



The Impacts of COVID-19 on Asia's Protected Areas

Results from a Preliminary Survey of Protected Area Management Authorities, July 2020



Asia Protected Areas Partnership





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Asia Protected Areas Partnership

The Asia Protected Areas Partnership (APAP) has been designed as a key platform to help governments and other stakeholders collaborate for more effective management of protected areas in the region.

APAP was initiated in 2013 at the first Asia Parks Congress held in Japan and was formally launched the following year at the IUCN World Parks Congress in Australia. It is chaired by IUCN, International Union for Conservation of Nature, and co-chaired by an APAP member-organisation on a rotational basis. As of November 2020, APAP had 21 Members from 17 countries in Asia, as well as two Associate Members.

The goal of APAP is to facilitate improved conservation outcomes for protected areas in Asia by:

1. Promoting best practices and innovative solutions to the challenges facing the region's protected areas, through knowledge sharing and capacity building;
2. Strengthening transboundary and regional cooperation; and,
3. Raising awareness about the multiple benefits of Asia's protected areas, both within and outside the region.

APAP also aspires to support national and regional efforts to implement the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity, a global set of goals and targets, which has been adopted by countries around the world to halt the loss of biodiversity.

More information about APAP can be found at: <http://www.asiaprotectedareaspartnership.org>

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The Impacts of COVID-19 on Asia's Protected Areas

Results from a Preliminary Survey of Protected Area Management Authorities

1. Introduction

COVID-19 has affected all aspects of society in unprecedented ways, and protected areas in Asia have been no exception. In response to mounting concerns about the potential negative impacts of COVID-19 on conservation, the Asia Protected Areas Partnership (APAP) carried out a survey to:

1. Help APAP understand the impacts of the pandemic on the region's protected areas and the measures that are being taken to address these; and,
2. Identify future opportunities for protected areas in the post-COVID-19 era.

2. Methodology

The questionnaire was inspired by a similar survey carried out by the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) in Africa. It was designed in June 2020 by the IUCN Asia Regional Office, which serves as the APAP Secretariat. The questionnaire was subsequently sent by email to all 21 APAP members in 17 countries, two APAP associate members, and nine other protected area agencies in the Asia region (non-APAP members).

From June until the end of July 2020, the APAP Secretariat received completed questionnaires from **12 PA agencies in nine countries**, namely Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Japan, Malaysia, Myanmar, Republic of Korea, Singapore and Sri Lanka. This represented a response rate of 37.5 per cent.

The questionnaire consisted of nine main questions and a number of supplementary questions. All questions included a "comments box" in which respondents could provide additional information. A summary of the major issues addressed by the questionnaire can be found in Table 1 below; the full questionnaire is presented in Annex 1.

Table 1. Major issues addressed by the APAP questionnaire on COVID-19.

Questionnaire	
1	How have visitor services been affected by COVID-19?
2	How have conservation activities such as patrolling been affected?
3	How have engagement and outreach with local communities been affected?
4	How have PA staffing levels been affected?
5	How have staff working conditions been affected?
6	Are there any particular measures that will be continued after the pandemic is over?
7	Are there discussions underway to prepare for future outbreaks of infectious diseases ?
8	What lessons for protected areas can be learned from the COVID-19 pandemic?
9	How might APAP and IUCN assist protected areas management authorities in relation to COVID-19?

3. Results

3.1 Visitor Services

Figure 1 summarises the responses received on the impact of COVID-19 on visitor services. **Seventy-five percent** of respondents reported that protected areas had been partially or completely closed as a result of the pandemic. **Twenty-five percent** of respondents said that protected areas had remained open largely as usual, but with social distancing rules.

How has COVID-19 affected visitor services in protected areas?



Figure 1. The impact of COVID-19 on visitor services.

The survey revealed that protected area management authorities had introduced a range of measures in response to COVID-19. For example:

- Measures such as mask-wearing, the use of hand sanitizers, and social distancing were being widely implemented;
- Public facilities, such as visitor centers, campsites, and shelters, had been closed to prevent mass infection;

- Visitor activities had been significantly restricted, including activities such as swimming and night safaris;
- Some management authorities were also restricting the number of visitors allowed into protected areas.

