representations see Appendix, Section B).
**Table 2: Overview of the rural settlements in the “Carska Bara” destination area**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rural settlement</th>
<th>Tourism aspects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Lukino Selo**  | • The Fishery is main tourism-related stakeholder, runs tourism- and recreation-related activities in area  
• 2-star, bed-and-breakfast type hotel “Sibila”, est. in early 1990s, owned and managed by the Commercial fishery |
| **Ečka**        | • Castle-hunting manor, built between in early 19th century, presently accommodation facility with irregular operation  
• Three churches from 18th and 19th century, designated important cultural property of Vojvodina Province  
• Art Colony, est. in 1956, held annually |
| **Stajićevo**   | • Only noticeable tourism-related stakeholder is family-run enterprise “Tiganjica” Ethno Village where complex comprises “Trofej” Restaurant, accommodation facilities with six rooms, and a spacious old-style farmyard |
| **Belo Blato**  | • Most diverse tourism supply in destination area  
• Approx. 10 annual events  
• Home to Ethno Center, completed in early 2000s, and International Research Center  
• Family-run agricultural estate “Lujza” (traditional Banat husbandry and gastronomy)  
• Several accommodation providers |
| **Perlez**      | • No delineated and marketed tourism product  
• Offers tourism potential  
• Century-old orthodox church with iconostasis painted by famous Serbian Realist painter Uroš Predić (1857–1953)  
• Village fair held annually |

Source: Đarmati, Puzović, Đureković-Tešić, Stojanović, Marić, and Vig, 2008; Čakalo-Momirov, 2009; Ečka A.D., no date; Selo Perlez pa u Banatu, 2012; Ćurčić and Jovanović, 2014; Močević, 2015; Rtvsantos, 2016; Zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture Zrenjanin, 2017; Adapted and designed by author
4. METHODOLOGICAL SETTING

This section provides the methodological framework for the study. It first briefly addresses methodological approaches employed in the relevant tourism-related research studies where EEG was utilized. This is followed by delineating the overall methodology of this study and by the description of methods applied. Subsequently, subsections on the collection of data and their analysis as well as on methodological limitations, respectively, are presented.

Ma and Hassink in their application of ‘path dependence’ and ‘co-evolution’ concepts in the case of Gold Coast, Australia, focus primarily on the development of the theoretical framework around these two concepts. The authors subsequently apply them in the analysis of Gold Coast tourism destination area development without elaborating on the methodology. However, in their subsequent case study of path dependence and the growth of tourism in the Guilin area, China, they employ semi-structured interviews with the stakeholders involved, as well as the use of supporting documents such as academic papers, professional reports, and statistical yearbooks (Ma and Hassink, 2014).

The combination of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with key informants from both public and private sector, with analysis of available documents, statistical data, stakeholder meeting minutes is the prevalent methodological setting in multiple studies where EEG is applied in the context of tourism (e.g. Bramwell and Cox, 2009; Pastras and Bramwell, 2013; Larson and Lindström, 2014; Brouder and Fullerton, 2015). Additionally, in the studies of Bramwell and Cox (2009) and Brouder and Fullerton (2015) stakeholder meeting- and participant meeting observations were also conducted. In scrutinizing the evolution of governance models in the Canadian Whistler mountain resort, Gill and Williams (2011; 2014) also utilized results obtained from longitudinal empirical studies that covered the period of over two decades along with resident surveys, arguably making the two studies most elaborate in terms of utilized methods.

All of the previously mentioned studies were methodologically designed as ‘case studies’ which utilized different and multiple methods and data sources, according to their respective contexts. Such comprehensive ‘case study’ approaches are suitable as they facilitate understanding of complex evolutionary paths and related interactions across tourism destination areas. This study, given its thematic scope, available resources and allotted production time, also employs the ‘case study’ approach, semi-structured, in-depth interviews as sources of primary data, and relevant documents, internet-based information, etc. as sources of supporting data.

4.1 Methodological approach and methods employed

In the context of academic research in leisure and tourism, Veal (2006) posits that both quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches are found, where, broadly, quantitative research delivers limited information on a large number of cases, whilst qualitative research offers rich, in-depth information on (relatively) few cases. The latter is further expanded by Mason (2002) and Ritchie and Lewis (2003) who contend that the
exploration of multiple dimensions of social world, social reality/realities, experiences of its participants, as well as social processes, their complexity and dynamics are arguably best undertaken via qualitative research. With these notions in mind and set against the backdrop of this study and its research questions which center on a micro tourism destination, qualitative approach is deemed justified. Furthermore, since the prospective research project is to explore evolution, development, connectedness, social actors, producers – which are some of the ontological elements Mason (2002) designates as parts of social reality or realities, the chosen methodology for this particular study is suitably qualitative.

The research study is contextual (also known as ‘descriptive’) and explanatory in character. Contextuality serves in both identifying and describing phenomena in the social reality, i.e. the notions of ‘path dependence’ and ‘co-evolution’ in this particular case, while the explanatory character facilitates discovering what the relationships between entities are (Oancea, A., no date), which is fitting for this research study as it aims to discover the dynamics of co-evolution and relational exchange among the designated actors in relation to “Carska Bara” reserve destination area. Building on the characteristics of contextual and explanatory studies, Yin (1994, 2004) posits that the use of case study approach is appropriate in either or both descriptive and explanatory studies, as well as for research aiming to generate first-hand, in-depth grasp of people and events in the contemporary setting (Yin, 1994; Yin, 2004). As these notions align with the research design of this study, it is designated as a case study, centering on single case i.e. the SNR “Carska Bara” destination area. Even though the relevant literature points out (Yin, 1994; Tellis, 1997; Zainal, 2007) that one important disadvantage of the case study as a methodological approach is the inability for scientific generalization due to small sampling sizes, this does not necessarily apply to the “Carska Bara” destination area as the aim is the application and testing of a theoretical setting and not the generalization potentially applicable in other cases. Furthermore, there is also justification for employing a single-case study and that is the time-dimension, which is a feature common in the case study approach (Yin, 1994). As previously mentioned, the time aspect is significant in EEG as well. Moreover, since the study is theoretically and conceptually based on the EEG notions of ‘path dependence’ and ‘co-evolution’, these are tested within the case study. This rationale according to Yin (1994) defines a case study as critical in type. Hence, this research study is also critical since it aims to apply and test the two EEG concepts as proposed by Ma and Hassink (2013). Both Yin (1994) and Rowley (2002) emphasize the importance of delineating unit(s) of analysis as they make basis/bases for the case (Rowley, 2002). The main unit of analysis is SNR “Carska Bara”, complemented by the examination of local tourism-oriented business in the designated rural settlements – as subunits. Therefore, as this case study contains multiple units of analysis, i.e. the main unit and several subunits, it embedded in design, as proposed by Yin (1994).

Data for the study is primary, collected first-hand by the author, and it is supported by complementary existing, previously compiled data. The method utilized for the primary data collection were semi-structured, in-depth interviews, while the complimentary data comprises relevant academic articles, books, institutional documents, annual reports, newspaper articles, tourism-related websites and other published material pertinent to the research project. This type of combined approach has been widely utilized in case studies.
employing EEG in tourism studies as illustrated at the beginning of the section. The combination of primary data, in the form of interviews, and supporting complimentary data arguably gives a solid insight into tourism destination development, since interviewees offer their professional accounts regarding development trajectories, related nuances, as well as personal accounts on experiences with other relevant tourism stakeholders involved. Furthermore, association with the supporting data offers a more holistic view of the phenomena scrutinized and, subsequently, cross-referencing (triangulation) with interviewees’ accounts.

4.2 Data collection

Following the guidelines for semi-structured, in-depth interviews as proposed in academic literature on qualitative methods (Crang & Cook, 1995; Mason, 2002; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003; Flowerdew & Martin, 2005; Veal, 2006; Adams & Cox, 2008) interview question templates were designed to elucidate on the aim of the study and the outlined research questions. The interviews were conducted by the author between February 13th to March 14th, 2017. Seven interviews were done in person, in respondents’ place of work, one was conducted via e-mail correspondence, and one was done both in person and via e-mail correspondence. The interviews conducted in person lasted between sixty and ninety minutes. All interviews were conducted in the respondents’ native Serbian language and those performed in person were audio-recorded, previously obtaining the interviewees’ permission. A document with the key information about the research study as well as the rights and contribution pertaining to the respondents was made out by the author and distributed to the interviewees throughout the process of recruitment.

The prospective interviewees were selected purposely via desk-based research, after considering both their potential in information provision as well as the spatial organization of the tourism-related business in the destination area. The targeted and subsequently recruited respondents are broadly divided into three groups: (1) those with direct involvement in the management of tourism in SNR “Carska Bara”, (2) those involved in tourism-oriented business situated in rural settlements encompassing and in the vicinity of the Reserve, as well as (3) those whose involvement in the destination area tourism is based on their profession-affiliated contribution (for overall information on both the respondents and interviews see Appendix, Section A). The recruitment consequently yielded a sample of 9 respondents, eight of which belonging to the first two, with one, as the external informant, belonging to the third category. Also, approximately one-third of the respondents fell into the public sector-, and the remaining two-thirds into the private sector category. The sample size was, given the small geographical scope of the study area; the project execution time-frame (end of January, 2017 to beginning of June, 2017), and resources at hand (self-funded project) arguably both manageable and suitable in terms of obtaining relevant material.

As previously stated, the interview question template was devised in order to generate information addressing the aim of the study and research questions. Given the rather small sample size, interview questions were specifically tailored to suit the profiles of the
respondents (for the full list of interview questions see Appendix, Section C). Even so, in line with the study all-inclusive topic of EEG and the pertaining concepts of ‘path dependence’ and ‘co-evolution’, the broad topics underpinning all interview questions related to: chronological development of tourism and tourism products, sectoral collaborations (public ↔ private; private ↔ private) as well as main challenges and/or obstacles along the development paths of the Reserve and local tourism-related businesses, respectively.

4.3 Data analysis

With the research project being qualitative in its methodology, the approach to data was inductive in terms of advancing from the observations of the phenomena researched to the existing theory on applications of EEG in destination development. The existing theory was conversely examined through the generated primary and supplementing data, adding a deductive reasoning angle, which supports Hyde (2000) who argues that deduction and induction are utilized throughout both qualitative and quantitative research processes, although are not formally acknowledged as such. Also, both primary and supplementary data was combined and triangulated using the EEG frameworks as described in the Theoretical setting section (p.8-18).

Further, data collected from the in-depth interviews was analyzed utilizing ‘thematic analysis’. This is a method which allows data sources, in this particular case – transcribed interview material, to be examined using themes or major concepts (Fox, 2004). Once that the appropriate patterns in the data collected are identified, coding i.e. assigning categories to the themes, concepts and ideas in the textual data takes place (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Given the limited number of interviews conducted the data was manually coded (e.g. via highlighting text portions in different colors, writing codes next to text passages with a certain theme).

