

THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF MEHEDINTI COUNTY THROUGH AGRITOURISM ACTIVITIES

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Abstract: Agritourism, a component of rural tourism, has the greatest implications in the capitalization of local tourist resources and in raising the living standard of the inhabitants, in the socio-economic development of the rural locality and the community in general, and last but not least, in the protection and conservation of the natural and built environment, in the context of an economic activity based on ecological principles (tourism encourages the protection of the environment). To be suitable for agritourism, rural communities must be located in an unpolluted area, possess numerous ethnographic and cultural values as well as numerous local traditions specific to the area, with a rich historical past or having other categories of resources that provide authenticity and highlight the local specifics. In Mehedinti plateau we find a series of localities where we can develop this new form of tourism. Here we meet many rural communities where traditions, culture and popular celebrations are still very well preserved and can be exploited through agritourism.

Key words: agritourism, rural tourism, sustainable development, Mehedinti County

INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism consists of two terms: rural and tourism with very precise meanings that must be known. If the classic definition of tourism presents it as a "recreational and/or sporting activity, consisting of traveling on foot or with different means of transport in interesting regions from a certain point of view", rural tourism is therefore tourism practiced in the rural environment, as an economic factor of local development, resulting from the services provided to clients to satisfy their needs [12].

The other component of the product, "rural area" is much more difficult to define. In general, it is appreciated that the rural area is a cultural space resulting from the relationship between nature and human activity over several centuries. Thus, in the rural area, the traces of the productive activity related to the primary sector, such as buildings, changes to the landscape or the planning and development of the territory are still present and active.

Rural tourism is considered, in general, as a set of a wide variety of activities, events, accommodation services, public food, leisure, developed in a space characterized as rural [15,17].

Of all the forms of tourism from rural areas, agritourism is the one that enjoys the greatest recognition. In the case of agritourism, agricultural activity and tourist activity are always related, in the end it is an activity that supplements the farmers' income. By using local resources and products, and combining two activities, the agricultural one as the basic activity and the tourist one as a complementary activity, the profitability of the agritourism activity is high, being in fact an alternative income opportunity for rural areas [1,9].

The development of agritourism will lead to a sustainable economic development of rural localities, due to the multiplier effect of this activity, the positive influences on the environment, agriculture, transports, constructions, processing and food industries, services from the most diverse fields will be felt [7,11,13].

By developing agritourism, several aspects are considered, with a direct impact on the villages:

Table 1.

Improving socio-economic imbalances from rural environment through agritourism

The impact	Positive
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the sale of goods and services made in the peasant household - infrastructure development - obtaining additional income from recreational/leisure activities - increasing the employment rate in the area
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - changes in the mentality of the inhabitants - rural-urban interaction - the existence of "refuges" for city dwellers - involvement of local/regional authorities in various activities
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the existence of educational programs - recognition of the importance of rural areas

Source: Butler, R., Hall M., Jenkis J., 1997, *Tourism and recreation in rural areas*, John Wiley and Sons, London [3]

Regarding the sustainability of this activity, the practice of agritourism aims at encouraging the practice of traditional activities in rural communities, stopping land abandonment and the chaotic development of tourist activities, in deep disagreement with the representative characteristics of the rural environment [2,5,10].

Agritourism promotes the idea of combining economic interests in the development of communities with those aimed at preserving nature. Rural entrepreneurs can have a successful model to capitalize on the tourism potential of an area and supplement income from agricultural holdings by being able to add a modest income from tourism activities [7,15].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Located at the confluence of two geographical regions, Banat and Oltenia, Mehedinti County has a high tourist potential, a fact mainly due to its geographical position and the existence of the Danube Gorge on its territory. The intensification of tourist activities from rural areas of the county determined the development of rural tourism and agritourism. The analysis of tourist activity intensification level, in Mehedinti County, is carried out on the basis of statistical indicators, specific to it.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Mehedinti County is located in southwest Romania, being part of the Southwest Oltenia development region. It is located on the left bank of the Danube. Mehedinti County is located on the territory of two geographical regions Oltenia and Banat and borders Dolj County, Caras-Severin, Gorj and two Balkan Peninsulas, Serbia and Bulgaria.

The geographical location of Mehedinti County and the beauty of the landscapes offer optimal conditions for the development of very varied forms of tourism [8,14].