Several respondents noted that the pandemic had led to a number of positive impacts. For example:

- Some respondents reported that - as visitor numbers had fallen - wildlife had begun to return to areas from which it had been previously absent;
- With the reduction in visitors, PA management authorities in some areas had been able to concentrate on over-due maintenance of facilities and trails;
- The pandemic had stimulated some PA management authorities to introduce new visitor activities to compensate for reduced physical access to protected areas (e.g. virtual reality tours and communications using Social Network Services).

However, respondents also noted that the income of local communities had decreased in many areas as a result of the drop in tourism. There were concerns that this would make communities more dependent on the natural resources within protected areas (e.g., Non-Timber Forest Products).

3.2 Conservation Activities

Figure 2 summarises the impacts of COVID-19 on conservation activities, such as patrolling, law enforcement, monitoring and research, control of invasive species, and habitat restoration.

Seventy-five percent of respondents said that conservation activities in protected areas had continued as usual or with some minor modifications. For example, in some areas, conservation activities had been re-oriented to focus on patrolling PA boundaries and trails. Respondents also noted that rangers at some sites were becoming increasingly involved in activities such as the preparation of signage for the public (e.g., signs emphasising the importance of social distancing), and supervising and managing visitors.

The remaining **twenty-five percent** of respondents said that conservation activities had been partially stopped. One respondent stated that the government budget for conservation activities had been reduced by half, affecting patrolling, research and field monitoring. Concerns were also expressed that the disruption to research activities would lead to inconsistent data collection.

How has COVID-19 affected conservation activities in protected areas?

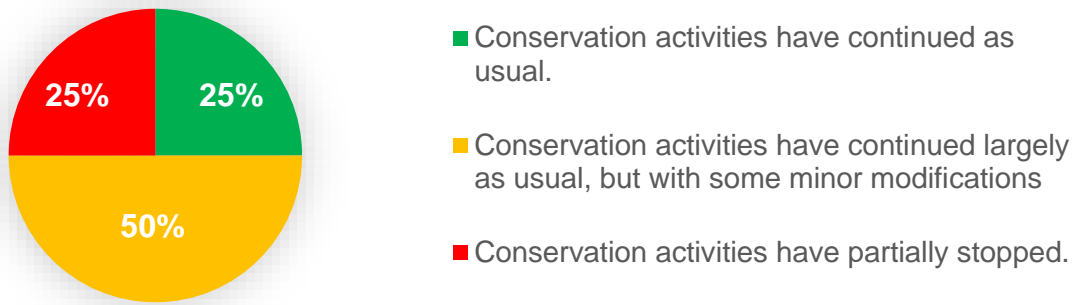


Figure 2. The impact of COVID-19 on conservation activities.

3.3 Local Community Engagement and Outreach

Figure 3 summarises the impacts of COVID-19 on local community engagement and outreach.

Fifty-nine percent of respondents reported that engagement with local communities had entirely or partially stopped. For example, many events, festivals and official meetings with local communities had been canceled or turned into virtual events, and visitation to Indigenous peoples' villages had been stopped. Some respondents expressed concerns about the negative impact that these measures were having on activities requiring public consultations and engagement, such as management planning, education and awareness campaigns, and socio-economic surveys. In addition, there were concerns that the limited availability of alternative livelihood activities might lead to increased illegal hunting, logging and fishing.

Forty-one percent of respondents said that engagement and outreach had continued as usual, but with some modifications, such as social distancing and the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). One respondent observed that Community Patrolling Groups had been able to continue their patrolling activities, and that the community monitoring and reporting system was still being implemented.

A number of respondents noted that special measures had been put into place to assist local communities, including:

- The provision of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) support to mountain guides and porters;
- The provision of temporary discounts to private operators working within PAs;
- The provision of logistical support for local communities, especially Indigenous people;
- The donation of special funds and emergency supplies; and
- The establishment of "drive-through" farmers' markets.

How has COVID-19 affected engagement and outreach with local communities?



Figure 3. The impact of COVID-19 on local community engagement and outreach.

