

**RESEARCH REGARDING THE DEVELOPMENT OF AGRITOURISM
ACTIVITY IN DANUBE GORGE MICRO-REGION**

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***Abstract:** Rural tourism, but especially agritourism is the activity that allows the superior capitalization of rural's area cultural resources. The Danube Gorge region represents the territory where the remarkable beauty of landscapes and biological diversity can be capitalized while preserving the unaltered traditions, and improving the life quality of communities is the result of economic activities of inhabitants, carried out in harmony with nature. Agritourism, a component of rural tourism, has the greatest implications in capitalizing local tourist resources and raising the standard of living of the inhabitants, in the socio-economic development of the rural locality and the community in general and last but not least, in protecting and conserving the natural and built environment, in the context of an economic activity developed on ecological principles (tourism encourages environmental protection).*

***Key words:** rural tourism, agritourism, tourist resources, Danube Gorge*

INTRODUCTION

The explanation of the concept of agritourism requires its treatment as a complex system, whose study cannot be done only by analyzing its components that are concentrated around the activity within the iagritourism farm but also involves the study of overall behavior, meaning the relationship between components of this system and the environment in which it operates [1,4]. The environment in which it operates is the rural area, an environment that can satisfy a wide range of motivations: from rest and recreation, to knowledge, culture, sports, treatment, hunting or fishing, etc. By satisfying these needs, agritourism can be considered a way to fully capitalize the rural area in all its complexity. Through agritourism, the tourist benefits from a clean and picturesque environment, from the natural tourist attractions and from the cultural - historical values, from the traditions and customs present in the village environment [2,8].

The Danube Gorge region represents the territory where the remarkable beauty of the landscapes and the biological diversity can be capitalized in the conditions of preserving the unaltered traditions, and the improvement of the life quality of the communities is the result of economic activities of the inhabitants, carried out in harmony with nature.

The variety of the landscape is given by the geological diversity of the route, the Danube crossing in this part of the Carpathians valleys with very varied structure and lithology that led either to the narrowing of the valley or to the formation of small depressions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to indicate the importance of agritourism in promoting the Danube Gorge micro-region, we made an analysis of static data regarding the specific indicators of tourist supply and demand, which indicate the intensification of rural tourism activity in this territory. Thus, we analyzed both the number of accommodation units, the degree of comfort of their use and the intensity of tourist traffic and the average length of stay.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The Danube Gorge runs between Bazias and Gura Vail on a length of 134 km and is one of the longest and most spectacular gorges from Europe, the views along it being very attractive.



Figure 1. Danube Gorge

The territory of the Danube Gorge micro-region is located in the southwestern part of the country, where the Danube forms the most impressive gorge from Europe. Anywhere, on the territory of Danube Gorge, it can stop to admire paradise. On the one hand, rocky hills, with parks and nature reserves, with secular forests protected by plant varieties and birds unique in the world. And on the other, the lazy thread of the Danube. Nature lovers will be delighted by the rare trees and shrubs, the colonies of swallows.

The Danube Gorge is a geographical region located along the northern bank of the Danube, in the south of Banat. The region is bordered by the Nera River to the west and the Danube Boilers to the east. The territory of the micro-region partially overlaps over the administrative territory of two counties, Caras-Severin and Mehedinti and at the same time over the territory of seven territorial-administrative units. The Danube Gorge is represented by the geographical region that stretches along the northern bank of the Danube, in the southern part of Banat. The region includes localities located in two counties: Caras-Severin (Berzasca, Coronini, Garlic, Pojejena, Sichevita and Socol) and Mehedinti (Breznita-Ocol, Dubova, Eselnita, Ilovița and Svinita).

Analysis of the agritourism offer

The Danube Gorge micro-region is recognized as an agritourism destination, in recent years, this form of tourism registering significant increases in terms of the evolution of the number of accommodation units.

Table 1 shows the evolution of accommodation units' number, at the level of the studied area, on the main localities that carry out agritourism activities.

Table 1.

Evolution of accommodation units' number, Danube Gorge, 2010-2020

		2010	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Agritourism units	Berzasca	:	3	3	3	3	3	4
	Coronini	2	5	5	5	4	5	4
	Pojejena	1	1	2	2	2	2	2
	Sichevita	1	2	2	2	3	3	4
	Socol	1	2	1	1	1	1	1
	Dubova	:	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Eselnita	4	12	12	16	15	17	22
	Svinita	:	:	:	:	1	2	2
	Danube Gorge	9	26	27	32	33	38	45

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

The analysis of the accommodation units by types of structures indicates that most of the tourist reception structures with accommodation function are agritourism units, in 2020, this representing 86.53% [1,3,6].