Rural tourism and agritourism are forms of tourism aimed at spending free time in rural areas. These forms of tourism are based on the motivation of returning to nature, to life, to the traditions and customs of the area, and involve the accommodation of tourists in a peasant household or in an agritourism guesthouse [6,16].

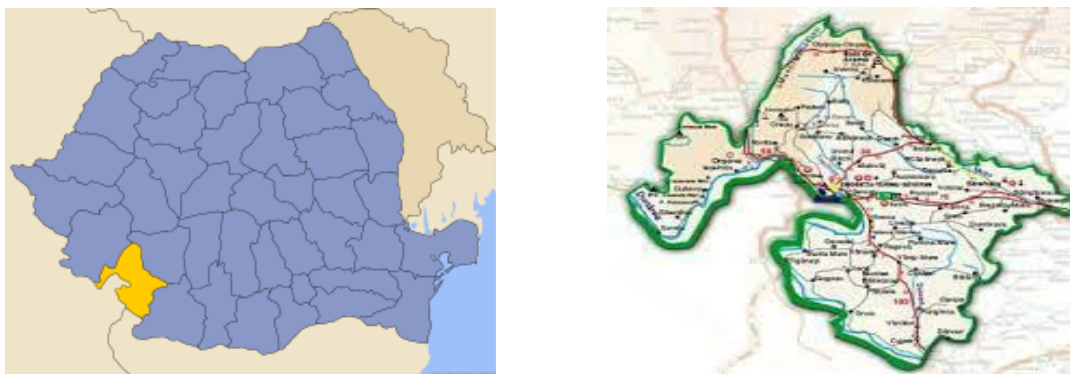


Figure 1. Mehedinți County

The analysis of the agritourism offer is carried out because of some indicators concerning the accommodation units, the accommodation capacity and the accommodation capacity utilization index [2,8].

Table 2 shows the evolution of accommodation units at the level of the SV Oltenia Region, in the period 2015-2022.

Table 2.

The evolution of agritourism guesthouses number from SV Oltenia Region, 2015-2022

	2015	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Mehedinți	19	31	41	50	61	70
Dolj	7	11	10	9	9	12
Gorj	26	62	76	97	97	95
Olt	:	4	4	3	4	5
Valcea	53	77	78	79	83	87
SW Region SV - OLTENIA	105	185	209	238	254	269

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro/shop/> [16]

The analysis of the evolution of the number of agritourism guesthouses in the SW Region - Oltenia shows that Mehedinți County is the third county with agrotourism potential, concentrating 26.02% of the total number of agritourism guesthouses existing at the regional level [2,8].

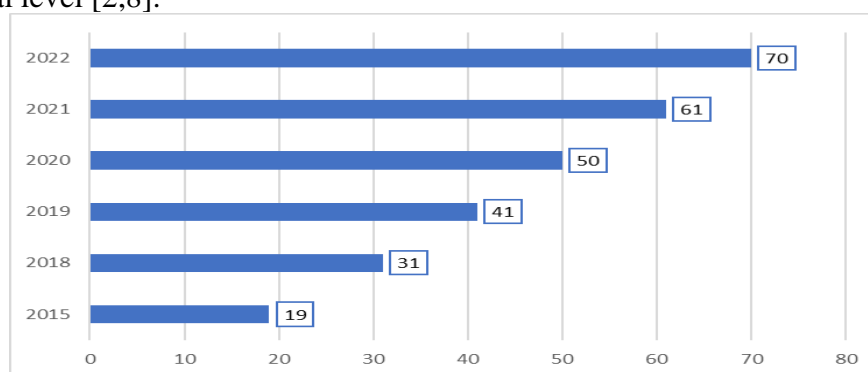


Figure 2. The evolution of agritourism guesthouses number from Mehedinți County, 2015-2022 [16]

In the period 2015-2022, the agritourism guesthouses number, at the level of Mehedinți County, increased by 268.42%, a fact due to the intensification of rural tourist activity in this area as well as the support of rural development, from European funds.

Table 3.