In the case of this research study, thematic data analysis began with ‘a priori codes’ or ‘pre-set codes’ – codes that are derived from the conceptual framework (in this case EEG) and research questions. When the concept of ‘path dependence’ is concerned, according to the alternative development path stages, the ‘pre-set codes’ were fixed accordingly: preformation phase, path creation phase, path development phase, lock-in phase, path as stable phase, and path as dynamic process. When the concept of ‘co-evolution’ is concerned, the following ‘pre-set codes’ were appointed: public-private sector co-evolution/interaction and private-private sector co-evolution/interaction. These pre-set codes are therefore delineated by the EEG frameworks and the interview data was coded against these frameworks which consequently meant that the sought-after ‘themes’ were already determined to a greater extent. ‘Emergent’ or ‘open codes’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006) that appeared during the textual data analysis were also considered in the process. Ultimately, only those results which were in strong relation to the study aim were integrated. Throughout the ‘Study findings and discussion’ section, results were illustrated with accordingly transcribed (Conradson, 2005) respondents’ quotes, translated by the author from Serbian into English.
4.4 Methodological limitations

As previously outlined, the ratio of private stakeholders outweighs the ratio of stakeholders from public sector, which poses as a potential methodological constraint, meaning that less perspective is gained from the government-affiliated side, although both sectors are equally significant in contributing to the development of tourism in this destination area. Potentially more respondents could have been recruited from public sector, e.g. local self-government of Zrenjanin municipality to balance out the disproportion. However, during the desk-based respondent research, and the interview processes there were no other potential interviewees identified/snowball-recommended in the Zrenjanin municipality who could have supplied information on circumstances and developments spanning over a longer period of time (e.g. a couple of decades), which would have been useful for this case study. Relatedly, insights from external stakeholders such as travel agencies located in the Zrenjanin municipality as well as elsewhere in Vojvodina province given the popularity of the nature reserve as a destination, would have been of value. Nevertheless, since the focus of this study is predominantly on the stakeholders operating within and in close proximity to the destination, such potential external informants were not considered. In addition, due to the time- and resource constraints, older historical supporting documents and publications which could have supplemented for the stakeholder information were not obtained.

Furthermore, during the interviewee recruitment process, one potential respondent although previously having agreed to participate, eventually failed to take part in the study. This was on the account of the unforeseen (temporary? – unclear to present day, note by author) closure of the business (Kaštel Ečka Hotel, Ečka village). Considering the circumstances, no other respondents affiliated with the business were to be located and contacted. The study results were therefore affected, due to the information gap regarding the hotel and its activities, however, effort was made, throughout the presentation of the results, in compiling and substituting the missing information with other available primary and supplementary data.

Finally, one of the interviews, initially scheduled to be conducted in person, had to be done entirely via e-mail correspondence, due to the continual engagements of the local tourism/hospitality-related business (Ethno Village “Tiganjica”, Stajićevo village). Upon agreement, the interview questions designed for the local tourism/hospitality business (see Appendix, Section 1) were distributed electronically. Relevant responses were obtained, however, due to the nature of the information exchange, there was no opportunity for expanding them in more depth, which may have influenced the data obtained in this manner.

5. STUDY FINDINGS

This section analyzes the concepts of EEG – ‘path dependence’ and ‘co-evolution’ in the setting of the delineated ecorural destination comprising of SNR “Carska Bara” and the encompassing and surrounding rural settlements. First, the evolutionary path of tourism development in the Reserve is presented departing from the alternative path dependence
concept as previously outlined. This evolutionary path is chronologically observed from the ‘preformation phase’ which started with the establishment of the first protected natural zone in the Reserve in 1955 (Galamboš et al., 2010) up to the present time with tourism development having undergone several detectable changes. Second, the co-evolution processes and the interactions between the Reserve and the local tourism business, as well as the local tourism businesses themselves are examined. Levels of involvement of the public sector, predominantly on the municipal level, i.e. Tourism Organization of Zrenjanin City, given the relatively small geographical spread of the destination area are also explored.

5.1 Aspects of the evolutionary path of the Reserve

The importance of wetlands as unique and complex systems of biodiversity and natural resources that are historically, culturally as well as economically linked to human settlements is well recognized in relevant academic literature, especially in the context of wetlands as nature reserves (Stojanović, 2003; 2004, 2005a; 2005b; 2009; Stojanović, Pavić and Mesaroš, 2008), and SNR “Carska Bara” is no exception. In scrutinizing the growth of tourism in a protected area, apart from the above-mentioned relations, the actual development of protection legislations also plays a significant part in both conservation of these ecosystems and in adding to the recognition of their tourism-related potential.

5.1.1 Preformation phase: from 1955 to the middle 1980s

The area comprising the Reserve today has had a long history of human influence due to its natural resources, mirrored in the complex web of water bodies, marshland, forests, meadows and pastures, rich in diverse flora and fauna. These natural preconditions were basis for three most prominent economic human activities in the area, namely management of water resources, fishing and agriculture, which would throughout the course of history give shape to the landscape and consequently to the Reserve as well (Stojanović, Pantelić, Savić, Dolinaj, and Leščesken, 2012). Accordingly, the chronicles of protection of the area, as a crucial factor in human activity regulation, including growth of tourism, have been intricate.

The very first decision regarding protection of these lands was made in 1955, when the site named “Vojtina Mlaka”, situated on the south tip of the Carska Bara bog (bearing the same name as the Reserve today, author’s note) was assigned the protected status owing to its exquisite natural beauty, and in accordance with then pertinent Law on the Protection of Cultural Monuments and Natural Rarities (Stojanović et al., 2012). A decade later, in 1965, the Carska Bara bog was declared ‘Marsh of international importance’ (Mrkša and Milanović, 2007). These pronouncements would subsequently set in motion a number of regulations which gave shape to the Reserve and activities within. The following act on protection, subsequent to the 1955 one, was proclaimed in 1986 by the Decision of Assembly of Zrenjanin Municipality. Stari Begej, the narrow, stagnant tributary of the Begej river as well as the Carska Bara bog were recognized as bearing particular ecological, scientific, educational and tourism significance due to their exceptional and unaltered
biodiversity. As such, they were by the 1986 Decision assigned protection statuses of Regional Park “Stari Begej” and Strict Nature Reserve “Carska Bara”, respectively (Mrkša and Milanović, 2007). Prior to this significant decision, in 1971 the Begej channel was constructed along with an embankment with the aim of draining the lands around the Belo Blato, Lukino Selo and Ečka settlements – and these developments were most crucial in giving shape to SNR “Carska Bara” as it is today (Galamboš et al., 2010).

When tourism-related activities are concerned, in the period between the late 1960’s to 1986 only hunting-related tourism prevailed in the area (Borić, 1992). Since the protected area was not large at the time (1,300ha or approx. 13km² in 1986, author’s note), there were no recorded conflicts stemming from hunting activities taking place around the Reserve (Borić, 1992). All tourism- and hospitality-related activities were the responsibility of an organizational unit which was established within the Fishery in 1975 as hunting tourism started to gain momentum (Kečkemeti, 1992). The year 1986 was when efforts by the tourism/hospitality organizational unit toward implementaiton of more defined tourism products started. According to the present Reserve tourism manager, there were no receptive accommodation facilities that would meet the needs of hunters who used to come from abroad as well, and mostly from Italy. The only restaurant, initially designed for the Commercial Fishery “Ečka” employees and local residents, was in function between 1962 to 1968 and was not meeting the needs of incoming tourists set on hunting in the area (Mihajilović, 1995). Hence they had to be redirected to “Vojvodina” Hotel in downtown city of Zrenjanin as well as Kaštel “Ečka” in Ečka village. This was especially so during the 1970s when hunting tourism was on the rise (Respondent #4).

Therefore, in line with its natural predispositions, and during the stage when the area comprising the Reserve was starting to obtain official recognition in terms of its rich ecosystem, the first visitors were motivated by natural, i.e. hunting resources. Additionally, socio-economic circumstances in the 1970s saw prominent migrations from rural to urban settlements, and the working force in cities had financial means, corporeal mobility as well as sufficient leisure time to engage in recreation and purchase of all-inclusive tours (Borić, 1992). Furthermore, ecological awareness was beginning to grow at the time as well, and the drive to get in touch with unspoiled nature, as a contrast to rapid urbanization and increasingly busy lifestyles, were all factors that would set the tone for more elaborate tourism development in protected areas, including the beginnings of tourism in SNR “Carska Bara”.

Thus, the foundations for subsequent tourism development in the Reserve area, proclaimed Regional Park and Strict Nature Reserve in 1986, were set during the initial stage, designated as the preformation phase along the development path of the destination area. The humble rise and shaping of this destination area was reliant on its geographical and historical orientation. The pre-existing abundant natural resources, paired with the locational advantage mirrored in the proximity to then economically growing urban centers of Zrenjanin, Novi Sad and Belgrade, and the formal nature protection acknowledgement of policy-makers all attest to the path preformation phase. Therefore, during this initial stage the state and public sector in general were noticeably crucial. This aspect confirms the aspect of policy driving in the path preformation stage. According to the municipality Assembly decision of 1986, the protected natural assets, i.e. Regional Park “Stari Begej”
and Strict Nature Reserve “Carska Bara” were entrusted to the Commercial Fishery “Ečka” which was at the time a subsidiary of the state-owned agro-industrial complex “Servo Mihalji” (Mrkša and Milanović, 2007), one of the largest and most profitable such complexes in the former Yugoslavia and the neighboring region (Fai, 2015).

5.1.2 Path creation and path development phase: the middle 1980s to early 2000s

The following couple of decades of the tourism evolution in the Reserve represent stages in which both path creation and path development phases took place. However, this was without clear distinction of either path as the introduction and expansion of tourism products and services were occurring successively and in spatial proximity.

The founding of Regional Park “Stari Begej” (1,328ha) and Strict Nature Reserve “Carska Bara” (447ha) by the municipality Assembly decision in 1986 paved the way for defining the role of this protected area. With principles of active nature protection in mind, and especially so when the Regional Park is concerned, prioritized protection as well as appreciation of the area was established. This entailed detailed planning of walking paths, resting points, transportation via waterways, and touring/sightseeing of the Park by the tourism/hospitality organizational unit of the Fishery (Borić, 1992). In 1987, through then pan-Yugoslavian tourist agency “Kompas” and their Slovenia-based branch, a tourist boat was transported from Ljubljana, assembled, and introduced in the Park as an attractive means of touring the Stari Begej tributary, situated between the Carska Bara bog and the Begej River.

These developments, with focus on the addition of the tourist boat, marked the emergence of eco-tourism in the Regional Park (Respondent #4). A so-called ‘safari program’ was established, and the main components were:

(i) the tourist boat ride;
(ii) tour of geo-botanical landscapes via three walking paths: Tiganjica the ‘health path’ (5,000m), Vojtina Mlaka (3,000m) and Meander with wild bird colony (1,000m);
(iii) canoe rental;
(iv) fiacre –traditional small, horse-drawn carriage rental; and
(v) horseback riding.

One emergent market segment were schoolchildren on excursions. Their needs were met and supplemented with organized daytrips to Belo Blato village and local reed-manufacturing factory as well as nature-based workshops on the Park premises (Mihajilović, 1995). These activities were subsequently, around 1990s accompanied with bird-watching tours owing to an initiative of a UK-based travel agency which specialized in bird-watching. The agency had enlisted the Carska Bara bog as one of the “most abundant marsh regions in Europe” and, having organized accommodation in the city of Zrenjanin, started operating tours to the Park (Mihajilović, 1995).
In addition to the emergent ecotourism on the premises of the Regional park, customary hunting and sportfishing activities continued to attract visitors to the area. Commercial Fishery “Ečka”, much as it does presently, owned and managed approximately 5,500ha of hunting grounds in the area encompassing and adjacent to the Park and the Reserve, as well as 70km of waterways comprising canals of fish-farming lakes suitable for fishing. Hence, in the period between the middle 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, under the management of the Fishery, and in compliance with regulations regarding the protection of natural resources, the area gradually developed and featured a tourism-related offer comprising hunting tours, safari programs, and tourist fishing. These were complemented by the reopening of the local restaurant on the premises of the Fishery in 1990, followed by construction and opening of “Sibila” Hotel in 1992, which represented a boost in the overall tourism supply. To illustrate, according to the statistics pertinent to visitor numbers, approximately 20,000 visitors were accommodated in the Park, within the safari program alone, between 1986 and 1991 (Borić, 1992) (Table 3, Figure 6, p.31).