From the 45 agritourism units registered in 2020 on the territory of the Danube Gorge micro-region, two thirds are concentrated in Mehedinti County (30 agritourism units) and one third in Caras-Severin County (15 agritourism units). Eselnita locality has the largest number of agritourism units (22 pensions) being, in fact, the most well-known tourist destination from the area.

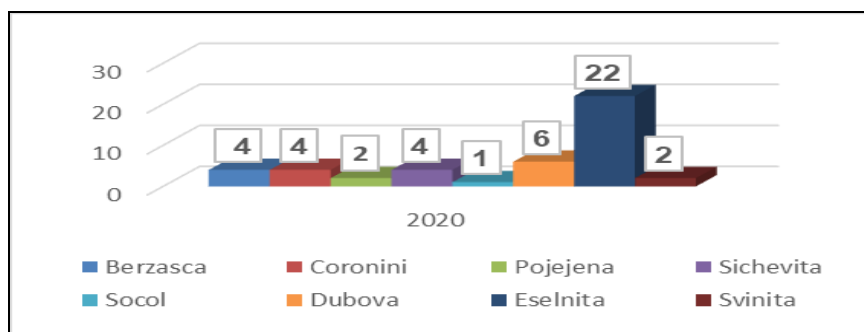


Figure 2. The number of existing agritourism units, from the Danube Gorge micro-region, 2020, [16]

In the analysis of the agritourism offer, a special importance is assigned to the analysis of the accommodation capacity, both in terms of the existing capacity but especially of the one in operation. Existing accommodation capacity indicates the total number of accommodation places existing in the tourist reception structures available to tourists [5,10]. The accommodation capacity in operation represents the number of places-days, indicating the number of accommodation places in relation to the duration of operation of each unit.

For the period 2010-2020, the analysis of the indicator regarding accommodation capacity indicates an increasing trend, except for the year 2020, when due to the pandemic situation, there are decreases in the values regarding the analyzed indicator. Thus, in the period 2010-2019, the value of the existing accommodation capacity increased more than 10 times (10.15 times) and that of the existing accommodation capacity by 2.82 times. [9,12] In 2020, the number of accommodation places decreased by 11.65% compared to 2019, and the number of day-places by 13.62%. This is the result of the suspension of activity in the hospitality sector, for a limited period, during 2020 [7,15].

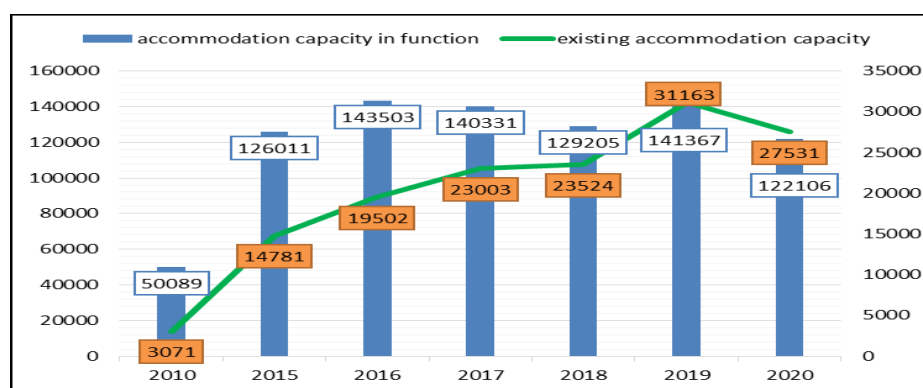


Figure 3. The number of agritourism units, existing in the Danube Gorge micro-region, 2020, [16]

In Figure 4. Is mentioned the use net index for existing agritourism units from the geographical region Danube Gorge, in the 2010-2020 period.

