

## SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE COUNTRY OF HAȚEG - RETEZAT THROUGH RURAL TOURISM

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**Abstract.** *In Romania, there is a country - Tara Hațegului - which, in our opinion, in terms of tourist, historical, cultural, spiritual or scientific interest, is not surpassed by any other Romanian country. The unparalleled density of historical vestiges, from ancient-Dacian and Roman to medieval, churches with the oldest documentary evidence in Romania, the existence of the dinosaur geo-park, national parks and scientific reserves, ethno-folkloric and gastronomic customs and traditions, particularly well preserved and preserved, make Tara Hațegului one of the most attractive tourist areas of our country. The best possible exploitation of all the natural and man-made resources of Tara Hațegului for the development of rural tourism can only be achieved by involving the rural communities in this field and, implicitly, the inhabitants willing to develop tourist activities that contribute to the development of the local economies of the communities. The authors of this paper present development possibilities in the Hațeg - Retezat area, based on the exploitation of the natural and man-made resources of the area from a tourism point of view.*

**Key words:** *rural tourism, tourism resources, rural tourism typologies, tourism management.*

### INTRODUCTION

The traveller through Romania, as a tourist, businessman or scientific researcher, can encounter, at every step, wonderful landscapes, vestiges of our nation's past, know customs of a rare beauty, well preserved, and transmitted from generation to generation, as authenticity and colour Romanian traditions, or maybe taste the unmistakable and, in some places, unaltered local gastronomy.

**Tara Hațegului (Hațeg Country).** Entering Hațeg Country from Banat, on the Iron Gate of Transylvania, after only a few kilometres one reaches Ulpia Traiana Augusta Dacica Sarmizegetusa, then the oldest church – historical monument located in Densuș, and, on the right, in Râu de Mori, in the village of Suseni, the medieval fortress of Colți described by Jules Verne in his novel *Cetatea din Carpați*.

From Suseni, Râu de Mori, one enters the valley of the Râului Mare in the Retezat Massif, qualified by the great botanist from Cluj, academician Alexandru Borza (creator of the Retezat National Park, in 1935), a “*holy land for science in its entirety, a sacred monument of nature, a gigantic nature sanctuary*” [2].

Retezat, this unique mountain of Romania, is the symbol, the emblem of the Hațeg Country. Its floristic and faunal richness – in other words, its biodiversity – together with the unparalleled landscapes given by the 40 peaks over 2200 m high and the over 100 glacial lakes, constitute, perhaps, the most important tourist and scientific attraction of the whole area.

The Gemenele scientific reserve with an area of over 1600 ha, where the Gemenele Laboratory House (Cabin) of the Romanian Academy is located, is the ideal place for researchers of Retezat biodiversity.

The natural tourist resources (the great variety of the relief and the unparalleled

beauty of the landscapes, from the glacial lakes to the summits of the Retezat and Țarc), the richness of biodiversity (flora and fauna), the uniqueness of the geodiversity represented by the Dinosaur Geopark in Hațeg Country, the Retezat National Park and the Gemenele Scientific Reserve are just as many “peaks” of the natural resources in this area.

Starting from the great diversity of the Retezat, the international scientific importance of the Retezat National Park was recognized by its inclusion, by UNESCO, in the list of biosphere reserves (1980). In the valley of the Râul Mare, from the confluence with the Zlata river and almost to the exit of the gorge, over about 18-20 km, in the last two decades, but especially in the last five years, more than 100 boarding houses and family houses have appeared. The phenomenon can also be found in other parts of the Hațeg area, through the particularly picturesque valleys that leave the Retezat Massif.

In this introduction to the tourism of the area, is presented, in a few words, the Berthelot mansion of the Romanian Academy, from the commune of the same name (General Berthelot), which became the research centre for the sustainable rural development of the Hațeg County in 2010. The recovery of the castle, of the agricultural and forestry land, donation of the French general H. M. Berthelot in 2001, represented the starting point, the idea of setting up the research and continuous training centre in the fields of bio- and geo-diversity, ecological agriculture, and sustainable rural development based in Berthelot.

The restoration of the castle, taken over by the Academy in a deplorable state, has been a duty of honour for the country’s first institution of science and culture, both for the memory of the donor and for honouring the Nopcea family that built the castle. At the same time, the scientific and educational destination of the castle and its annexes should constitute the resumption, after more than six decades, of *“the desire of the Romanian Academy to guide and help the rural population of the region.”* The current scientific presence of the Romanian Academy in Hațeg Country-Retezat is the resumption of the sociological, economic and biodiversity research activities carried out by our academic predecessors Dimitrie Gusti, Alexandru Borza, Aron Densușianu, and A. Niarady.