Table 3 & Figure 6: Visitor numbers, Regional Park “Stari Begej” (safari program) 1986 – 1991

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Ornithologists</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>2,286</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>826</td>
<td>3,328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>1,179</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>841</td>
<td>2,143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>4,944</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>691</td>
<td>5,667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>3,796</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>4,086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>2,488</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1,766</td>
<td>4,280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>14,861</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>4,681</td>
<td>20,020</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| %    | 74,2         | 2,4            | 23,4   | 100%

Source: Borić, 1992

Therefore, a combination of factors and enablers was initially set to shape the development path of tourism and hospitality in the Park and the Reserve area. These included continued policy-making related to the protection and promotion of existing natural resources which confirms a path dependence that is resource-based (Martin and Sunley, 2006; Ma and Hassink, 2014). Furthermore, the active involvement of the Fishery from the early stages of tourism development demonstrates that path dependence itself is reliant on historical circumstances (Martin and Sunley, 2006). This is in the case of the Fishery its century-long tradition of managing natural assets in the area. These natural assets and the previous local economic circumstances surrounding the Commercial Fishery were crucial for its consequent professional expertise as well as entrepreneurship – which is, according to Carlsson (Carlsson, 2007, in Martin, 2010), arguably the most significant feature of path dependence. These entrepreneurial traits were in the process translated from fish farming to the management of the Regional Park, the Strict Nature Reserve, and other activities such as angle-, sportfishing, and hunting, a role that persists to this day. One of the interviewees justifies the relevance of the Fishery:

“Manager [of a protected area] is always elected as someone who is in the field, someone who has enough experience, someone with sufficient financial strength, who has enough tools, tractors, this, that − we are looking at many things. /.../ The Fishery has been assigned management [of the Reserve], because this is one hydrological system. They have always been here. We are all here together, the nature protection, the embankments, and all. Since the
very beginning, the ‘50s when the management was established, and the ‘80s
when managers were being assigned – it has always been Fishery ‘Ečka’,
regardless if it is a stock company, or a public enterprise, whatever the
organization [of the company] – it’s always been Fishery ‘Ečka’.”
(Respondent #3)

Given that the primary activities of the Fishery were at the time, as they are today, related
to fish farming, tourism-oriented activities were continuously of supplementary character
(Respondent #3, Respondent #4), regardless of their gradual defining. In the beginning of
the 1990s approximately 12% of the Fishery employees were directly engaged in tourism,
and the returns from this complementary activity were modest, yet satisfactory given low
returns on investment in the tourism industry in general (Borić, 1992). Furthermore,
unfavorable socio-economic circumstances – hyperinflation and stark economic decline, as
well as the unstable geo-political situation in the country – the Balkan wars and consequent
breakup of Yugoslavia, were starting to emerge at the time. These negative developments
would also, unsurprisingly, bear consequences in the realm of tourism. Hence, in the
decade up to the 2000s there were just a number of major steps relevant to the further
acknowledgement and establishment of the Park and the Reserve on the domestic and
international nature-protection and tourism scene.

In 1994, upon the proposal of Institute for Nature Protection of Serbia and based on new
tendencies and international principles of nature protection, the Reserve was assigned 1st
Category Nature Reserve status, and renamed Special Nature Reserve “Stari Begej-
Carska Bara” (Stojanović, 2005; Mrkša and Milanović, 2007; Stojović, 2008). Also,
according to the classification by IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature,
author’s note), the Reserve was assigned 4th Category of Habitat and Species Management
Area. In 1994, in accordance with then operative Law on Tourism, National Tourism
Organization of Serbia was established, as the legal successor of the former Tourist
Association of Serbia. This government-affiliated organization was founded with the aim of
advancing and advertising the tourism potential of Serbia on the national and international
markets (Serbia.travel, n.d.). This was at the time, considering the overall disadvantageous
conditions for the development of tourism supply, an important stride for all Serbian
destinations, including the Special Nature Reserve “Stari Begej-Carska Bara”. One more
significant recognition for the Reserve was endorsed in 1996. That year the Reserve was
proclaimed a RAMSAR site, and ascribed on the list of “Wetlands of International
Importance” according to Ramsar Convention (Stojović, 2008) owing to its unique
gemorphological landscapes, and abundant biodiversity, especially the ornitofauna with
250 recorded bird species. This endorsement was noteworthy not only for the SNR “Stari
Begej-Carska Bara” as a tourism destination, but also for the Province of Vojvodina, since
this was the third Reserve to be assigned as a RAMSAR site in Vojvodina, after SNR
“Ludaš Lake” and SNR “Obedska Bara”, which obtained their status in 1977 (Ramsar.org,
no date).

The period between the early 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, was therefore
caracterized by several formal policies and international acknowledgements that were
established in the relation with the Reserve, along with the continued involvement of the
state and, on the local level, the Fishery. Along its tourism evolutionary path and still in the
development stage, SNR “Stari Begej-Carska Bara” was in dire need of efficient marketing targeted at domestic visitors. One of the interviewees attests:

“Then, I was asking around, consulted some people, in marketing, management, and such, then Studio B [popular Belgrade-based radio station]. Their target group is relevant to us, and Belgrade as the emitting market is especially important, and they listen to a lot of Studio B, mostly population that is of concern to us, between 20 and 40, 50 years of age, interested in swamps, marshes, and this nature here. So we came up with a short, effective radio advertisement with a pop-quiz. And it was effective, the prize in the pop-quiz was a weekend at ‘Sibila’ hotel. That was in 2002.” (Respondent #4)

Another promotion of the Reserve as an attractive destination was facilitated with the collaboration of National Tourism Association of Serbia and USAID, through CHF International/Serbia (US-based nongovernmental organization, author’s note) in 2004. CHF International/Serbia, National Tourism Association of Serbia and affiliated partners organized a contest titled “Ten Perfect Places” in order to promote the economic significance of the Corridor X (‘ten’, author’s note) for Serbia. The Corridor X is one of the pan-European corridors, connecting Salzburg, Austria and Thessalonki, Greece, via Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Macedonia. European Bank for Reconstruction and Development has been providing loans for the infrastructure upgrading along the Corridor (Railway Gazette, 2010). The 2004 competition was aimed at raising the quality bar of tourism services for all who travel along this corridor through Serbia. The international contest board had, upon examination, proposed the Reserve a a competitor, and subsequently one of the winners, who were each awarded US $10,000 to improve their business performances. The award funds were utilized for infrastructure improvement in the Reserve, including a set-up of information boards and the elevation of the existing wooden observation tower (Respondent #4; personal communication with the Reserve). The infrastructure upgrading had arguably contributed to the growth in visitor numbers. Although the figures were on the steady rise from a little over 10,000 in 2001, by the year of 2004 they rose up to 14,000 visitors on annual basis (Kovačević and Marković, 2012).

In operation within the Fishery, organizational Unit “Carska Bara-Reserve” had made further efforts in expanding the tourism supply, and extending the operating season beyond the spring/early summer which had been traditionally established as school excursion season. Nevertheless, given the nature of tourism offer based on existing resources, the demand had remained steadily focused on school excursions, organized groups of retirees, firm employees and individual visitors, with the supply being spatially concentrated on the Reserve and to an extent to the village of Belo Blato (Respondent #4). Moreover, regulations concerning managing of protected areas, such as the Reserve, had been imposing limitations in terms of further tourism growth (Respondent #3, Respondent #4).

“/…/ Because, here in the Reserve, everything that is done is limited by Institute for Nature Conservation [of Serbia, and from 2010 of Vojvodina Province]. Whatever has to be done, analysis of the impact on biodiversity, on the ecosystem, is needed. When you want to build a see-saw, you need the analysis of the impact of see-saw on the ecosystem. Or – can we even obtain a
As seen from the above, both path creation- and the path development phase yielded creation of a number of tourism products and services focused on the Reserve. These two stages on its tourism evolutionary path were characterized by continued entrepreneurship by the Fishery and the recognition of tourism potential of the Reserve on the national and international level, with the assistance of National Tourism Organization of Serbia. On the local level, Tourism Organization of the Zrenjanin City (TOZC), established in 2000, has been in charge of promoting the Reserve on the domestic market, and as the most appealing destination in the municipality, it has been included in every tour offered by TOZC (Respondent #9). Furthermore, regulations regarding protected areas, implemented under the authority of Institute for Nature Conservation of Serbia and monitored by the authorized Ministry have been of major influence in the tourism development path of the Reserve. Laws in effect up to year 2004 were Law on Environmental Protection and Law on Foundations of Environmental Protection (Vlada Republike Srbije, 2004). Despite the desire for further growth of tourism in terms of capacity and diversification of tourism products (Respondent #4, Respondent #9), the strict guidelines and principles of managing all activities in the Reserve, including tourism, prevail (Respondent #3). As in the path preformation phase, the involvement of the governmental/public sector had retained a substantial role when implementation of protected area regulations is concerned. The Fishery had, as previously, continued to operate the Reserve in compliance with the abovementioned legal guidelines. In that sense, the path dependence of “Carska Bara” had arguably been firmly set in the nature protection and conservation realm, resulting in the path shift to a present stable state. On the other hand, given the entrepreneurial and managerial role of the Fishery, the path dependence also branches and exhibits a feature of ‘path plasticity’. This notion represents possibility for new development, innovation and flexibility within the existing institutional setting (Strambach, 2008). The two diverging paths are examined respectively in the following subsections.

5.1.3 Path as movement to stable phase: from early 2000s to present

The period between the early 2000s up to today represents the tourism evolutionary path of the Reserve as a transfer to a stable state. This stage in path dependence is recognized by both Martin (2010) and Ma and Hassink (2013). In the context of local industry, Martin (2010) argues that this stage is characterized by steadiness and fortification of existing technologies, with either very little or no innovative inputs or internal change. These features, translated into the tourism-related path dependence are mirrored in further focus on major tourism products, sectors as well as perseverance of pertinent institutions, according to Ma and Hassink (2013). Given the characteristics of tourism development in SNR “Carska Bara” it may be safe to argue that the path as movement into a stable phase is applicable.
In the year 2006, during the second and final phase of a project carried out by Institute for Nature Conservation of Serbia in coordination with Ministry of Science and Environmental Protection, SNR “Stari Begej-Carska Bara” was enlisted as Area of Special Conservation Interest within the Emerald network (Zavod za zaštitu prirode Srbije, n.d.). Emerald network in non-EU member states, such as Serbia, is the equivalent of Natura 2000, the largest organized network of protected areas on the territory of the European Union. This recognition once again attests to the significance of the Reserve as a protected area, adding further to its scientific, educational and touristic relevance. Two years later, in 2008, the boundaries of the Reserve were considerably expanded, as per decision of Institute for Nature Conservation. The initial area of 1,676ha with three zones of protection (1st zone – 703,7ha; 2nd zone – 371,8ha; 3rd zone – 600,5ha) was increased to the present 4,726ha (Stojović, 2008; Galamboš et al., 2010). Nevertheless, tourism-related activities with the existing infrastructure remained focused on the initially designated space as the ‘Amazon-like’ wilderness found in that area was always most appealing to the visitors (Respondent #3).

