

THE CERTIFICATION SYSTEMS IN ECOTOURISM

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Abstract: *The hereby study undertakes to introduce the certification procedure in ecological tourism, as well as the criteria that must be fulfilled by the lodging units that wish to voluntarily adhere to this modern form of tourism. In our country, the Certifying System in the Ecotourism is used by the Romanian Association of Ecotourism (AER) and this adjusts the international experience to the Romanian context. This has been developed in conformity with the Accreditation Program in Nature and Ecotourism promoted by the Australian Association of Ecotourism (NEAP being the first accreditation system in ecological tourism) and in conformity with Nature's Best of the Swedish Association of Ecotourism (the first accreditation system in Ecotourism in the northern hemisphere). A key element in the certification procedure consists of drawing up a plan of sustained development which should answer the entirety of certification requirements. The hereby study shows a model of sustained development plan that can be used by managers and owners of lodging units that wish to acquire the certification in tourism.*

Key words: *ecotourism, principles of ecological tourism, action plan, certification system*

INTRODUCTION

According to the Global Organization of Tourism, Ecotourism is a form of tourism where the tourist's main motivation consists of observing and appreciating nature and local traditions related to nature that should fulfil the following conditions:

- Nature conservation and protection;
- Using the local human resources;
- Educational character, consideration for nature – tourists and local communities' alertness;
- A minimal negative impact on the natural and social-cultural environment.

We consider the development of a Certification System in Ecotourism as being imperatively needed – a mechanism that puts into practice the basic principles of Ecotourism in order to ensure the nature preservation and the sustained development of local communities through tourism. This is an important step taken forward given the fact that, starting with March, 2003, the Global Organization of Tourism has made a recommendation to governments to support initiatives that promote the certification in a sustained tourism (Bran, 2007).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

THE PRINCIPLES OF ECOTOURISM

These principles are approved and promoted by the Romanian Association of Ecotourism (AER) and they are based on two international models: *Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program* developed by the Australian Ecotourism Association and *Nature's Best*, the accreditation system promoted by the Swedish Ecotourism Association. These principles (as shown under Figure no. 1) must be put into practice both by those that develop ecotouristic products, as well as by those that plan the development of a certain area based on ecotourism.

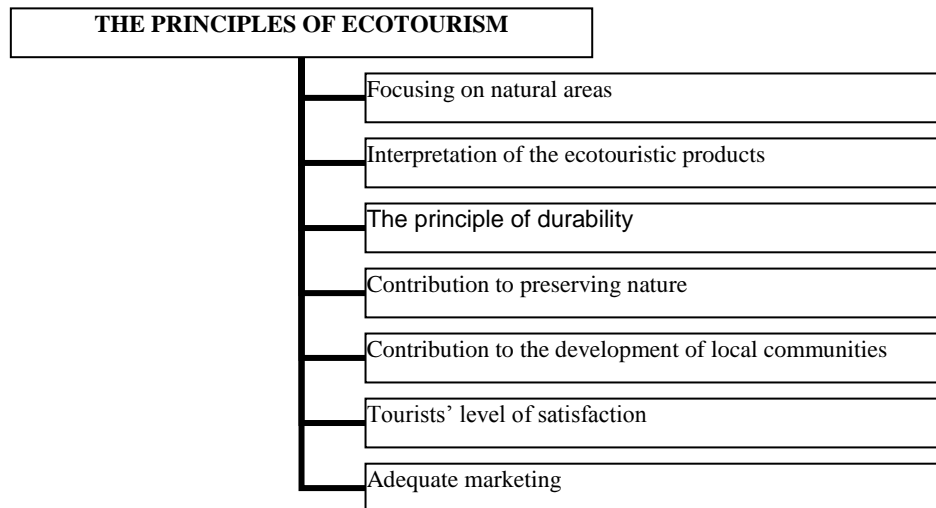


Figure 1. The Principles of Ecotourism

Focusing on natural areas – Ecotourism focuses on direct and personal experience in nature, in a natural environment and it is based on using it, respectively of its geomorphological, biological, physical and cultural characteristics. Therefore, the accent on the natural area is fundamental in ecotourism planning, developing and management.