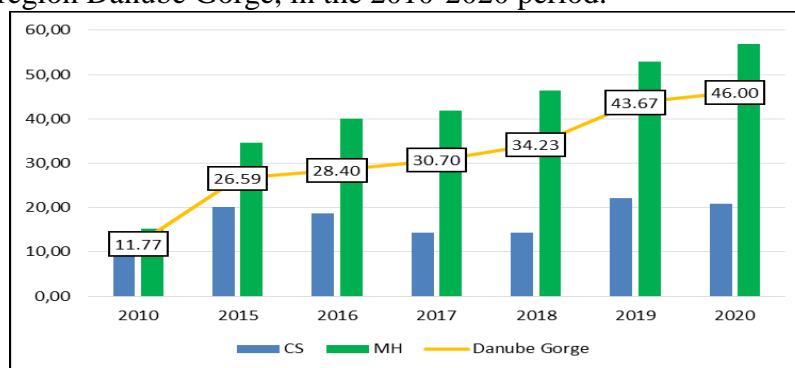


Figure 4. The evolution of the net use index of accommodation capacity, Danube Gorge, 2010-2020, [16]

For the period 2010-2020, the use degree of agritourism units, from Danube Gorge micro-region, indicates an increasing trend. In the analyzed interval, the intensive use index increased by 34.23 percent. This is due to the development of the agritourism infrastructure and the intensification of the tourist activity from studied area. The increase of the intensive use index value of accommodation capacity to 46%, in 2020, is due to the conditions imposed by the Covid 19 pandemic, which determined a desensitization of the tourist activity from rural area [15]. If is made an analysis regarding the degree of intensive use of agritourism units, depending on the county of which the administrative-territorial units are part of the area where the agritourism units are located, a wider use can be observed, in the case of those located in Mehedinti County, the value of the indicator is higher than the region average. In the case of agritourism units located on the territory of Caras-Severin County, the value of the indicator is lower than the region average.

The analysis of agritourism demand

In recent years we are witnessing to an intensification of the demand for agritourism activities, due to the increase of the living standard of the population, the diversification of the tourist motivation but especially the desire of the population to spend a few days in picturesque, unpolluted places, away from agitation and pollution of urban agglomerations [1,6,13]. The following table shows the evolution of tourist arrivals in the agritourism units in Danube Gorge geographical region.

Table 2.

The evolution of tourist arrivals in agritourism units, Danube Gorge, 2010-2020

	2010	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Berzasca	:	1305	1558	1294	1831	1301	1820
Coronini	603	971	1567	428	611	346	539
Pojejena	148	359	1609	1898	1517	2141	1092
Sichevita	528	1427	1361	1719	1744	1839	2017
Socol	136	12	:	:	5	323	:
Danube Gorge - CS	1415	4074	6095	5339	5708	5950	5468
Dubova	:	1344	2871	3150	3245	4998	5428
Eselnița	1656	9363	10536	14514	14261	19794	16263
Svinita	:	:	:	:	310	421	372
Danube Gorge - MH	1656	10707	13407	17664	17816	25213	22063
Danube Gorge	3071	14781	19502	23003	23524	31163	27531

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

For 2010-2020 period, the analysis of tourist arrivals in agritourism unit, in Danube Gorge area, indicates an upward trend with slight reductions in 2017 and 2020. Over a decade, the value of the indicator has increased almost 9 times (8.96 or), due to the intensification of the agritourism activity in the area and the change of the consumers' preferences towards the types of tourism practiced [12,7]. The analysis of tourist arrivals in agritourism units of Danube Gorge area, within Mehedinti County indicates an increase of 13.32 times, being higher than the region average, while in the case of agritourism units from Caras-Severin County, the increase is only 3.86 times, below the region average. The restrictions imposed by the Covid 19 pandemic, regarding the possibility of carrying out tourist activities, led to a decrease of almost 50% (43.24%) in tourist arrivals in 2020 compared to 2019 [15].

Table3.

The evolution of tourist arrivals, in the agritourism units, on months, Danube Gorge 2020

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII
Berzasca	12	6	:	:	11	319	432	661	291	72	10	6
Coronini	:	:	:	:	:	65	197	192	85	:	:	:
Pojejena	:	:	:	:	:	51	387	302	275	22	55	:
Sichevita	77	108	75	:	72	159	471	362	125	126	124	88
Danube Gorge - CS	77	114	75	0	83	594	1487	1517	776	220	189	94
Dubova	:	:	:	:	:	419	1383	1539	1149	495	72	37
Eselnita	30	14	38	:	42	1961	4213	4880	3383	1100	161	101
Svinita	:	:	:	:	:	24	54	138	72	42	22	20
Danube Gorge - MH	30	14	38	0	42	2404	5650	6557	4604	1637	255	158
Danube Gorge	107	128	113	0	125	2998	7137	8074	5380	1857	444	252