The evolution of agritourism guesthouses number, Mehedinti County

	2015	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Corcova	:	1	2	2	2	3
Dubova	1	4	5	6	6	6
Eselnita	12	15	17	22	25	24
Isverna	:	2	3	3	5	5
Ponoarele	:	2	2	2	3	5
Simian	3	3	3	3	4	4
Svinita	:	1	2	2	3	3
Total	19	31	41	50	61	70

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro/shop/> [16]

The agritourism guesthouses registered in Mehedinti County are unevenly distributed at the locality level, most of them, over half (54.28%) being concentrated in the Danube Gorge area [14].

The existing tourist accommodation capacity indicates the number of places made available to tourists, in a certain period of time, usually a calendar year.

The existing accommodation capacity in agritourism guesthouses from Mehedinti County represents, on average, 24.84% of the existing one at the regional level.

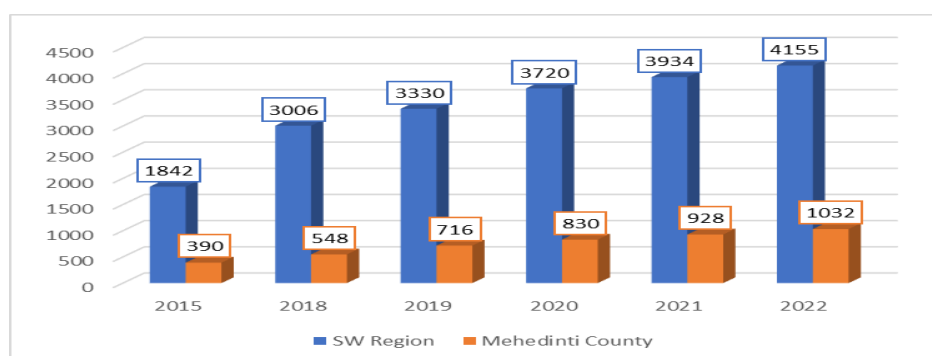


Figure 3. Evolution of existing tourist accommodation capacity in agritourism guesthouses, Mehedinti County, 2015-2022, [16]

In the period 2015-2022, the existing tourist accommodation capacity increased, at the regional level the growth rate was 125.57%. The same trend is registered at the county level, the average growth rate being higher than the regional average, 164.62%.

Table 4.

The evolution of the existing tourist accommodation capacity in agritourism guesthouses, at the level of Mehedinti County, 2015-2022

	2015	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Corcova	:	8	18	18	18	36
Dubova	20	54	88	118	118	118
Eselnita	271	315	372	428	451	443
Isverna	:	40	60	60	82	82
Ponoarele	:	26	26	26	34	61
Simian	48	46	46	46	55	63
Svinita	:	16	28	28	36	36
Total	390	548	716	830	928	1032

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro/shop/> [16]

The structure of the existing accommodation capacity, in the main localities that have agritourism guesthouses, shows that, in the localities on the Danube Gorge, 63.76% of the total existing accommodation places at the county level are concentrated.

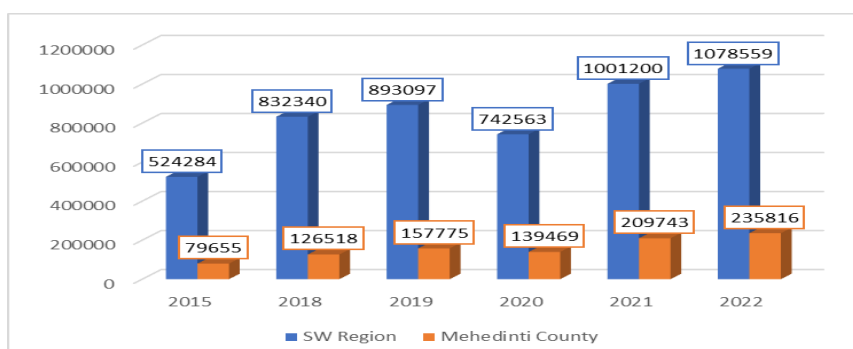


Figure 4. The evolution of tourist accommodation capacity in operation, in agritourist guesthouses, Mehedinți County, 2015-2022, [16]

The tourist accommodation capacity in operation, at the level of agritourism guesthouses, from Mehedinți County, for the period 2015-2022, shows an increasing trend, except for the year 2020, when due to the sanitary restrictions imposed by the Covid 19 pandemic, the period of operation of the accommodation units was reduced, which determined the decrease of this indicator.