Interpretation of the ecotouristic product – Ecotourism offers opportunities of experiences in the middle of nature that lead to a better understanding, appreciation and joy to discover and protect nature and local traditional culture, both for visitors, as well as for the local community. Ecotourism products are attractive to those tourists who are willing to interact with the natural environment and who wish to broaden their knowledge, comprehension, appreciation and pleasure to various levels.

The principle of durability seen from the perspective of protecting the natural habitat – The ecotourism activities and their planning must provide the best tourism and planning practices from the perspective of nature preservation and sustained development. The tourism activity must be planned and progressed so that it reduces the impact produced on nature. The ecotouristic product unfolds and is administrated so that it preserves and capitalizes the natural and cultural environment where it exists, by acknowledging and putting into practice the practices that characterize the sustained tourism (Bran, 2005).

Contribution to preserving nature – Ecotourism contributes in a positive manner to preserving natural areas. Ecotourism involves the participation to preserving the visited natural areas, by offering constructive possibilities for a reliable management and preserving these natural areas (e.g.: offering financial support within rehabilitation programs of natural areas, gathering waste left behind by tourists or contributing to preservation organizations).

Constructive contribution to the development of local communities – Ecotourism offers durable contributions regarding local communities. Local community is often part of the ecotouristic product. Benefits of ecotourism must be allocated in their vast majority also to local communities. Local benefits can come from using local tourist guides, purchasing local goods and services and using local facilities. The ecotourism activities and their planning must ensure an attenuation of the negative impact on the local visited community and on their life style, by supplying in the same time long term constructive contributions for these communities. As a consequence, ecotourism must equally bring out

the cultural component of the visited area and contribute to preserving this component (Honțuș, 2005).

Tourists' level of satisfaction – Ecotourism answers tourists' expectations. In developing ecotouristic products, one should take into account that, generally speaking, potential tourists in this field have a high level of education and expectations. Therefore, the satisfaction level related to the ecotouristic product is essential, the experience offered fulfilling or even surpassing the tourists' level of satisfaction.

RESEARCH RESULTS

THE CERTIFICATION SYSTEM IN ECOTOURISM

The Certification System in Ecotourism is enforced depending on two categories:

- Ecotourism programs offered by tour-operators or tourist guides (maximum 15 participants);
- Small guesthouses located in rural and natural areas (maximum 25 rooms).

As far as guesthouses are concerned, the Certification System in Ecotourism involves the fulfilling of general principles and then of criteria which are checked and scored on site (Table 1).

Table 1. The Certification System in Ecotourism

GENERAL PRINCIPLES	CRITERIA
Principles of sustained management of the guesthouse	The criterion of demonstrating a sustained/long-lasting and efficient management of the guesthouse
	The criterion of implementing a sustained management system
	The criterion of observing the national and international relevant laws
	The criterion of personnel's continuous training
Product focused principles	The criterion of focusing on natural areas
	The criterion of interpreting the ecotouristic product
	The durability criterion seen from the perspective of protecting the natural habitat
	The criterion of contribution to conservation
	The criterion of constructive contribution to developing local communities
	The sensitivity criterion towards culture and local traditions
	The criterion regarding the tourists' level of satisfaction
	The criterion of adequate marketing