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

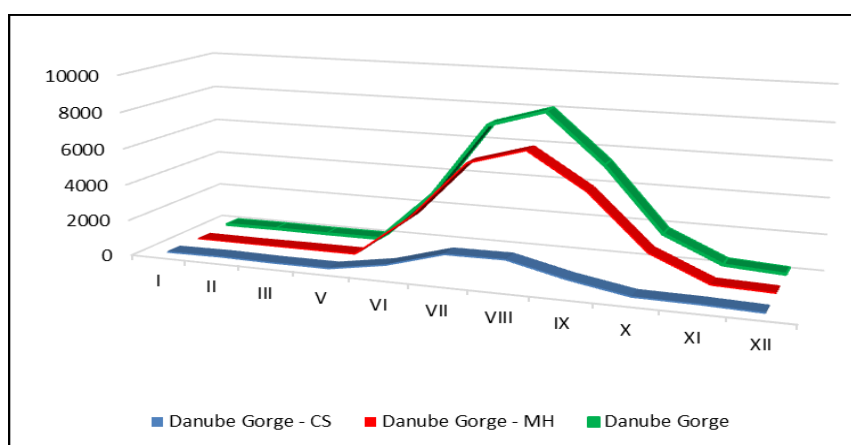


Figure 5. Evolution of tourist arrivals, on months, Danube Gorge, 2020, [16]

It is known that in 2020 the tourism activity was marked by the health crisis generated by the SarsCov 2 virus, which caused the suspension of the activity of the hospitality sector for a significant period of time. In this situation, in April, during the state of emergency established at national level as a measure to reduce the spread of infection with the new Coronavirus, tourist activity was suspended, which is why the value of the indicator is zero [8,15]. After the lifting of the state of emergency and the relaxation of restrictions on tourism activities, the population began to move towards alternative forms of tourism, giving up mass tourism. This has favored the intensification of the tourist

activity in this region. The period June - September is marked by a considerable increase in tourist arrivals in agritourism units from Danube Gorge (figure 5), indicating a peak season in August, when a total number of 8074 tourists was registered.

The analysis of tourist arrivals indicates a higher preference of tourists for agritourism units in the Danube Gorge, Mehedinti County, here being concentrated 80.13% of tourist arrivals registered in 2020. The most important agritourism destination of the micro-region remains the locality Eselnita which registers 73.71% from the total number of tourists arriving in agritourism units from Danube Gorge, Mehedinti County and over half (59.07%) of the total number of tourists registered in the agritourism units, on the entire region [6,14].

Another important indicator in the analysis of tourist demand concerns the number of overnight stays of tourists in the accommodation structures with accommodation function. The following table presents the situation of overnight stays of tourists, in the agritourism units from the Danube Gorge region, for the period 2010-2020.

Table 4.

The evolution of tourist overnight stays in agritourism units, Danube Gorge

	2010	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Berzasca	:	2393	3318	2614	3029	2922	3858
Coronini	1776	8902	6915	2120	1761	1776	1016
Pojejena	376	2606	4311	3448	2233	3207	2745
Sichevita	272	26	:	:	15	736	:
Socol	272	26	:	:	15	736	:
Danube Gorge - CS	2696	13953	14544	8182	7053	9377	7619
Dubova	:	2551	5276	5555	6345	9117	11179
Eselnita	3200	16999	20938	29343	30477	42545	36624
Svinita	:	:	:	:	350	695	751
Danube Gorge - MH	3200	19550	26214	34898	37172	52357	48554
Danube Gorge	5896	33503	40758	43080	44225	61734	56173

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

For the analyzed period, the value of the number of overnight stays, increased constantly, until 2020, when due to the Covid 19 pandemic, a decrease was registered. Thus, for the period 2010-2019, the increase registered in the region was 10.47 times, with significant differences in the case of agritourism units located within the two counties[15,16]. For the agritourism units concentrated in the localities of Caras-Severin County located in the Danube Gorge region, the number of overnight stays increased 2.82 times, while in the case of those located within the localities belonging to Mehedinti County, 15.17 times.

The analysis of the overnight stays number of tourists in the existing agritourism units from Danube Gorge micro-region, on months in 2020, indicates a maximum value, in August, like the arrivals of tourists. 81.15% of the overnight stays registered this month were concentrated in the agritourism units located on the territory of Mehedinti County, most of them being concentrated in the locality of Eselnita 11,286 overnight stays. At the level of Caras-Severin County, the highest values were registered for the agritourism units from Pojejena localities - 876 overnight stays and Sichevita - 872 overnight stays.