3.4 Staffing

Figure 4 summarises the impact of COVID-19 on PA staffing levels. According to the survey results, **83 per cent** of respondents reported that staffing levels had remained unchanged. However, a number of respondents expressed concerns about the impacts of COVID-19 on staff wellbeing. For example, they noted that:

- Staff were vulnerable to coming into contact with people who have the virus but are asymptomatic;
- Staff capacity building, training and awareness programmes were no longer permitted;
- In addition to their regular work, staff were being required to carry out extra duties, such as advising park visitors to abide by safe distancing measures; this had led to an increase in workloads.

The other **17 per cent** of respondents said that staffing levels in protected areas had decreased, as a result of reduced government expenditure on conservation and a decrease in the income of protected areas. Some of the respondents noted that special staffing measures had been put into place in response to the pandemic. For example, in some areas:

- Staff from HQ and other enforcement agencies had been deputed to help with patrolling;
- A new system of two working shifts had been introduced, with staff spending 50 per cent of their time at the office and 50 per cent of their time working from home;
- The government had decided not to recruit additional PA staff because of budgetary constraints. In addition, no salary increments for existing PA staff had been provided.

How has COVID-19 affected protected area staffing levels?



Figure 4. The impact of COVID-19 on PA staffing levels.

3.5 Staff Working Conditions

Figure 5 summarises the impacts of COVID-19 on PA staff working conditions.

Seventy-five per cent of respondents reported that COVID-19 had led to changes in the working conditions of their staff.

Has COVID-19 affected the working conditions, workloads, safety or well-being of protected areas staff?

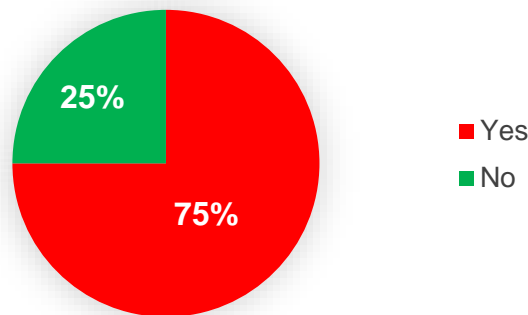


Figure 5. The impact of COVID-19 on PA staff working conditions.

Of the nine respondents who reported a change in staff working conditions, only two said that workloads had decreased. The remaining seven reported that workloads had increased, as a result of new and additional duties and the new burdens associated with safe working requirements (such as smaller teams, split teams, safe distancing measures, working from home, working with a mask, etc.).

3.6 Prospects for Continuing Measures after the Pandemic Has Ended

Figure 6 summarises the responses received on the prospects for continuing measures after the COVID-19 pandemic has ended.

Will new measures that were introduced in response to COVID-19 be continued after the pandemic is over?

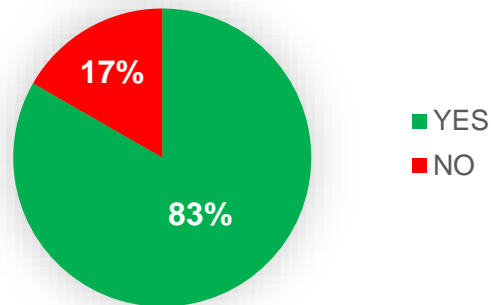


Figure 6. Percentage of respondents who reported that new measures would be continued after the pandemic (in green) or stopped (in red).

Eighty-three per cent of respondents said that new measures introduced in protected areas in response to COVID-19 will be continued after the pandemic ends. For example, many respondents stated that they expected to:

- Continue to implement health precautions and maintain strict standard operating procedures; and,
- Continue to use technology, such as virtual reality for nature interpretation programmes, drones for patrolling, and CCTV to count visitors and monitor visitation to protected areas.

Overall, COVID-19 has led to greater use of technology in protected area management, and many of these uses seem likely to be continued.

3.7 Preparation for Future Outbreaks of Infectious Diseases

Figure 7 summarises the responses received on the preparation for future outbreaks of infectious diseases.