In 2020, compared to 2019, the value of the indicator at the regional level decreased by 16.85%, while at the county level the reduction was smaller of only 11.60%.

The net utilization index of the accommodation capacity is a percentage ratio that indicates the degree of use of the accommodation structures, over the course of a year. Figure 5 shows the evolution of the indicator over the months of 2022, at the regional level.

From the analysis of the data presented, it can be observed that a higher use degree of the accommodation capacity, both at the regional level and at the level of each county, in the May-September period. In the case of Mehedinți County, the highest value of the net use index of the accommodation capacity is recorded, the reason being the existence of agritourist guesthouses on the Danube Gorge [14,17].

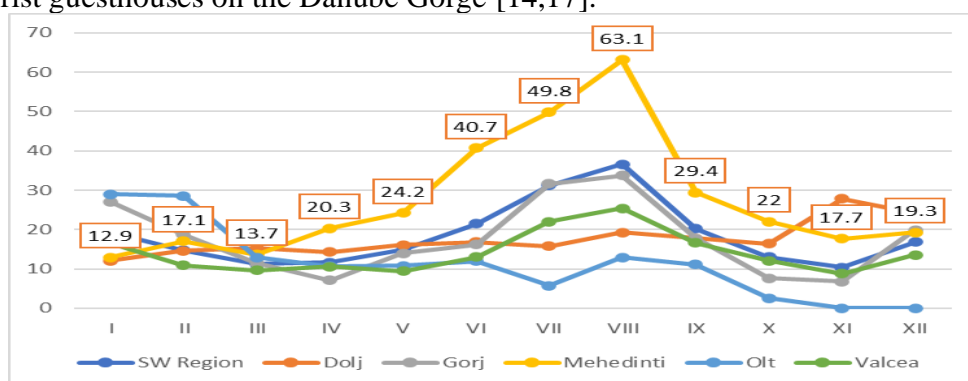


Figure 5. Accommodation capacity utilization index, South-West Region, 2022, [16]

The analysis of agritourism demand focused on the main indicators of tourist traffic. In this sense, we undertook an analysis of statistical data regarding tourist arrivals, their overnight stays and the average length of stay.

In the period 2015-2022, tourist arrivals in agritourism guesthouses showed a general upward trend, except for 2020, when there were decreases. At the level of the

South-West Region, in 2020 compared to 2019, tourist arrivals decreased by 51.77%, while at the level of Mehedinți County, the decrease was only 15.98% [1,8].

Table 5.

The evolution of tourist arrivals in agritourist guesthouses, Mehedinți County, 2015-2022

	2015	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total						
South-West Region	41462	82392	92836	73470	102014	103144
Mehedinti County	12726	23866	33323	27997	32262	33967
Romanians						
South-West Region	39512	79061	90180	73099	100846	39512
Mehedinti County	11840	22506	32004	27974	32199	11840
Foreigners						
South-West Region	1950	3331	2656	371	1168	1011
Mehedinti County	886	1360	1319	23	63	269

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro/shop/>, [16]

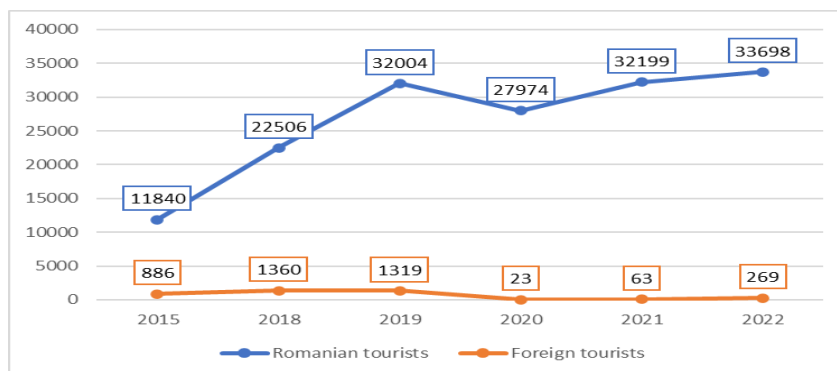


Figure 6. Evolution of tourist arrivals, Mehedinți County, 2015-2022, [16]

The decrease in the number of tourists is different by category of tourists, figure 6. Thus, at the level of Mehedinți County, the arrivals of Romanian tourists decreased by 12.59, while, in the case of foreign tourists, the decrease was 98.25%.