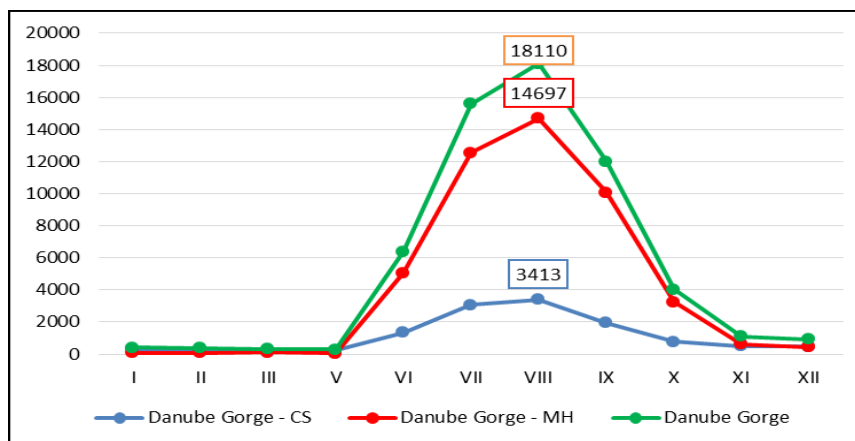


Figure 6. Evolution of overnight stays, on months, Danube Gorge, 2020, [16]

Figure 7. shows the average length of stay spent in agritourism units on the Danube Gorge, in the period 2010-2020.

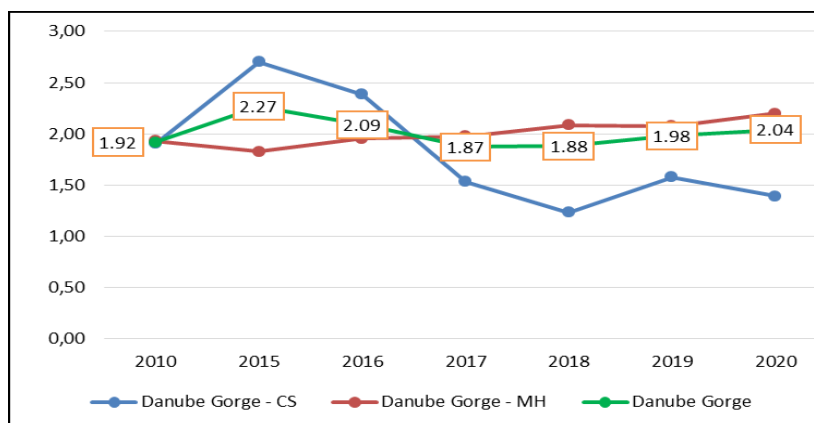


Figure 7. Average length of stay, Danube Gorge, 2020, [16]

The average length of stay indicator is calculated by relating the number of overnight stays to the number of tourist arrivals registered at the level of accommodation unit.

The analysis of the average length of the stay, for the existing agritourism units at the level of the Danube Gorge area, in the 2010-2020 period, indicates a sinuous evolution, marked by increases and decreases over the entire time period under analysis. The highest value was recorded in 2015-2.27 days/tourist, and the lowest in 2017-1.87 days/tourist.

For the existing agritourism units from Mehedinti County, the evolution of the average length of stay is increasing, marked by a slight decrease in 2015. In the case of agritourism units from Caras-Severin County, the value of the indicator shows a continuous downward trend, after, in 2015, it registered a significant increase. The lowest values of the average length of stay are recorded in this area.

CONCLUSIONS

The forms of rural tourism, specific and integrated to it, can be considered alternatives to solve, at the same time, problems specific to the rural environment but also to the urban environment, in this category being problems such as those related to planning, social, economic, etc. Therefore, the emergence and development of forms of

tourism in rural areas is necessary, the aim being to ensure a possible economic and social development of rural areas, the contribution of these forms of tourism to support the overall development of rural areas is highlighted in several dimensions: economic, ecological, social and cultural.

The Danube Gorge is a geographical region located along the northern bank of the Danube, in the south of Banat, being situated at west of the Nera River and at east by the Danube Boilers. The surface of the micro-region partially overlaps over the administrative territory of two counties, Caras-Severin and Mehedinti and at the same time over the territory of seven territorial-administrative units.

The Danube Gorge micro-region is a LEADER territory, comprising 7 communes that constitute a rural, compact and homogeneous territorial unit from a geographical, cultural and ethnic point of view.

The low population density, the preservation of a high proportion of natural conditions, but also the high degree of protection and conservation of biodiversity give the micro-region a pronounced rural tourist character and a special importance in the development of sustainable recreational activities.

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