When policy-making is considered, further legal strengthening regarding protected areas continued, and the Law on Environmental Protection previously in effect from 2004 was in 2009 substituted with Law on Nature Conservation. The newly implemented law was, in comparison, more pronounced in terms of not only levels of protection and activities allowed in special nature reserves, but also concerning their management, financing and legal obligations of the authorized reserve manager, i.e. the Fishery in this case (Vlada Republike Srbije, 2009). In accordance with the new law, the authorized manager is obliged to comprise the management plan on ten-year basis, with detailed methods of conservation, use and coordination of the Reserve (Vlada Republike Srbije, 2009). Although the operation of the Reserve is by means of this law entirely entrusted to the manager, as illustrated earlier, no interventions on the Reserve premises are to be undergone without previously obtaining the permission of Institute for Nature Conservation. The Institute itself underwent structural changes, and based on the same Law on Nature Conservation, the organizational unit of Institute of Nature Conservation of Serbia based in Novi Sad was transformed into Institute for Nature Protection of Vojvodina Province in 2010 (Galamboš et al., 2010). This operational change represented more rigid institutional focus on protected areas in the Province, including SNR “Stari Begej-Carska Bara” which itself was subsequently renamed into SNR “Carska Bara” in 2011 (Respondent #3).

The above depicted changes did not reflect in visitor flows in the period between 2005 and 2015. The demand had remained concentrated on predominantly school- and company trips over weekdays, with individual, mostly family visits during the weekends, season- and weather dependent. The supply, with focus on sustainable tourism, has, to this day, been centered on the 2-hour boat tour, “health path” and small, nature-conservation museum visits, all subject to charge collection. Collecting entrance fees for the boat tour was introduced in 1986, and the “health path” in 2004, the latter upon the proposition by Institute for Nature Conservation. Entrance fee collection has been not only means of financing some operations in the Reserve but also relevant to tracking visitor numbers in the protected area (Respondent #3). As Figure 7 (p.36) shows, there have been variations in
visitor numbers in the observed period. These fluctuations were induced by a couple of external factors.

The year 2006 saw a significant drop in the number of visitors due to the break-out of bird flu, however two years later the figures showed a remarkable recovery, which was not to be witnessed to date. Another visible fall in visits to the Reserve took place in 2014, which was due to two major exogenous developments. 2014 was the year when massive flooding occurred in approximately one-third of Serbian territory during late spring – the typical high season in the Reserve. Moreover, in 2014 there was a change in regulations regarding collaborations between travel agencies and schools when school excursion programs are concerned. This implied a stricter set of protocols travel agencies had to follow in organizing school trips, which consequently led to the overall decline in this type of organized visits, not only to “Carska Bara” but other reserves in country as well (Respondent #3).

Based on the observations above, it can be argued that the path dependency of the Reserve “Carska Bara” has shifted to a stable stage, featuring dominant tourism products and visible strengthening of legislations and regulations regarding management of protected areas. The operation of the Reserve has remained in the hands of the Fishery, and under the watchful eye of Institute for Nature Conservation of Vojvodina Province. There have not been endogenous innovations when growth of tourism is concerned. Furthermore, although the Reserve has been balancing books (Ribarsko Gazdinstvo “Ečka” AD, 2014), shortage of subventions from the authorized Ministry is evident:

“/.../ It is not enough. I always argue for larger subventions [from the Ministry], not so that we would get lazy, but to help us [the Reserve] get to the next infrastructural level and let us manage from there. Like kids – you can’t leave them during schooling and let them fend for themselves. You [the Ministry] should put us through school, so that we are strong enough, so that we can develop tourism and so on.” (Respondent #3)
The complex, ever-changing web of laws and institutions has also been impeding further progress:

"/.../ I have a feeling that we are dealing with form and paperwork, rather than real issues. And then when we miss out on those issues, and lack investments to develop [we stagnate] – all stagnation is regression. That’s my mantra, and that’s what I say – if we don’t move forward but stay in one place, we fall two years behind." (Respondent #3)

Conclusively, in “Carska Bara”, the path dependence is visible in protected area tourism limitations, consolidation of tourist types and touristic experiences on offer. Arguably, there have not been elements of path renewals and developments of new products that would altogether mark the stage where path is a dynamic process which eventually is to enter a new evolutionary cycle. Hence tourism development in the Reserve has reached the stable state as described in the Ma and Hassink model (Figure 1, p.13).

5.1.4 Path plasticity: from 2015 to present

Very recently the Fishery, has made steps towards tourism diversification within its spatial and entrepreneurial domain. Having explored and taken advantage of existing natural and infrastructural resources in combination with innovativeness and strategic marketing moves, the Fishery has demonstrated a new possibility along its managerial path dependence, i.e. ‘path plasticity’. This EEG concept, translated into tourism studies, implies an endogenous, incremental and subtle change along path dependence of the tourism destination (Halkier and Therkelsen, 2013). When “Carska Bara” is concerned, although the path dependence has entered the steady stage, since there is both geographical and functional unity with the Fishery, this path dependence branched while expanding the existing potential. The notion of ‘path plasticity’ is represented by the development and marketing of new tourism product – sport fishing on Joca Lake, which is owned and managed by the Fishery.

Joca Lake, situated to the southwest of the Reserve, across 700ha represents a unique natural compound, abundant in predominantly pike, perch, carp and several other species of freshwater fish (Jezero Joca, n.d.) (Figures 8 and 9, p.38). The lake had always been under the management of the Fishery. Until the year of 2010 it was used for fish farming, and later it was utilized as a standby water reservoir in case of draught in the area. In 2013 the Fishery had commissioned the Lake to a Belgrade-based entrepreneur who invested substantially into the surrounding infrastructure and had set up sport fishing on the lake shore. However, his contract was subsequently not extended and the Fishery itself, recognizing the potential for further expansion of sport fishing and its integration into the existing tourism products, had decided to take over the coordination of Joca Lake in 2015 (Respondent #4). Research into the current trends in the sport fishing-oriented demand accompanied with further investment into surrounding infrastructure had yielded a newly designed tourism offer. It comprises one- and three-day tours oriented towards sport-fishing enthusiasts, as well as five- and seven-day tours geared towards larger groups. The focus of sport-fishing activities is Joca Lake, but several smaller lakes on the territorial domain of
the Fishery are also advertised. All overnight tours include accommodation at “Sibila” Hotel, visits to the Reserve, and sightseeing trips to the city of Zrenjanin, and the villages of Belo Blato, Perlez and Kovačica – where a well-known Museum of Naïve Folk Art is situated (Jezero Joca, n.d.). The newly designed and diversified tourism product has thus far been successful and lucrative, profiting ten-fold in comparison to the previous commission-based use of the Lake, according to the Fishery management (Respondent #4). The targeted market segment involves domestic as well as foreign sport-fishing devotees, and the novel tourism experiences are promoted through the existing offer centered on the Reserve, as well as via multilingual website devoted to pike-fishing on Joca Lake, and consecutive two-year presence at Fishing Show in Novi Sad in the spring of 2016, and 2017 (Jezero Joca, n.d.).

In tourism literature on ‘path dependence’ the concept of ‘path plasticity’ represents a far less evasive way of escaping path dependency subtle in comparison to new path creation which may involve large and rapid changes (Halkier and Therkelsen, 2013; Clavé and Wilson, 2016). It denotes a more adaptable approach to resisting the repercussions of path dependence such as a lock-in and possible adverse outcomes in further path shaping (Clavé and Wilson, 2016). Although the Reserve itself exhibits its own path dependence as protected area with tourism activity, its spatial proximity to Joca Lake and the managerial connectedness deem them as one destination unit. The combination of cross-sectoral (commercial fishing and tourism) knowledge, resourcefulness, entrepreneurship and the advantage of being in ‘the right place at the right time’ (Clavé and Wilson, 2016) have thus resulted in ‘path plasticity’ that may in the long-term bring about positive effects in the entire observed destination area.

In conclusion, the tourism development path of the Reserve conforms with the ‘path development’ model proposed by Ma and Hassink (2013) to an extent. The resemblance is found in the ‘path preformation phase’, which in the case of the Reserve took place between 1955 and the middle 1980s. The two following phases of ‘path creation’ and ‘path development’ merged into one phase along the tourism development trajectory of “Carska Bara” between the middle 1980s and early 2000s. Subsequently, due to limited possibility for tourism expansion since the Reserve is a protected area, what followed was ‘path as
movement to stable phase as in the Ma and Hassink (2013) model, which started in early 2000s and continues to present day. In the case of “Carska Bara” nevertheless, one significant divergence from the model is visible in the form of ‘path plasticity’ owing to the Fishery management aspect, which had started utilizing existing resources and infrastructure in creating new tourism experience on Joca Lake from 2015 onward.

5.2 Aspects of co-evolution in the destination area

As previously delineated, the notion of co-evolution in the EEG studies is often presented as a certain ‘doppelganger’ in the process of evolution, i.e. development of economic regions (Schamp, 2010). Nevertheless, Schamp (2010) also adds that co-evolutionary processes should be examined in relation to special cases, taking into consideration entities on the micro-economic level and analyzing ‘what is co-evolving with what’ (Schamp, p.432, 2010). This is in line when EEG is applied within tourism studies as tourism destination areas represent complex systems, comprising different components such as products, institutions, and sectors as recognized by Ma and Hassink (2013). These elements interact on both macro- and micro-levels (Ma and Hassink, 2103) and examination of these interrelations facilitates understanding of the evolution of the entire destination area.

The following subsections deliver mechanisms behind the co-evolution and interaction between the Reserve and local tourism-oriented businesses, as well as the interrelations among local tourism stakeholders themselves. As Brouder and Fullerton note (2015), these interactions are particularly relevant not only for the development of the tourism sector, but the designated region as well, especially when the region is rural, and depending on one or few major tourism attractions (Brouder and Fullerton, 2015), which is the case of “Carska Bara”. In addition, the place and involvement of public sector in the designated destination area is examined in relation to tourism-oriented stakeholders who all operate within private sector.

5.2.1 Co-evolution and interaction between SNR “Carska Bara” and local tourism-oriented businesses

In the immediate proximity of the Reserve, on the territory of the rural settlement of Lukino Selo the only tourism-oriented facility is “Sibila” Hotel, owned and managed by the Commercial fishery “Ečka” Corporation. This hotel has demonstrated its own path dependence in strong relation to the Fishery, and its development path can be traced to the year 1921, when first ancillary facility was constructed to serve the needs of the Fishery employees as a cafeteria (Hotel Sibila, no date). The gradual development of tourism-related activities focused on the Reserve in the 1970s and 1980s prompted the need for hotel accommodation in the same locality. The construction was initiated in 1991, and the hotel put in operation the year after. Given its territorial and managerial unity with the Fishery, the establishment of the hotel is in apparent causal relation with the growth of tourism in the Reserve and the co-evolution is evident. With current capacity of 38 beds across one suite, nine twin-, five double- and two triple rooms the hotel accommodates
most visitors (Hotel Sibila, no date), apart from school excursions and tour groups where the number per group exceeds fifty persons. Initiatives to expand the present capacity of the hotel as well as adding a swimming pool to both augment the numbers of overnight stays and enhance visitor numbers during summer months exist. Nevertheless, the estimated investments are substantial, and there has been no further planning to date (Respondent #4). All tourism-related development in Lukino Selo is inclined towards entrepreneurial efforts of the Fishery. Due to unfavorable socio-economic circumstances in this rural settlement and the ongoing outmigration, it is unlikely that tourism and hospitality-related offer will expand beyond the existing hotel in the following period.