The evolution of tourists' overnight stays in agritourism guesthouses in Mehedinți County is presented in table 6. In the case of overnight stays, the general trend is to increase in 2020, but decreases are recorded.

Table 6.

The evolution of overnight stays in agritourism guesthouses, Mehedinți County, 2015-2022

	2015	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total						
South-West Region	79638	164925	192636	149348	191541	195570
Mehedinti County	23894	47466	67477	61463	67901	67892
Romanians						
South-West Region	76118	157309	187078	148516	189512	193666
Mehedinti County	22287	44641	64820	61430	67763	67329
Foreigners						
South-West Region	3520	7616	5558	832	2029	1904
Mehedinti County	1607	2825	2657	33	138	563

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro/shop/> [16]

At the regional level, the decrease in the value of the indicator regarding the number of overnight stays, in 2020, compared to 2019, was 44.97%. In the case of Romanian tourists, the number of overnight stays decreased by 44.69%, while in the case of foreign tourists the decrease is much more pronounced 55.24%.

Overnights registered in agritourism guesthouses in Mehedinți County decreased overall, in 2020 compared to the previous year, by 12.67%, the value being much lower than the regional average. In the case of Romanian tourists, the decrease in the number of overnight stays was 10.06%, while the overnight stays of foreign tourists decreased by 86.17%.

By reporting the number of overnight stays to tourist arrivals, we obtain the average length of stay, an important indicator of tourist traffic.

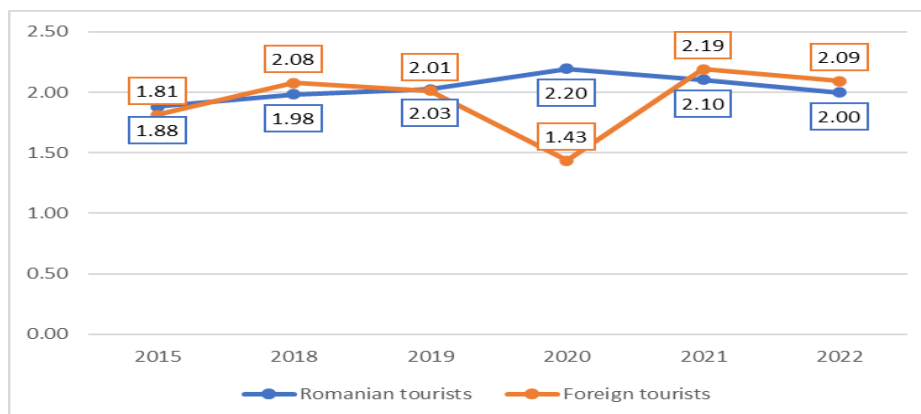


Figure 7. Average length of stay in agritourist guesthouses from Mehedinți County, 2015-2022, [16]

The average length of stay in agritourism guesthouses in Mehedinți County is, in the case of Romanian tourists, 2.03 days/tourist on average and 1.94 days/tourist in the case of foreign tourists.

CONCLUSIONS

Rural tourism and agritourism are considered alternatives of the sustainable development of rural communities and the promotion of traditions and customs specific to these places. In this context, the emergence and development of tourist activities in the rural environment is necessary, through which the economic and social development of Romanian villages can be ensured.

The exploitation of the local tourism potential, natural and anthropic, of local products and the possibility of intertwining agricultural activities with recreation, indicate that the profitability of agritourism activity in Mehedinți County is high, being in fact an additional source of income for the inhabitants of the rural environment.

The natural and ethno-cultural heritage of the Mehedinți villages are important factors of the rural tourism activity, a fact that determined the development of this type of tourism.

The low population density in the Mehedinți villages, the unaltered preservation of natural resources, in a fairly large proportion, the high degree of protection and conservation of biodiversity gives the Mehedinți landscape a pronounced rural touristic character supporting sustainable development.

The intensification of agritourism activity in the rural areas of Mehedinți County requires actions aimed at both monitoring and diversifying and developing a competitive tourist offer at the national and, why not, international level. In this sense, it is necessary to adopt measures aimed at improving the promotion activities of local tourist resources, so that the offered tourist products can be included in the national and international tourist circuits, as unique tourist destinations.

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