Eighty-three per cent of respondents stated that discussions to prepare for future outbreaks were already underway. Among the measures being considered to help prevent the spread of infectious diseases were the following:

- Development of standard operating procedures;
- Determination of PA carrying capacities in light of social distancing requirements;
- Introduction of online ticketing systems;

- Introduction of new health precautions and the development of special visitor management procedures to prevent the spread of infectious diseases;
- Greater use of technology and reduced reliance on human resources.

Are there any discussions underway in your organisation to prepare for future outbreaks of infectious diseases?

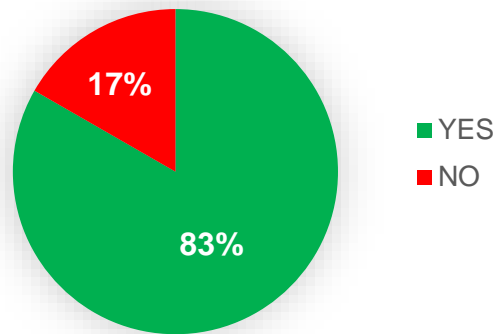


Figure 7. Status of discussions to prepare for future outbreaks of infectious diseases.

3.8 Lessons Learned for Protected Areas

Respondents identified a number of lessons for protected areas, based on their experiences of dealing with PA management during the COVID-19 pandemic. These included:

- The importance of sanitation in protected areas;
- The usefulness of engaging technological assets in PA and visitor management;
- The need for rules and regulations related to social distancing (not only between people, but also between people and wildlife);
- The need for governments to prioritise the conservation and restoration of habitats for wild species in the post-COVID era;
- The need to increase public awareness and understanding of the importance of protected areas.

3.9 Suggestions for APAP/IUCN

Respondents identified a number of ways in which APAP and IUCN could assist protected area agencies to respond to COVID-19. For example, it was suggested that APAP/IUCN could:

- Collate and share information, case studies and policies on PA management and COVID-19;
- Help build the capacity of PA staff in relation to health and safety issues;
- Disseminate recent research findings on the impacts of COVID-19, focusing on wildlife and socio-economic aspects;

- Assist PA management authorities to access funding, training and equipment to address the impacts of COVID-19.

4. Discussion

It is important to emphasise that this survey represents only a snapshot in time. It was undertaken at an early stage in the pandemic, and the situation may have changed significantly in many areas as the pandemic has continued (and often worsened). It is also important to note that the response rate (37.5 %) was relatively low. The results should therefore be treated with some caution.

Bearing these caveats in mind, the overall picture that emerged from the survey was more positive than might have been expected, at least in terms of conservation impacts. Although a majority of respondents reported that protected areas were fully or partially closed at the time of the survey, it was encouraging to note that conservation activities, such as patrolling, appeared to be continuing in most areas. Similarly, it was also encouraging to note that there were few reports of staff reductions. Whether protected areas will be able to continue conservation activities and maintain staff numbers as the pandemic lengthens remains to be seen.

The greatest impacts to date appear to be on local communities, who have experienced a loss of tourism income in many areas; cultural activities, such as festivals, have also been negatively affected. These impacts are cause for concern, particularly if the reduction in income leads to increased pressure on the natural resources of protected areas. It will be important for PA management authorities and governments more generally to consider ways of mitigating these effects. In this regard, it was encouraging to see that some areas had already introduced mechanisms to assist local communities, such as the provision of CSR support for mountain guides and the introduction of “drive through” farmers’ markets.

The wellbeing of PA staff is also a cause for concern. Many appear to be experiencing an increase in workloads and a reduction in benefits, whilst also trying to cope with new - and often more restrictive - ways of working

On the positive side, the pandemic has stimulated a number of innovations in protected area management, including greater use of technology for visitor management; it seems likely that many of these measures will continue even after the pandemic has ended. The pandemic has also stimulated PA management authorities to address the risk of future infectious diseases more proactively.

As a regional network of protected area agencies spanning 17 countries in Asia, APAP is well-placed to assist with the collation, dissemination and sharing of information and emerging best practices. APAP has already organised one webinar to share information and experience among APAP members about their responses to COVID-19. APAP is also well-positioned to assist with capacity building, through its regular offerings of technical workshops. At the global level, IUCN can also make an important contribution, e.g., through

the work of the WCPA Task Force on COVID-19 and Protected Areas and the preparation of technical briefs, best practice guidelines and other knowledge products.