In the settlement of Ečka, apart from the three churches described in the ‘Destination area setting’ section, the only prominent tourism-related business is the former castle which has been transformed into hotel “Kaštel Ečka”. Its development path, dating back to the beginning of the 19th century, is tied historically to the Fishery, as the mutual founder was affluent Armenia-born merchant, Lord Lazar Ágošt, whose savvy entrepreneurial spirit influenced the progress of the whole micro-region around the Reserve, the settlements of Lukino Selo, and Ečka (Kastel Ecka, n.d.). The establishment of the Reserve, its subsequent tourism development and increasing visitor numbers did not straightforwardly cause the transformation of the historic castle into accommodation facility. However, the existing pertinent literature does not contain data on the factual date of the hotel founding. Still, as the tourism management of the Fishery (Respondent #3, Respondent #4) attests, the interaction between the castle-hotel and the Reserve dates to the 1970s since when visiting hunters would be directed to accommodation in “Kaštel Ečka”, a practice that persists to this day, expanded with other market segments.

“/…/ We [the Reserve] are the major factor in their [tourism] offer. Because they have none of their own. And they are a part of our historical tale. Since the whole story traditionally gravitates to the Castle [Ečka]. /…/ [Their] expenditures are enormous, and look – it’s their location in Ečka, they have nothing overly attractive, not many tourists come to fill their capacity. /…/ On weekends, maybe, when someone visits ‘Carska Bara’ and doesn’t want to spend the night at ‘Sibila’ but elsewhere more luxurious, then they go there [Kaštel Ečka] /…/ In a sense, they depend on us. (Respondent #4)

Hence, although the castle-hotel presently faces functional difficulties due to accumulating expenses, it can be argued that there is both co-evolutionary and inter-relational exchange with the Reserve. This is because the castle-hotel and the Reserve share the tourism product of “Carska Bara”, and the current operation of the hotel is very much dependent on the seasonal dynamics and more well-off visitors of the Reserve.

Stajićevo village is where its only prominent tourism-related business is situated. The Restaurant “Trofej”/Ethno village “Tiganjica”, is regarded by its third-generation owners as ‘the gateway to the Reserve” as it is merely 2km away from its entrance (Respondent #6). The development path of this firm is marked by the initial restaurant management. A locally well-known barrelhouse ‘Živa Mađarica’ was commissioned in 1994 by the present owner and subsequently expanded with accommodation facilities and other attractions
In a little over two decades of business, the relational exchange with the Reserve had passed through different phases, according to the present owners.

“As far as we are concerned, we have always been in favor of cooperation, unselfishly, and with benefit and promotion of both sides in mind, but we must admit that we have not always encountered understanding and positive answers. This mostly had to do with their [the Fishery] ownership transformations, marketing team and other elements – things we had no influence over.”  
(Respondent #6)

While there is no formal cooperation between this tourism-related business and the Reserve (Respondent #6), owing to the spatial layout, around 70% of the Restaurant “Trofej”/Ethno village “Tiganjica” guests – estimates the Reserve tourism management – visits the Reserve. On the other hand, the restaurant part of this business maintains satisfactory cooperation with the Fishery as their main fresh fish supplier (Respondent #6). Therefore, to an extent, there is interaction between the Reserve and this privately-owned business, although when tourism products are concerned, they have been developing independently, and mutual visitor flows are the results of spatial proximity and functional complementarity with the restaurant and the ethno village posing as an attractive addition to the Reserve.

Among the rural settlements in geographical relation to the Reserve, the village of Belo Blato has the most defined tourism offer, owing to the collective innovative efforts of the village community itself (Respondent #5). The Belo Blato residents, their local community tourism group, and the “Women’s Club”, which was founded in the 1960s by local female small-scale agricultural entrepreneurs, have all been involved in the promotion of the tourism experiences, based on diverse cultural heritage and traditional farming (Respondent #2, Respondent #5). The development path of tourism in Belo Blato has also been dependent on the Reserve visitors’ influx (Respondent #5). Furthermore, the establishment of the International research-educational center in 2007 is thematically focused on the exploration of the “Carska Bara” biodiversity. Hence, the tourism offers of the Reserve and the village are mutually complement and co-evolving. One of the Belo Blato entrepreneurs who has been managing an agricultural estate for almost a decade confirms:

“They [the Reserve] are good for us as much as we are good for them. A sort of supplement to everything. /.../ Visitors, wandering into Belo Blato, eager to discover ‘the real rural’ came here owing to ‘Carska Bara’. /.../ We [the agricultural estate and the Reserve] have a formal cooperation agreement, we are tied - schoolkids’ excursions. I can’t manage without them [the Reserve], and vice versa. /.../ We are not competitors; we rely on each other.”  
(Respondent #2)

Although most of the Belo Blato community and their tourism experiences do rely on the tourism demand of the Reserve, not all small tourism-related business in this rural settlement are incorporated in the Belo Blato – “Carska Bara” inter-relation, as some of the respondents note (Respondent #7, Respondent #8). According to these interviewees, who
have been in tourism/hospitality business since 2009, the official assimilation of tourism experiences on the municipality level, managed and maintained by the Tourism Organization of the Zrenjanin City, is merely nominal. The TOZC has not mediated between this Belo Blato-based business and the Reserve, they contend. The Reserve itself has never offered formal cooperation (Respondent #7, Respondent #8). This example supports the notion that in the context of co-evolution and inter-relational exchange between stakeholders in a destination, stakeholder relations are not of the same intensity. In that sense, as in this case, some stakeholders are not involved in the overall community tourism growth, which may impede sustainable development of tourism in the future (Brouder and Fullerton, 2015).

As noted in the ‘Destination area setting’ section, the village of Perlez, located south of the Reserve, does not offer a tourism program or experience, although there is potential, owing to the proximity of “Carska Bara”. However, as reported by the Reserve tourism management (Respondent #4), there are no initiatives in Perlez geared towards creation of tourism offer, any receptive, accommodation facilities or relational exchange with the Reserve. The example of Perlez in the context of “Carska Bara” destination area yet again supports the view that destination areas are diverse and complex systems (Ma and Hassink, 2013; Brouder and Fullerton, 2015). It illustrates the fact that across these systems there are varying levels of competitiveness, business capabilities and performance, as well as readiness to network. These features apply to firms in the category or public and private sector (Ma and Hassink, 2013). In this case study, the co-evolutionary framework, applied to describe the interactions between the Reserve “Carska Bara” and local tourism-related businesses indicated the varying levels of the above features. While this set of interactions delineates the macro-level dynamics of the destination area, the following sections consider the inter-relations among the local tourism stakeholders themselves – on the micro level, and the role of the public sector within the destination area, respectively.

5.2.2 Interaction among local tourism-oriented businesses

The literature on rural tourism, ecotourism (Fennell, 1999; Pajvančić and Markov, 2011) and especially tourism in protected areas (Stojanović, Đorđević, Lazić, Stamenković and Dragićević, 2014) argues that local communities impact tourism development, and vice versa – tourism itself influences these communities constructively or adversely. In these processes, and against the backdrop of EEG in tourism studies, collaboration i.e. inter-relational exchange among local population engaged in tourism and hospitality plays a role in overall dynamics of tourism development in destination areas. In the case of “Carska Bara” destination area these inter-relations on the micro level exhibit patchy patterns which seem to disintegrate this destination area, rather than contribute to its unification.

In the relatively small geographical context of the “Carska Bara” destination area, the number of operating stakeholders in tourism/hospitality sector is limited. It may also be safe to argue that the study respondents from this sector are familiar with each other, and have had social or other interaction at some point. Nevertheless, when tourism-related interaction is concerned, its levels are visibly inconsistent across the rural communities
included in this case study. While there is evidence of co-evolutionary and inter-relational exchange between the Reserve/the Fishery and most tourism-related establishments in the area, the situation is rather different when the stakeholders themselves are in the limelight. According to the data obtained from the interviews, it is only the village of Belo Blato where collaboration among tourism-related stakeholders is detected. Furthermore, this collaboration is predominantly on the Belo Blato local community level. The village, having recognized its potential as a sustainable rural tourism destination, links agricultural producers who contribute to marketing of the village through an array of events where local products are presented and sold – “We annually hold around ten events, all sorts of events. And our goal is to promote the village, but also to connect more widely, to network.” (Respondent #5). Another interviewee, an agricultural and tourism entrepreneur, for instance, illustrates the mutually rewarding collaboration with a fellow villager:

“Look, I do not grow poppy seeds, and the woman who does, /…/ considerably increased her yield as guest numbers on my estate grew. My strudel is made with her poppy seeds. Do you need a better example?” (Respondent #2).

This community also boasts the afore mentioned “Women’s Club”, local “Tourism Group” and “Culinary Amateurs’ Association”, all equally active in Belo Blato tourism promotion and development (Respondent #5). Presently, there is also an initiative to formally tie the villages in the area, starting with Belo Blato, across Perlez, Stajićevo, Lukino Selo, Ečka and Knićanin (rural settlement southwest to the Reserve, bordering with Perlez, author’s note), since each community can contribute in the rural tourism domain. Yet, professional guidance and input provided by tourism organizations on municipal, provincial and national level are necessary for further tourism growth and recognition in Belo Blato and beyond (Respondent #5). This collaboration is presently maintained by one local stakeholder who, through an agreement with “Kaštel Ečka” in the village of Ečka, facilitates the castle-hotel guests who visit Belo Blato during their stay in the area (Respondent #2).

Although the village by large displays favorable interconnectedness, similarly to the example in the section regarding co-evolution and interaction with the Reserve, some local micro tourism/hospitality entrepreneurs do not have established collaboration within the community. In literature, it is recognized that a variety of personal relations and word of mouth in small communities appear to serve as important marketing methods used by local stakeholders to direct flows of content customers among themselves (Viken and Aarsaether, 2013). Nevertheless, this is not always the case and positive referrals sometimes tend to be one-sided. One of the interviewees, also a Belo Blato-based tourism/hospitality entrepreneur, comments:

“She [another tourism business owner in village] only tends to her own needs and to what’s in her own interest. /…/ Me, for example, I always recommend her estate [to my guests]. She never does that for me.” (Respondent #7)

Notwithstanding misunderstandings of this nature, the respondents in Belo Blato do agree unanimously that for all stakeholders to function, be profitable and gain further touristic recognition, a more defined, proactive involvement of the public sector is necessary (Respondent #5, Respondent #7, Respondent #8).
To sum, co-evolutionary and inter-relational exchanges between the Reserve and among local tourism stakeholders are diverse on both macro- and micro level. As in the tourism development of ‘Carska Bara’ destination area one of the focal points is the engagement of the public sector, the last segment prior to the ‘Conclusions’ section depicts the involvement of the public sector in relation to the destination area and the tourism stakeholders included.