Source: <http://eco-romania.ro> - The Romanian Ecotourism Association

SUSTAINED MANAGEMENT PLAN (PMD) – CONTENT PROPOSAL

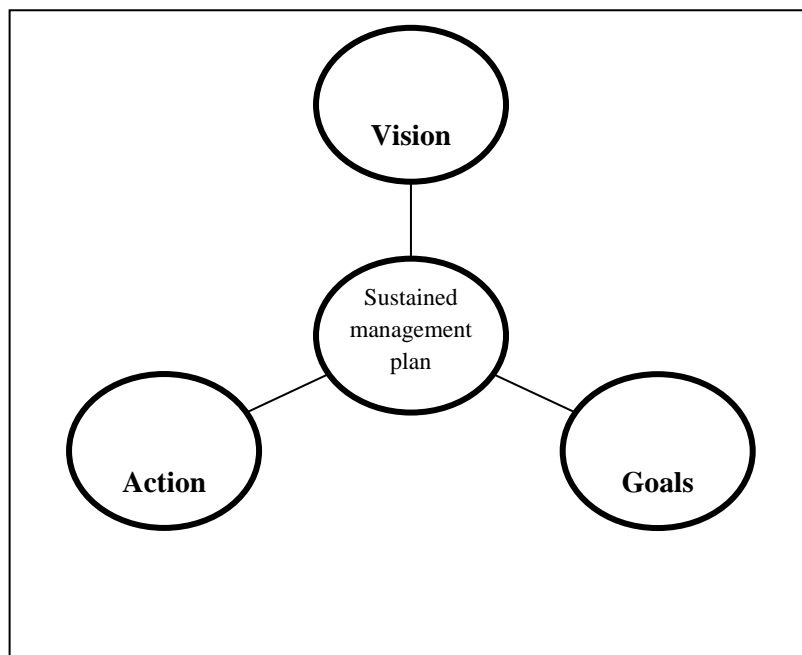


Figure 2. Elements of the sustained management plan

Vision - The guesthouse offers touristic services with a minimal impact on nature and aims for increasing the quality of life in the community to which it belongs by an adequate behaviour towards employees and promoting products, culture and local traditions. (*The vision and goals of the guesthouse are part of PMD. The guesthouse has a vision which is in conformity with the principles of ecotourism.*)

Goals:

- Preserving natural resources and reducing the environmental impact;
- Stimulating the development of the local community by hiring personnel from local communities and by promoting local traditions and culture;
- Providing secure and good quality services;
- Employees and tourists not only benefit of the confidence in their jobs, but also of the one in the activities they undertake.

A. Preserving natural resources and diminishing the environmental impact can be achieved by cutting down water consumption, reducing the quantity of waste and garbage, lowering the energy consumption, reducing the impact on air, ground and water.

✓ In order **to reduce the water consumption** we suggest the following: the use of buttoned faucets and shower heads with low streaming; toilets to have recipients with controllable water stream; showers to be installed in bathrooms; using a small quantity of water for watering plants (water dripping systems or watering plants mainly during mornings or evenings); collecting rain water and using it for various activities; adopting other measures of cutting down the quantity of used water; displaying written warning for reducing the water consumption; encouraging customers to use towels over several days; connecting all touristic facilities to a draining system or introducing a water collecting, storing and treatment system or a system for evacuating residual waters towards a water treatment plant.

✓ **Diminishing the quantity of waste and garbage:** purchasing materials so as to avoid packages in excess; try as much as possible to use bio-degradable packages; use only recipients which are re-usable or bio-degradable (e.g. glasses); use disposable items (utensils or recipients) only in special situations, maximum one time/person/stay; encourage both employees and tourists to take part in programs for collecting, recycling and diminishing the quantity of waste; collect and remove all noticed garbage; make composts of the organic waste; organize and subsidize (finance, labour, etc).