Annex 1: Survey Questionnaire

Asia Protected Areas Partnership (APAP): Questionnaire on COVID-19 and Protected Areas Management

Background

COVID-19 has affected all aspects of society in unprecedented ways, and protected areas in Asia have been no exception. The following questionnaire has been prepared to help APAP understand the impacts of the pandemic on the region's protected areas and the measures that are being taken to address these, and to identify future opportunities for protected areas in the post-COVID-19 era. The questionnaire is being sent to all existing APAP members. It consists of only 11 questions, and should take less than 20 minutes to complete. The responses to the questionnaire will be analysed and presented during the next APAP Steering Committee meeting. Please submit your responses **by 30 June 2020**.

1. How have visitor services in protected areas been affected by COVID-19?

- Protected areas have remained open to visitors as usual; no special measures have been implemented.
- Protected areas have remained open to visitors as usual, but with social distancing rules.
- Protected areas have been partially closed to visitors. (Some visitors are allowed, but numbers are controlled; potentially crowded areas, such as popular trails and camping sites, have been closed.)
- Protected areas have been fully closed. (No visitors allowed; all services stopped.)

Please provide additional information in the box below about the option you chose.

1.1. Have there been any impacts (positive or negative) on protected areas as a result of the measures described in response to Question 1? If so, please summarise these briefly in the box below.

1.2 If visitor services have been affected, have any new activities been introduced to compensate for reduced physical access to protected areas (e.g., provision of virtual reality tours of protected areas, organisation of online educational events)? If so, please describe these briefly in the box below.

2. How has COVID-19 affected conservation activities in protected areas, such as patrolling, anti-poaching, monitoring, research, control of invasive species, habitat restoration, etc.?

- Conservation activities have continued as usual.
- Conservation activities have continued largely as usual, but with some minor modifications (e.g., with social distancing rules).
- Conservation activities have partially stopped.
- Conservation activities have entirely stopped.

Please provide additional information in the box below about the option you chose.

2.1. Have there been any impacts (positive or negative) on protected areas as a result of the changes described in response to Question 2? If so, please summarise these briefly in the box below.

3. How has COVID-19 affected engagement, outreach and the provision of services from the PA management authorities to local communities in and around protected areas?

- Engagement with local communities has continued as usual.

- Engagement with local communities has continued largely as usual, but with some minor modifications (e.g., social distancing rules).
- Engagement with local communities has partially stopped.
- Engagement with local communities has entirely stopped.

Please provide additional information in the box below about the option you chose.

3.1. Have there been any impacts (positive or negative) on protected areas as a result of the changes described in response to Question 3? If so, please summarise these briefly in the box below.

3.2 Are the protected area management authorities providing any special support for local communities who are vulnerable to COVID-19? Please describe these briefly in the below box.

4. How has COVID-19 affected protected area staffing levels?

- Protected area staffing levels have remained unchanged.
- Protected area staffing levels have decreased.
- Protected area staffing levels have increased.

Please provide additional information in the box below about the option you chose.

4.1. Have there been any impacts (positive or negative) on protected areas as a result of the changes described in response to Question 4? If so, please summarise these briefly in the box below.

- 5. Has COVID-19 affected the working conditions, workloads, safety or well-being of protected areas staff? If so, please provide a brief summary in the box below.**

- 6. Are there any particular measures that were introduced in protected areas in response to COVID-19 that will be continued after the pandemic is over?**

- 7. Are there any discussions underway in your organisation to prepare for future outbreaks of infectious diseases?**

Yes (If you choose this option, please briefly summarise the measures being considered in the box below.)

No

- 8. What lessons for protected areas can be learned from the COVID-19 pandemic? How should protected area management be changed in the post-COVID-19 era?**

- 9. What could APAP do to assist protected area management authorities in relation to COVID-19?**

10. Please kindly let us know your organisation's name.

11. Would your organisation be interested in sharing its experience of dealing with COVID-19 by preparing a short web story?

Yes. (If you choose this option, the APAP Secretariat will follow-up with you at a later date.)

No

Thank you very much for your time!



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