

International Symposium on Biology of Rare and Endemic Plants (For Short BIORARE Symposium)

TODEG: AN EXAMPLE FOR ECOTOURISM IN FOREST ECOSYSTEMS:

ABSTRACT

The Foresters' Association of Turkey (The TOD), which is an "Association for the Public Welfare," was founded in 1924. Some aims of the TOD are "extending love for forests throughout the country, increasing public awareness for forest resources, conserving forests". The Ecotourism Group of the TOD (TODEG) was founded in 2000 as a voluntary / non-profit working group. TODEG organizes 10-13 excursions each year, and tries to introduce forests to tourists in the context of forest ecosystem. Apart from protected areas, TODEG places emphasis to rare and unique forest ecosystems without a legal status. TODEG also organizes events for school kids.

Canyons, lakes, wetlands, wildlife stations, bird nesting areas, fossil forests, and geological formations, archaeological and historical values in forest ecosystems are in the group's excursion range as well as forests.

Key words: TOD, TODEG, ecotourism, forest ecosystem, TIES

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Urbanization and industrialization has created a great deal of pressure on rural and forest areas, Forest areas have been attacked by means of legislation; habitats to endemic and rare plant species are shrinking in Turkey.

Forest villagers are the poorest in Turkey and they are indirectly forced to leave their villages to make ends meet,

The society is sometimes misinformed about forest fires, erosion control, national parks, wild life, and afforestation by related institutions.

From all these factors, eco-tourism concept stands out to contribute to rural development and conserving nature, to inform those who feel the weight of city life and act with an impulse to understand nature and tend to grow consciousness for conservation.

Ecotourism can be used as an important tool to conserve the ecosystem, primarily by the locals living in or nearby the ecosystem. These efforts may also be appreciated in terms of mitigating the effects of climate change and increasing carbon sequestration capacity.

Having the idea of contributing rural development and informing the society about damaged forest ecosystems, a few volunteers from the Foresters' Association of Turkey founded TOD Ecotourism Group, TODEG with their motto "it is not far" in 2000. These volunteers were going to organize non- profit excursions and inform the participants with scientific data to create public opinion about special ecosystems. Their priority for choosing the excursion area was forest ecosystems, which covers roughly 20 million hectares in Turkey and is also the area of expertise for those volunteers.

Excursions began in 2001; four of the planned five excursions were executed. These excursions showed that considering the features of the destination was not enough, physical conditions of participants, whether they appropriately dressed and so on were needed to be taken into consideration. While informing the participants about the ecosystem properties, wild animals, erosion traces, non-wood forest products, afforestation and other forestry activities, the difficulties of acting together with a group of people from various fields and very different age groups were being experienced.

Getting more experienced in excursions, some rules were developed and implemented. A pioneer and a rearguard, walkie talkies, excursion surveys, first aid case against insect bites and simple injuries became compulsory for every excursion. Group members took first aid courses.

Since TODEG is an Ankara based group, early excursion destinations were determined near Ankara and the target participants were mainly from Ankara. Therefore, many places around Ankara like Soğuksu National Park, Karagöl, Beynam Forest, Işıkdağı, Eğriova, Yünlü Plateau, Kirmir River, Mahkeme Ağacı, Sivrihisar, Çamkoru, Beypazarı Bird Paradise, Çamlıdere Fossil Forest, Hasanoğlan, Elmadag were firstly visited. 14 of 41 national parks in Turkey have been visited so far; information about their source values, threats to those were given to the participants of those excursions. Apart from Nature Parks and Protected Areas, as seen in eastern Black Sea region, Çatacık, Yenice, Pınarbaşı examples, forest ecosystems with high source values were included in excursion program.

In each excursion, it was made sure that an expert informed the participants. It was aimed to make the participants aware of the values and threats to the area and stay on nature's side. Information, security and health were the main issues to be considered.

TODEG, which has organized ten excursions per year in average since 2000, no matter how much it tried to make every excursion to become a source of income for the local people, it couldn't reach the expected level in this sense. Main reason for that was local people was not well prepared for such excursions.

New members from different backgrounds rather than forest engineers joined TODEG and they made it stronger. Excursion surveys, preparations and evaluations for executed excursion were made in usual meetings every other week. As the group began to acquire more experience, they started to organize long distance excursions and the number of annual excursions was increased. With its registered logo and membership to TIES, TODEG has institutionally moved a bit further. Furthermore, TODEG tried to create awareness among school kids by visiting them as well.

TODEG, organized a workshop called "Ecotourism in Forest Ecosystems" attended by 91 delegates from 14 universities, 25 public institutions and NGOs on 20-22 May 2010. The workshop provided an opportunity to review ecotourism, which is also a new concept in the world and to contribute to its nature friendly implementation in Turkey.