5.3 Aspects of co-evolution and interaction with public sector in the destination area

5.3.1 Public sector and SNR “Carska Bara”

The path dependence of the Reserve, as previously described, has been determined by two features. One of them is its evolving status as a protected area, with continual legislative engagement of the public sector, i.e. Ministry of Agriculture and Environmental Protection on the state level, and Institute for Nature Conversation of Vojvodina Province on the provincial level. The other element is the aspect of the Reserve management by the Fishery which has shaped its tourism development path owing to its entrepreneurial efforts, while in accord with relevant legislations and regulations. Today, the Fishery itself is a privately-owned enterprise, under the umbrella of Mirotin-Energo Ltd. since 2008 (Pudar, 2016). The current form of ownership was established after lengthy and complex processes of privatization, following the collapse of its previous proprietor, the state-owned agro-industrial complex “Servo Mihalj” in the 1990s (Đukić, 2012). The fact that the Reserve as the protected, natural heritage of Banat region and a significant tourism revenue generator is in the hands of a private business has been a thorny issue between the Fishery/Reserve management and the local government of Zrenjanin municipality (Respondent #4; Stupar, 2009). The tense relationship between the Fishery and the municipality government is mirrored in the fact that the Reserve covers 60% of the municipal land. Therefore, the municipality retains the rights to the majority ownership, claiming that the local government would be more efficient and transparent in the Reserve management. Furthermore, the municipality claims it would be better positioned in obtaining the much-needed financial support from the state (Stupar, 2009). This was one of the reasons behind the establishment of Public Enterprise “Nature Reserves of Zrenjanin” in 2013, by the municipality itself (Stojin, 2016), that had further aggravated tensions between the Fishery and the Municipality. The main responsibilities of this Public Enterprise are management of natural assets in the Zrenjanin municipality and several fishing areas as well as issuance of fishing permits. The Enterprise has made attempts in gaining official rights to manage “Carska Bara”, however, Provincial Government has not been accommodating in that regard (Stojin, 2016). Commercial Fishery “Ečka” has, on the other hand, maintained that they have the physical and professional means to run the Reserve, and thus are suitable for its operating (Respondent #3). These disputes remain unsolved, and attest to the unfavorable relations between the Fishery and the municipality.

When the collaboration with Tourism Organization of Zrenjanin City is concerned, the tourism management of the Reserve and the Organization representative both argue it has
continuously been satisfactory and for the benefit of “Carska Bara” (Respondent #4, Respondent #9). This local government-affiliated body has been through certain structural changes; however, according to the respondents, they did not influence the cooperation with the Reserve. TOCZ had, up to the year 2000, functioned as Tourism Association of Zrenjanin, within the public sector. In 2005, the affiliated Tourism Information Center was established, whose main responsibilities are tourism-, accommodation-related information dissemination and souvenir design and sales (Turistička organizacija grada Zrenjanina, n.d.). In the period between 2009 to 2016 the status of TOCZ had changed and it was restructured as Public Enterprise ‘Tourism Center of Zrenjanin City’. Nevertheless, in line with Law on Tourism in effect, the TOCZ reverted to operating as tourism organization at the end of 2016 (Tourism Organization of Vojvodina, personal communication). Notwithstanding these structural transformations, its functions remained unaltered. TOCZ continues to consolidate the municipal tourism offer and channel it to tourism organizations on provincial and national level.

It is the currently effective Law on Tourism that stipulates responsibilities of tourism organizations as destination managers in Serbia. Those responsibilities fall into two activity groups: those concerning tourism development and coordination of all local participants in each destination and those concerning promotion of destinations on domestic and international market (Stojković, 2015). In the “Carska Bara” case however, the designated manager is Fishery “Ečka” as assigned by the authoritative Ministry. Besides the marketing efforts conducted by the Reserve and the Fishery, promotional outreachs by TOZC seem to satisfy the needs of “Carska Bara” on the domestic market (Respondent #4). Still, as both the Reserve tourism management and TOCZ note, more efforts in advertising this destination should be directed towards international markets, which is the responsibility of the national tourism organization.

In review, when firms in both private and public sectors are observed, as in the case of the Fishery and municipal tourism organization, it can be safe to argue that mutual co-evolution and interactions exist. Furthermore, co-evolution is detectable within public and private sectors as well, mostly due to unstable political and socio-economic circumstances in Serbia, which have been for the past couple of decades dictating reorganizations in businesses, public and private, across the country. These negative conditions are recognized throughout official tourism development and marketing strategies on provincial (Bakić, 2009) and national levels (Vlada Republike Srbije, 2016) as SWOT analyses’ elements of ‘threat’ which potentially may hinder tourism growth hereafter.

5.3.2 Public sector and local private tourism-related business

While the public sector in tourism domain and on municipal level has traditionally exhibited favorable cooperation with “Carska Bara”, when local tourism-oriented businesses are concerned, challenges in tourism development and coordination do exist. The interviewees operating in the private sector share different experiences with TOZC, especially so in Belo Blato. This arguably supports the view that destination promotional activities – which are typically the focal activities of local tourism organizations in Serbia,
are far easier to undertake in comparison to endeavors related to educated, planned, and dedicated destination growth (Stojković, 2015).

Firstly, in the rural settlements of Lukino Selo and Perlez, as previously described, there has not been any concrete tourism development, apart from the accommodation provision at “Sibila” Hotel in Lukino Selo, which is already integrated in the “Carska Bara” and Jezero Joca Lake tourism experiences. There is a recognized need for the diversification of tourism product as well as the geographical expansion of tourism offer within the Reserve destination area, especially to the south of “Carska Bara” where the village of Perlez is situated (Respondent #1). This potential growth would ‘break’ the concept of the ‘honeypot site’ born by the Reserve, and therefore not only broaden the overall tourism offer and experiences in the destination area, but also contribute to the management of the “Carska Bara” visitor flows in busy seasons and, consequently, further conservation of this protected area (Respondent #1). Nevertheless, TOZC has not taken any tangible steps in this regard, overlooking both tourism initiation and advertising in settlements such as Perlez. This is despite stating that a holistic approach exists: “/…/ all those villages, around [the Reserve] and next to bodies of water, which can function in tourism supply, that’s what we [tourism organizations on municipal, provincial and national level] are able to market nationally.” (Respondent #9).

The castle-hotel “Kaštel Ečka”, in the village of Ečka, is included in the official tourism offer of the Zrenjanin municipality. It is advertised as accommodation/hospitality facility of distinguished aristocratic past and with historical ties to the Reserve area (Respondent #9). Owing to the castle’s long-established tradition, the building itself, along with its surroundings was awarded the status of ‘Cultural monument’ in 2001 by the Government of Republic of Serbia. In 2005, with the intention of supplying the hotel with needed additional accommodation space, a new wing was constructed, in agreement with authoritative Institute for Conservation of Cultural Monuments of Zrenjanin. Subsequently, in 2007, further restoration took place and today the castle serves as an example of a successfully restored cultural monument (Dvorac Kaštel u Ečki, n.d.). The hotel has been in private ownership of Belgrade-based “Univerzal holding a.d.” enterprise since 2004 (Dvorac Kaštel u Ečki, n.d.), and as noted earlier, its operation is irregular. Although the municipality had intervened in the conservation and reconstruction domains, which in turn contributed to the touristic value and accommodation capacity of the castle, seemingly unfavorable circumstances today persist and interfere with the management of the facility. What precisely is the underlying cause of those circumstances remains obscure since the hotel management eventually failed to participate in this research study.

The owner-managers of Restaurant “Trofej”/Ethno village “Tiganjica” in the village of Stajićevo note that their cooperation with the local TOZC has been positive throughout the two decades of their family-run business (Respondent #6). TOZC had not participated in this enterprise development given the firm’s strong path dependence embedded in family entrepreneurial efforts. Nevertheless, TOZC in cooperation with Tourism Information Center, has been a valuable partner in promoting the Ethno village as “the ‘pearl’ of tourism offer in Banat region” (Respondent #6).
In Belo Blato, where significant steps initiated by the community members themselves have been made towards utilization of the village tourism potential, there are inconsistencies between what the community needs and what has been provided by public sector on the local level.

“/.../ We have reached a certain level, a ‘peak’ maybe even. What’s next? Now we need a more defined strategy, a strategy of rural tourism development. /.../ We can do things locally [by ourselves] but what is central is the expertise. And that’s precisely Tourism Organization of Zrenjanin City. And beyond – Tourism Organization of Vojvodina, [Tourism Organization of] Serbia. Our potential needs recognition, we can’t make do without that.” (Respondent #5).

The above statement also attests to the presence of ‘path dependence’ in tourism development of the Belo Blato community, as the village had clearly put collective effort in utilizing and relying on the resources available for its tourism growth. Either new ‘path creation’ or ‘path plasticity’ along the tourism development trajectory of Belo Blato would evidently require the involvement and coordination on the behalf of larger, external establishments with more expertise – on municipal level, such as TOZC, as well as – on provincial, and national levels.

There is relational exchange with the public sector, however, as one of the interviewees states, it is not sufficient in terms of yielding concrete results in defining and improving the integrated tourism offer of Belo Blato:

“Our collaboration [between the village and TOZC] is not bad, we don’t have that sort of a problem. That collaboration is more symbolic, you know? It’s non-binding. /.../ It’s all like – we are, and we aren’t [cooperating], we can, we can’t [make things happen].” (Respondent #5).

On the other hand, TOZC attests to the efforts in analyzing and encouraging rural tourism in the municipality. The Organization prides itself on supporting the local rural households in establishing accommodation facilities. The profit from rural tourism and hospitality provided by the local people is seen as the supplement or alternative to land cultivation where yields tend to be unsatisfactory and insufficient (Respondent #9). In 2006 TOZC had established formal categorization of rural households as registered accommodation/hospitality providers. Today there are approximately 100 registered beds in the villages across the municipality (Respondent #9). Although these initiatives appear positive, experiences of some accommodation providers in Belo Blato paint a different picture.

“/.../ And so we wanted to register two rooms in our household, and start the business. That was in 2009. But they [at TOZC] mocked us, saying – Who’ll come and visit you in Belo Blato? ’ I ignored them and got the paperwork done.” (Respondent #8).

Similarly to previously cited testimonies from Belo Blato, this micro-entrepreneur maintains that the involvement of TOZC is only nominal in character. “It’s all figurative.
They [TOZC] come to our place, take photos, but never send us any guests” (Respondent #7). More effort needs to be placed into active tourism offer and experience development, as well as into the investment in rural infrastructure and procurement of state-funded subventions, which are all tasks of the municipal public sector and cannot be achieved by villages themselves (Respondent #8). One Belo Blato-based agriculture/tourism entrepreneur, while admitting to personal negative experiences in applying for state funding, however, appreciates the work TOZC does for the business:

“To me, they are accommodating. They help me, with all promotions, everything goes through them. They do not bring me guests per se, but act as mediators between travel agencies and myself. I cooperate with some fifty travel agencies. /.../ And, I have no time to visit [tourism] fairs. I give them my leaflets and they promote me. /.../ Since I started my business, they are with me. From the very first day. They initiated my [tourism] story.” (Respondent #2)

Clearly, public sector on the local level and mostly in the form of TOZC is present across the destination area, and relational exchange between public sector and private sector is detectable, yet the levels of this exchange appear very uneven. Rural settlements where tourism offer is established to a certain level – such as the case in Belo Blato, receive more of, at least nominal promotional attention, while others, where concrete endeavors are necessary – such as Perlez, remain overlooked. Furthermore, nature and level of collaboration between individual private stakeholders and public sector also demonstrate different dynamics, which is reminiscent of varying interaction levels observed between the Reserve and local tourism business, as well as among tourism businesses themselves. It may be contended that co-evolutionary processes in the “Carska Bara” destination mirror general circumstances when Serbian rural regions are concerned. While the resources – natural, cultural, historic – are abundant, and the tourism offer seems appealing, state investments in the development of rural tourism and the collaboration among the stakeholders included seem to be lacking (Đenadić et al., 2016).

