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## "Life after the pandemic will not be the same as before": How the revenue-savvy Brijuni National Park has navigated COVID-19 and is planning for the future

The 34-km<sup>2</sup> Brijuni National Park in Croatia comprises 14 islands and their surrounding waters in the Adriatic Sea. When MPA News reported on Brijuni in 2014, we said it might be the most revenue-savvy MPA in the world. During the summer high season, the park collects a visitor fee of 27 euros (US \$33), which includes a ferry ride, a guide for four hours, a tourist train ride, and entrance to museums on the main island. The park manages three hotels and three guest villas on site, with villa rentals ranging up to 1800 euros/night (US \$2186). In addition, it hosts and caters several weddings per year, generating additional revenue. It also operates a golf course and a safari park.

To be clear, Brijuni is a national park first, with extensive conservation, research, and education programs. But the park is really smart about tourism, on which most of its revenue is based.

When the COVID-19 pandemic started, and tourism nearly everywhere slowed or stopped, Brijuni's budget took a big hit. MPA News returned to Brijuni to see how the MPA has responded to this challenge, and what lessons it could provide to other MPAs on lowering costs, securing revenues, and rebuilding a tourism base.

Marno Milotić is the general manager of Brijuni National Park, and Sandro Dujmović is the park's scientific manager.

### **MPA News: Marno and Sandro, in what ways has the COVID pandemic impacted tourism to Brijuni?**

**Marno Milotić:** The COVID pandemic has strongly impacted tourism in all of Croatia, including the Brijuni National Park. By the end of October 2020, our revenues decreased significantly compared to the same period in 2019:

- The number of visitors declined 61%.
- Revenues from the sales of excursions declined 53%.
- Revenues from our restaurants declined 44%.
- Revenues from the Department of Accommodation (our hotels and villas) declined 33%.
- Revenues from our park's Department of Sports and Recreation – which includes our golf, tennis, diving, cycling, and kayaking activities – declined 16%.

What has stabilized us to some extent has been revenue from international projects, which have grown in recent years. That revenue remained steady for us in the past several months. So the total reduction in revenues for the park as a whole, compared to 2019, is around 50%.

### **Those international projects have helped diversify your revenue stream over the past decade. Can you describe what the projects are?**

**Sandro Dujmović:** Yes. The projects are described here. Briefly, in partnership with other institutions, we have won two EU-funded grants as part of the Interreg Med program, which focuses on sustainable growth in the Mediterranean region. These grants support the employment of several staff at the park and the hosting of trainings, workshops, and research. We also secured a large, 6-million euro grant of EU funds through the Croatian government to finance an array of projects within the park from 2016-2021.

## **How has Brijuni National Park responded to the decline in revenue this year? Have you cut costs?**

**Milotić:** We have been constantly trying to adapt to the situation, in various ways.

First, we have tried to keep our guests – as best we can under the circumstances – while attracting new ones. What's been important to recognize is that the habits of our guests have changed during the pandemic: they are now looking more for places with fewer people and less crowds. It is about building a relationship of trust. The guests need to be sure that the destination they are coming to is safe for their health – now more than ever.

Our region of Istria in Croatia introduced measures at the beginning of the pandemic that have contributed to keeping the number of infections low. At one point, Istria had the fewest infections per capita of any region in Europe. In the National Park, we have reduced the number of passengers on boats and in tourist trains, in museums, at exhibitions, and in guided groups in general. We introduced the mandatory wearing of masks in transport and indoors, as well as by our staff.

After each boat crossing or train ride, the vehicles (train and boat) are disinfected. We also place shoe disinfectants at the entrance to the boat. Our museum spaces are cleaned after each group, etc. We have done everything we could to reduce the possibility of infection. Our visitors have accepted it and recognized it as good practice.

We also introduced the Brijuni Pocket Guide app for smartphones, so our guests could have the option of exploring the park on their own and avoiding close contact with other visitors, such as on guided group tours. By a stroke of luck, we were already developing this app before the pandemic began. The app cost about 13000 euros to build. It is free for users.

At the same time, we have cut costs. In spring, we stopped investments and large projects worth about 3.5 million euros that were not already financed by the EU funds that Sandro mentioned. Due to the spring lockdown and the reduced mobility in the following months, many surveys and monitoring exercises could not be implemented on time, so we postponed them for the fall or for 2021. We also postponed several international collaborations, workshops, and trainings, or did them online.

We managed as best as we could. Although our revenues have decreased, we are proud to have kept all our employees and no one has been let go. When you permanently employ around 250 people and you finance largely by yourself, it is certainly not a small thing.

## **You mentioned attracting new guests. Even with the new safety measures, that can't be easy to do during a pandemic.**

**Milotić:** We are advertising more and have introduced significant discounts on ticket prices. There are still guests on Brijuni, the weather is nice, and people are 'fleeing' to nature. They feel safe here, as there are no crowds.

Along that line, we have noticed that spending per guest has actually increased this year – as when people are less stressed, they spend more. The pandemic experience has been so stressful for everyone, locked in their homes most days, that a visit to Brijuni is by comparison even more relaxing than in normal years.

**Dujmović:** Therefore opportunities exist to attract new guests. We just need to recognize those opportunities and turn the situation into an advantage for us, instead of thinking that we have an unsolvable problem. We believe that people will turn to nature, visiting its beauties more and spending less time indoors. That represents a great opportunity for us – together with great responsibility, since we are primarily a national park where tourism must never be ahead of nature protection.

## **With vaccines on the way, the COVID pandemic will end in a year or so, hopefully. But the possibility of a future pandemic or other unforeseen interruptions will remain. In terms of Brijuni National Park, do you expect that the post-COVID future will be the same as *before* COVID, with tourism returning? Or have things changed for the park in a fundamental way?**

**Dujmović:** Life after the pandemic will not be the same as before, at least not for a very long time. Our business strategies will change accordingly. As we mentioned before, we have already introduced the Brijuni Pocket Guide app for smartphones, which, without much advertising, has already been used by about 30% of our guests as an alternative to a classic guided tour. Online ticket sales have also increased compared to before.

People are obviously no longer comfortable being around strangers. That is why we plan to introduce changes in passenger transport on the island itself. For example, we are considering a "hop on - hop off" type of tourist train so guests are not confined with the same group of people for a significant time. At the same time we want to expand the guest's experience of the park. These changes all go in the direction of better visitor management. We are working with a consultant company now to conduct a visitor management study on Brijuni. That document will help us better understand the present status of tourism here, and foresee future alternatives.

## **For more information:**

**Marno Milotić**, Brijuni National Park, Croatia. Email: [marno.milotic@np-brijuni.hr](mailto:marno.milotic@np-brijuni.hr)

**Sandro Dujmović**, Brijuni National Park, Croatia. Email: [sandro.dujmovic@np-brijuni.hr](mailto:sandro.dujmovic@np-brijuni.hr)

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