✓ **Reducing the energy consumption:** use fluorescent light over 90% instead of incandescent light; rooms to be naturally ventilated; during day light, use exclusively the natural light (as much as possible); use solar energy; the waste of heat through windows and doors is diminished by an adequate sealing, the use of double windows and insulation strips; an employee trained in this direction is delegated with making the energy consumption more efficient; heat is produced and distributed through centralized installations; electrical equipment belongs to energy class A “energy efficient”; at least 50% of the building is made in wood or other natural material; tours, itineraries and schedules are planned so that the travel time and distances are diminished (including by avoiding crowded areas and rush hours); encourage tourists to use efficient transport from a fuel point of view (e.g. supplying information regarding public transportation, providing bikes for visiting tourist attractions); encourage employees to go on foot, by bike or by public transportation in order to get to work; all vehicles are well maintained (technical check-up to date); when picking and/or buying vehicles we will make efficient choices from the fuel point of view; we will use vehicles that do not consume more than 10 litres/100 km.

✓ **Reducing the impact on air, ground and water:** improvements and touristic activities (e.g. buildings, pathways) do not lead to remodelling the ground, changes of the rivers' courses, complete termination of vegetation, etc; we will use fences, undergrowths, barriers or other corresponding signs for maintaining traffic in the areas designated for various categories of users; waste is not stored away anywhere else but in special designated places; the regular level of the noise produced by the ensemble of activities related to the product (including telephones, public communication systems, transport operations, concerts, music, equipments and mechanical installations) does not significantly exceed the background noise of the area; servicing and maintenance units producing noise are placed at a distance from the quiet areas or they are soundproof.

B. Stimulating the development of the local community by hiring personnel from the local communities and by promoting local traditions and culture.

Stimulating the development of the local community is done by the following actions:

- The use of local tourist guides' services for showing off the significant local tourist attractions and for systematically training other tourist guides;
- The use of other natural persons' services on a local level (e.g. kitchen staff, transport);
- Encouraging the purchase of local products and souvenirs;
- Using other local services: guesthouses; renting bikes, carts etc;
- Offering the students/youngsters that live in the area the possibility for practising, in order to gain work experience in the ecotourism field.

Promoting local traditions and culture:

- Informing tourists about the behaviour code that needs to be adopted inward the local community;
- Showing tourists the traditions of the area, encouraging the participation in traditional festivals;
- Serving specific food for the respective area especially;

- Buying local products as much as possible: souvenirs, food drinks, etc. (Beciu, 2011)

C. Providing secure and good quality services: we have carried out a risk analysis that comprises the activities impacting on the environment and on the safety of work, as well as identifying the measures to counteract these risks; in unforeseen situations, there is a person responsible for removing the problem as soon as possible; tourists have access to a list of contact persons in case of emergencies that comprises: the fire fighting department; the administration of the natural habitat, mountain rescue, hospital and others; all the company's employees wear the "safety equipment" in cases when it is required; the correct use of the equipment is explained by the company's manager or by specialized companies/persons; at least one company employee is trained for giving the first aid and takes part in the activities that involve giving the first aid.

D. Employees and tourists benefit both of the confidence in their jobs, as well as of the activities that they undertake: the company the all employees have insurances in conformity with the type of activities they undertake; participants in all activities get clear information about the insurances included in the company's product.

CONCLUSIONS

The hereby study has shown the certification procedure in ecotourism, as well as the criteria that must be fulfilled by the lodging units that voluntarily wish to adhere to this modern type of tourism. In our country, the Certification System in Ecotourism is used by the Romanian Ecotourism Association (AER) which adapts the international experience to the existing context in Romania. A key element of the certification procedure is represented by drawing up a sustained management plan that should answer all certification requirements. The present study has shown a sustained management plan as a model that can be used by managers or owners of the lodging units that wish to acquire the certification in tourism. Guesthouses that implement the certification in tourism are presented with a series of benefits, such as: it allows customers to identify better those products that can offer amazing experiences related to nature and rural culture; contributes to increasing the level of confidence in Romanian ecotourism products on the international market; becomes a marketing instrument for tour-operators and guesthouses owners; guarantees a higher quality level of services; contributes actively to preserving nature and long-lasting development at a local level; supports local administrations in the protected areas with developing a form of tourism with a minimal impact; provides a platform for shared activities between the entrepreneurial sector and the nature preserving organizations.

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