Considering the study findings and pertaining discussion, in the last section the research questions are addressed, relevant conclusions drawn and prospective research possibilities are outlined.

6. DISCUSSION

In the “Carska Bara” destination area, the Reserve represents the pivotal point of tourism offer, and the core of tourism activity. Its tourism development path, analyzed by the means of ‘path dependence’ address the first research question stated in the introductory section of the study.

1) How does the concept of “path dependence” apply to SNR “Carska Bara”?
   - What has been the development path of the Reserve?
This study case results visibly demonstrate the existence of ‘path dependence’ in the tourism development of “Carska Bara”, however, the pattern of ‘path dependence’ detected is different to the one proposed by Ma and Hassink (2013) (Figure 1, p.13). In the “Carska Bara” case, the ‘preformation phase’, is followed by a combined ‘path creation and path development stage’. During this merged stage, the role of the state exercised via relevant institutions (see Segment D, Appendix) remained prevalent, which determined a prominent time along the path development of the Reserve – the one where tourism growth had been determined by the status of “Carska Bara” as ‘protected area’ (see Figure 10, p.50). This feature predisposed the emergence of ‘path as movement to stable phase’ that continues to this day. On the other hand, the entrepreneurial efforts of Commercial Fishery “Ečka” were crucial for the notion of recent ‘path plasticity phase’, mirrored, in this case, in the utilization of Joca Lake for sport fishing and its incorporation in the existing tourism product. In addition, although the concept of ‘lock-in’ is excluded from the “Carska Bara” case, as it is in the original Martin’s (2010) model as well as Ma and Hassink’s (2013), it can be contended that political lock-in exists, due to rigid tourism policies since the heart of tourism activity in the destination is a protected area. Although in this particular case the political ‘lock-in’ is not necessarily negative since the purpose of the strict policies is to protect and conserve the biodiversity and ecology of “Carska Bara”, these policies do obstruct further innovation when tourism offer of the Reserve is concerned. Similarly, again because the Reserve represents the crux of this ecorural destination towards which other tourism activities are geared and emanate from, a functional ‘lock-in’ can also be observed. In the case of “Carska Bara”, the Fishery, as the official manager of the Reserve, has an established network of clients whom it collaborates with, as well as rooted methods of production and working.

Nevertheless, to sum, the path dependence of the Reserve is determined by two fundamental elements, historically and geographically rooted: the fact that “Carska Bara” is a protected area and the fact that its designated manager is Commercial Fishery “Ečka” with diverse means of utilizing the area.
The following set of research sub-questions relates to the ‘co-evolutionary’ aspect of EEG which address causal and inter-relational mechanisms between public and private sectors that have shaped the tourism development in the “Carska Bara” destination area. (research question no. 2)

- What is the extent of co-evolution and interactive exchange between the Reserve and local tourism-oriented businesses?
Based on the primary and supporting data, Figure 11 (p.51) displays these processes across the destination area on the macro level. “Sibila” Hotel, put in operation in 1992, was the direct result of growing demand for receptive facilities as visitor numbers to the Reserve grew. Its cooperation with the Reserve persists. The International research-educational center in Belo Blato, opened in 2007 with the aid of donations (Respondent #5) was founded to promote the biodiversity of the Reserve in scientific circles and to tourists. Next, Kaštel “Ečka” in the Ečka village, although possessing its own development path, in recent years has become largely dependent on the Reserve visitor flows, therefore also expressing co-evolutionary relationship with “Carska Bara”. Besides apparent collaboration between the Reserve, Belo Blato community, and Belo Blato-based agriculture/tourism entrepreneur, there is no evidence of collaboration. Visitor flows exist, however only owing to geographical proximity between the Reserve and the stakeholders. This is the case of Perlez village, one entrepreneur in Belo Blato, and one entrepreneur in the village of Stajičevo. Nevertheless, the family-run enterprise in Stajičevo does traditionally cooperate with the Fishery as their designated fresh fish supplier. These perceptions all indicate that co-evolution and interactive exchange in the Reserve destination area exhibit varying levels of involvement, which are arguably the result of respective evolutionary paths of the stakeholders and their multiple roles, including those outside the tourism/hospitality domain (Brouder and Fullerton, 2015).

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 11**: Co-evolution and relational exchange between SNR “Carska Bara” and local tourism-related stakeholders  
Designed by author

The following research sub-question applies to causal and relational dynamics among tourism-related businesses in the destination area.
What is the extent of co-evolution and interactive exchange among the local tourism-oriented businesses themselves?

These relationships seem to be inconsistent on the micro- as they are on the macro level (Figure 12, p.52). Moreover, no mutual co-evolutionary relations have been detected in a sense that the establishment of one business incited the founding of another. Interaction among the involved stakeholders has been observed, however, across the destination area comprising five rural settlements, it appeared to be concentrated in the Belo Blato community. In Belo Blato, “Women’s Club”, local “Tourism Group”, “Culinary Amateurs’ Association” together with one agriculture/tourism entrepreneur seem to have a favorable rapport and collaborate regularly in an array of touristic events, promoting their village. Circumstances among private stakeholders in this community support Randelli et al. (2014) since in the agriculturally path-dependent settlement, tourism has been recognized as the ‘window of opportunity’ and potential for ‘new path’ creation. This attests to the notion that tourism can become a feasible option in enhancing the multi-functionality of rural areas. Moreover, these relations among Belo Blato stakeholders possibly resemble the concept of ‘community destination development model’ in which there are solid links between destination attractions and its local community (Jamal and Getz, 1995; Viken and Aarsaether, 2013). Curiously, one other Belo Blato-based entrepreneur does not belong to this local network of expertise, information and mutual assistance exchange. This indicates the complexity of inner relationships among community members themselves. As Figure 12 (p.52) shows, other than cooperation between one agriculture/tourism stakeholder in Belo Blato and Kaštel “Ečka” in the village of Ečka, there is no detectable inter-relational exchange among the stakeholders in the destination area. Informal efforts to network are initiated by the Belo Blato community, however it is the responsibility of the municipal tourism organization to act in official linking of these villages.

Figure 12: Relational exchange among tourism-related business in the destination area
Designed by author
The remaining research sub-questions relate to the dynamics of co-evolution and relational exchange between the Reserve and public sector, as well as the tourism-related stakeholders in the destination area and public sector, respectively.

- What is the extent of co-evolution and relational exchange between “Carska Bara” and public sector?

The influence of public sector on municipal, provincial and national level is evident along the evolutionary path of “Carska Bara”. The omni-presence of public sector in the form of policy regulations and legislations is similar to the findings of Ma and Hassink (2014) in the case study of Guilin, China. It supports the notion that exogenous factors require more attention alongside internal elements, as they clearly influence both relational interactions and consequently development paths of tourism areas. This is also evident in the case of the “Carska Bara” destination where, for instance, the roles of tourism agencies that have promoted the destination tourism experiences, and schools as main consumers of the Reserve tourism offer, have been prominent. On the municipality level, the Reserve, as the most attractive tourism destination of the Banat region, has been traditionally linked to Tourism Organization of Zrenjanin City (TOZC). Therefore, the relational exchange between “Carska Bara” and public sector has conventionally been established and functioning since the recognition and registration of the first protected area in middle 1950s. Nevertheless, it may be contended that the co-evolution between “Carska Bara” and public sector is rather difficult to discern. This is since there has been considerable structural reorganization in public sector paired with intricate cobweb of laws and legislations on national, and other administrative levels in Serbia (Stojković, 2015). These changes were again due to the overall turbulent political and socio-economic circumstances in the country and the transitional period, following the Balkan conflicts in the first half of the 1990s. These developments along with enduring post-socialist adaptations and inadequate transparency in administration bore impact on the country’s tourism industry as well (Hall, 2004). Hence, it can be argued that public sector itself, within and outside the tourism domain, possesses its own evolutionary and co-evolutionary paths, whose extent is beyond the scope of this research study. Also, Fishery “Ečka has gone through transformations, namely privatization. The tense relationship between the municipal government and the Fishery, ongoing for approximately a decade, stems precisely from the fact that a privately-owned enterprise oversees “Carska Bara”, a public good. This adverse relationship between the Fishery and the government of Zrenjanin is in stark contrast to the long-standing, constructive collaboration of “Carska Bara” and TOZC, showing that correlations between one establishment and public sector, although on the same administrative level, are not inherently homogeneous.

- What is the extent of co-evolution and relational exchange between local tourism businesses and public sector?

Figure 13 (p.54) displays how tourism-related businesses in the destination area all gravitate towards TOZC, and exhibit varying levels of inter-relational exchange. The cooperation is predominantly based on the promotional efforts of the municipal Tourism Organization, rather than active and practical role that TOZC should assume to develop
tourism in these settlements. For such reasons, certain strands of the collaboration between rural settlements or stakeholders themselves are only formalistic in nature. Furthermore, it is relevant to add that Law on Tourism in effect strictly prohibits local tourism organizations to engage in creation and sales of tour packages which would in turn supplement their limited budget (Stojković, 2015). The continuous lack of state funding, applicable in the Zrenjanin municipality case as well, may serve as one possible explanation as to why TOZC remains idle when tourism growth is concerned and why the Organization selectively focuses on collaboration with stakeholders whose tourism product is already established and recognizable on the market. This is exemplified by one agricultural/tourism entrepreneur based in Belo Blato. This family-owned, traditional farmstead developed along its own agriculture-rooted path, however, tourism-related business idea was initiated by TOZC themselves, as attested by both the entrepreneur and the Tourism Organization representative. Yet, this is an isolated case, and it supports the notion that tourism development task is less daunting when a solid base – such as an affluent and a well-managed property – previously exists. These circumstances are to an extent in line with findings of Pastras and Bramwell (2013) in the study of Athens, Greece. It is evident that public sector, here in the form of local tourism organization, has strategic favors which influence development paths and interactions on macro- and micro levels. Apart from the varying relational exchange between tourism stakeholders in private sector and TOZC, when co-evolution is concerned, there is no evidence of such mutually causal relationship in the destination area.

Figure 13: The “Carska Bara” destination area and relational exchange with public sector
Designed by author
Ultimately, it may be contended that the development path of the Reserve destination area, defined as an ‘ecorural destination’ given its geographical, and socio-economic layout, is suitable for the analysis based on the EEG notions of ‘path dependence’ and ‘co-evolution’. Nevertheless, as shown throughout the study findings, the tourism evolutionary path of the Reserve itself is different to the one proposed by Ma and Hassink (2013). The emergence of path plasticity in the “Carska Bara” case is reminiscent of similar processes of incremental modifications and innovative tourism growth within the existing institutional framework described by Halkier and Therkelsen (2013). Similarly, novelty in tourism emanates from combining experiences of two different industries as depicted by Larsson and Lindström (2014) is also visible in the “Carska Bara” example.

Co-evolutionary and inter-relational exchanges in the destination area are detectable, however they are of varying intensity, on different levels, and between different stakeholders. These findings are in line with the literature on tourism in rural areas of Vojvodina and Serbia (Pavlović et al., 2015; Njegov, Demirović, and Radović, 2015, Đenadić et al., 2016) demonstrating that the cooperation among tourism-related stakeholders, within private sector, and between private and public sectors is insufficient. Partnerships between tourism-related stakeholders and Reserve management do not exist, although they might improve networking and even policy-making, as observed in the case of the UK national park tourism partnership study (Bramwell and Cox, 2009). Along similar lines, potential formal collaboration and networking between the Reserve and local stakeholders, could eventually contribute to alternative, sustainable governance in the destination area, as seen in the case of Whistler, Canada by Gill and Williams (2011). Besides the potential in new unions of the stakeholders in private sector, further and more substantial state-funded development investments (Respondent #2, Respondent #3, Respondent #9) as well as education of tourism-related stakeholders, both current and prospective ones, is needed (Jegdić, 2010; Pajvančić and Markov, 2011). This is due to the recognition that local population in agricultural/rural areas has the fundamental natural, cultural, infrastructural potential for the establishment and growth of tourism/hospitality-related businesses (Pajvančić and Markov, 2011; Pavlović et al., 2015; Njegov, Demirović, and Radović, 2015, Đenadić et al., 2016).

This prospect of tourism as the drive for utilization of multi-functionality of rural areas and regional development is a well-present topic across the pertinent literature (e.g. Medojević, Milosavljević, and Punišić, 2011; Novković, Mutavdžić, and Vukelić, 2013; Randelli, Romei and Tortora, 2014; Đenadić et al., 2016). Nevertheless, how this development unfolds in transitional countries such as Serbia and, subsequently Serbia’s most prominent agricultural region of Vojvodina, is contingent on a variety of factors, which are path-dependent in geo-political and socio-economic aspects. The case of “Carska Bara” ecorural destination area represents an example of the ways different historic, geographic, natural and human agents have come to shape this destination. Further, more comprehensive understanding of mechanisms behind tourism destination developmental processes can arguably contribute to both enhancement of the demand-side experiences and the provision of these experiences by the supply side.
6.1 Potential future research avenues

Protected areas as tourism destinations exemplify significant resources for research tourism studies, as well as application of interdisciplinary approaches, such as the combination of EEG and tourism studies. As seen in the case study of “Carska Bara” destination area, these spaces are complex amalgamations of natural abundance and rich cultural and historic heritage. As such, they lay foundations for varied research approaches and methodologies, wherein the applications of evolutionary economic geography and the concepts of ‘path dependence’ and ‘co-evolution’ represent just one possible strand of scientific approach. The “Carska Bara” destination area itself may be further explored within EEG. The comprehensive co-evolutionary theoretical framework encompassing co-evolutionary processes in a tourism area development as proposed by Ma and Hassink (2013) could be applied, with in-depth analysis of these developments across not only sectors, as in this case study, but also products and institutions.

Alternatively, destination development with the application of EEG could be observed in numerous other Vojvodina special nature reserves and rural settlements in their proximity. In the province of Vojvodina there are 12 special nature reserves with established forms of recreational tourism and other leisure activities, as well as with significant potential for growth of sustainable tourism, namely ecotourism (Stojanović et al., 2011). Aside from special nature reserves, Vojvodina is home to one national park, two areas of exceptional importance, two regional parks and seven nature parks (Stojanović et al., 2011). The importance of tourism development in these areas is manifold and includes raising awareness of nature protection and conservation, creation of novel, sustainable tourism products as well as inclusion of local population and the overall improvement of infrastructure and standard of living (Stojanović et al., 2011). As tourism growth in protected areas typically requires careful planning and cooperation of multiple stakeholders from both public and private sector, co-evolutionary approach to scrutinizing mechanisms and dynamics of cross- and intra-sectoral relationships would potentially benefit their betterment. Moreover, a longitudinal methodological approach would also be of importance, similarly to the studies of Gill and Williams (2011; 2014) as analysis of evolving and co-evolving processes in the long term may contribute to a better understanding of changing circumstances, especially in Serbian public sector.

Furthermore, comparative analyses of tourism areas’ evolutionary processes could also facilitate the exchange of different tourism management, marketing and planning practices that may be either applied more widely. Comparative analyses could be given a further geographical spread, and, for instance, similar protected areas in the neighboring Croatia could be included. This is of relevance, since Croatia, a member of the European Union as of 2013, may provide examples and lessons of what could be possible development paths for such tourism destination areas in Serbia, which obtained its European Union candidate status in 2012 (Orlović-Lovren, Crnčević and Milijić, 2013).
7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This research study has aimed to describe and examine the tourism developmental trajectory and inter-relational exchange among tourism-related stakeholders from public and private sector in the setting of a small-scale, nature-based tourism destination where a special nature reserve represents the heart of tourism activities. This was done via the theoretical framework of evolutionary economic geography and concepts of ‘path dependence’ and ‘co-evolution’. The results have shown that natural resources combined with historic and cultural heritage represent important preconditions for development of a tourism destination, and that involvement of and interaction of tourism-, and not only exclusively tourism-related entities serve as a vital dimension along this trajectory path.

Accomplishments, regardless of their scale, in a tourism destination, such as the “Carska Bara” area, in rural and/or peripheral localities where tourism is regarded as a possible solution to the demographic and economic deterioration attest to the viability of these destinations. Steps that are taken in the direction of destination development and promotion and, especially, in forging as well as strengthening ties between small, local entrepreneurs with active involvement and assistance of public sector can make a difference in these destination areas. These gradual positive steps can represent a ‘ripple effect’ where incremental changes and investments in a destination may have larger impact on the local community, and beyond. Tourism is, then, in such processes not the cure-all for existing unfavorable socio-economic circumstances. Rather, it is a versatile tool that can, when managed sensibly, facilitate societal transformations that can have lasting positive effects.

With these perceptions in mind, coupled with the facts that today, perhaps more than ever, desire for exploration and conservation of natural world, and deeper understanding of tradition, culture and the ‘grass roots’ community, it may be contended that small destinations brimming with these resources deserve a rightful place in tourism studies, planning and on tourism maps.
8. REFERENCES


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9. APPENDIX

A. RESPONDENT AND INTERVIEW INFORMATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Respondent profile</th>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Interview type</th>
<th>Interview date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>External expert (Geography, tourism and hospitality higher education provider)</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Novi Sad</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>February 28, 2017</td>
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<td>#2</td>
<td>Agricultural producer/tourism entrepreneur</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Belo Blato</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>February 13, 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td>Project manager, SNR “Carska Bara”, Commercial Fishery “Ečka” Corp.</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Novi Sad</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>February 28, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4</td>
<td>Tourism manager, SNR “Carska Bara”, Commercial Fishery “Ečka” Corp.</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Lukino Selo</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>March 1, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5</td>
<td>Tourism/ tourism event coordinator, local elementary school principal</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Belo Blato</td>
<td>E-mail correspondence</td>
<td>February 21-22, 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>#6</td>
<td>Manager assistant, Tourism/hospitality provider</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Stajićevo</td>
<td>E-mail correspondence</td>
<td>March 14, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#7</td>
<td>Tourism/hospitality provider</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Belo Blato</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>February 11, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#8</td>
<td>Tourism/hospitality entrepreneur</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Belo Blato</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>February 12, 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>#9</td>
<td>Director, Tourist Information Center</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Zrenjanin</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>February 13, 2017</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
B. RURAL SETTLEMENTS IN THE DESTINATION AREA

Map of Lukino Selo
Source: maps.google.com

Commercial fishery “Ečka” and “Sibila” Hotel
Source: ribnjakecka.com

Map of Ečka
Source: maps.google.com

Castle “Ečka”, Ečka
Source: zrenjaninheritage.com

Map of Stajićevo
Source: maps.google.com

Ethno-village “Tiganjica”, Stajićevo
Source: serbia.com
C. INTERVIEW QUESTION TEMPLATES

I. Interview questions for Director, Tourist Information Center, Zrenjanin municipality (public sector)
   1. What are the main roles and responsibilities of the Tourist Information Center on local/municipal level?
   2. What can you tell me about your cooperation with SNR “Carska Bara”?
   3. How do you cooperate with Tourism Organization of Vojvodina, and Tourism Organization of Serbia?
      3.1 How has that cooperation influenced the development of tourism in the Reserve?
   4. Who else do you collaborate with in both public and private sector?
   5. How has the public sector influenced the evolution of tourism in the Reserve?
   6. What have been the major challenges and obstacles in the tourism development on the municipal level?
   7. How would you describe the tourism supply of SNR “Carska Bara” in comparison to the other four special nature reserves in the province?
   8. What is your vision of the rural tourism in the future?

II. Interview questions for Tourism manager, SNR “Carska Bara” (private sector)
   1. What can you tell me about the development of tourism in the Reserve, chronologically?
      1.2 How about tourism activities related to the surrounding lakes? (also owned and managed by Commercial fishery “Ečka” corp., author’s note)
   2. Who do you collaborate with in the private sector in the surrounding settlements, and what is the nature of that collaboration?
   3. Who do you collaborate with in the public sector (on local, province- and national level) and what is the nature that collaboration?
   4. What have been the major challenges and obstacles in the tourism development in the Reserve so far?

III. Interview questions for Project manager, SNR “Carska Bara” (private sector)
   1. What is your professional view on the development of tourism in protected areas? And specifically, in SNR “Carska Bara”?
   2. What can you tell me about the management (organizational) structure of the Reserve?
   3. How would you characterize the development of tourism in the Reserve, chronologically?
   4. Who do you collaborate with in the public sector, on local, provincial and national level and what is the nature of that collaboration?
   5. Who do you collaborate with in the private sector, in the local rural communities and what is the nature of that collaboration?
6. What challenges would you single out when tourism development and management in the Reserve is concerned?

IV. **Interview questions for tourism/tourism event coordinator, Belo Blato community (public sector)**
   1. What has been, in general, the development path of tourism in Belo Blato?
   2. How would you describe the nature of relationship (interaction) with SNR “Carska Bara”?
   3. How would you describe the nature of relationship with other tourism-oriented businesses in the area?
   4. How and to what extent has the public sector influenced the development of tourism in Belo Blato?
   5. What have been the challenges or the obstacles on the Belo Blato tourism development path?

V. **Interview questions for the External expert, geography, tourism and hospitality higher education provider (public sector)**
   1. Based on your research experience, what is presently your view on the development of tourism in protected areas in Vojvodina Province, and especially in SNR “Carska Bara”?
   2. In your opinion, how has the public sector influenced the tourism in the Reserve and neighboring area?
   3. In your opinion, how has the private sector influenced the tourism in the Reserve and neighboring area?
   4. What do you think about the collaboration between the sectors when tourism is concerned, specifically, in the Reserve?
      4.1 What have been the major challenges in that respect?
   5. Has the academic community in any way been included in tourism development in the Reserve and the adjacent area?

VI. **Interview questions for local tourism/hospitality businesses in the Reserve destination area (private sector)**
   1. What has been the development path of your business?
   2. How would you describe the nature of interaction with the Reserve?
   3. How would you describe the nature of interaction with other local tourism-oriented businesses?
   4. How and to what extent has the public sector (on local, municipal level) influenced the development of your business?
   5. What have been the major challenges and/or obstacles in the development of your business so far?
D. HIERARCHICAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF SNR “CARSKA BARA”

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<th>NATIONAL LEVEL (Belgrade)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Government of Republic of Serbia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ministry of Agriculture and Environmental Protection</td>
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<td>(Sector for Environmental Protection)</td>
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<td>Institute for Nature Conservation of Republic of Serbia</td>
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<th>PROVINCIAL LEVEL (Novi Sad)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government of Autonomous Province of Vojvodina</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Secretariat for Town Planning and Environmental Protection)</td>
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<td>Institute for Nature Conservation of Vojvodina Province</td>
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<th>LOCAL LEVEL (Lukino Selo)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commercial Fishery “Ečka” Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Unit “Carska Bara – Reserve”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Interview data (Respondent #3), Project manager at SNR “Carska Bara”  
Designed by author*