The rural area of Hațeg County represents one of the richest areas of Romania in terms of natural and anthropogenic tourist offers, due to the natural, socio-cultural, and historical potential that can be exploited from a tourist point of view. The natural tourist resources consist in the great variety of the relief and the beauty of the landscapes, the richness of biodiversity (flora and fauna), and the uniqueness of the geodiversity (the Dinosaur Geopark in Hațeg Country, the Retezat National Park, and the Gemenele Scientific Reserve). Since the tourist potential includes numerous economic resources whose consumption can only be achieved “in situ,” their involvement in the economic circuit of values as a superior process of rural development of the rural area of Hațeg Country-Retezat is a must. From the point of view of human resources, few areas of Romania can be compared to Hațeg Country. An unprecedented density of ancient Dacian (Sarmizegetusa), Roman (*villa rustica*), fortresses. And defence towers (Colț, Nălațvad, and Răchitova), churches (Densuș and Sântămaria Orlea), castles and mansions (Berthelot and Kendeffy) belonging to medieval civilization, rural architecture, ethnography and authentic Hațegan folklore, etc. represent exceptional tourist attractions for Hațeg Country-Retezat area [1, 5, 7, 8,10].

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Researching literature, it was found a conceptual and methodological “vacuum” regarding the two fundamental components of rural tourism: 1) **monitoring and evaluation (quantification) of the complex tourist potential of rural localities** (rural tourism) and, on this basis, 2) **managing the optimization of the rural tourist offer**

(routes, circuits) **of an area** [11,12].

This is the reason that has led to consider the methodological conceptualization of monitoring and quantifying the tourist potential of rural settlements (Rs), in different tourist zones (areas) (Ta), starting from two basic requirements of the field:

- ✓ **the sustainable (prioritized) development of areas and villages with natural and human potential for rural tourism and agritourism;**
- ✓ **the optimisation of the management of rural tourism and agritourism activities** in rural settlements and tourist areas.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

Classifications regarding the typology of the tourist potential (offer) can be found in the literature: ethno-folkloric tourist villages, artistic and craft tourist villages, climate and landscape tourist villages, fishing and hunting tourist villages, vineyard tourist villages, pastoral tourist villages, sports tourist villages [4]. or in a paper about the rural territory of Hațeg Country: pastoral agro-tourist villages, agro-tourist orchard villages, agro-tourist mixed profile villages, scenic tourist villages, cultural-historical potential tourist villages, tourist villages as a base for departure to mountain ascents, villages as a support for holiday home dispersion areas, villages as a support for transit tourism (mountain, alpine, etc.), economic objectives of tourist interest villages [3,9,13]. Popa goes even further, observing the fact that “*the hierarchization of the tourist villages in Hațeg Country took into account precisely the extent to which rural communities could organize themselves in order to highlight the local potential and to generate the most important tourist flows.*” Popa felt the need to rank the tourist villages in the Hațeg area according to the “*local rural tourist potential*” (rural, our emphasis and addition) and the generation of “*tourist flows.*” Next, the author distinguished, in Hațeg Country, 55 villages with poor tourist infrastructure, 14 villages with satisfactory infrastructure, and 10 villages with certain prospects for tourism development, the classification being a function of two factors: infrastructure of transport and the quality of the habitat – *existing factors* – and the quality of natural and human resources (offer) – *potential factors*.

From the point of view of the pursued objectives (evaluation – quantification) regarding the complex rural tourism potential of the villages and the optimization of the tourist offer (routes, flows, circuits), it needs considering that some terminological classifications are also necessary (insufficient specification in literature), referring to the following categories: *tourist potential*, *tourist resource*, *tourist objective*, *tourist offer*, *tourist infrastructure* [10,14,15].

The *tourist potential* of an area (locality) is made up of all the natural and human resources and the existing tourist infrastructure in the structure of the respective rural area.

The *tourist resource* represents tourist attractions suitable (potential) for visiting and possible tourist attractions (present) to be exploited directly through tourism activities, found in the rural area in the form of tourist objectives (natural or anthropic) or as raw materials used in the developing of various tourist products.

The *tourist offer* is a commercial (economic) concept included in a rural tourism program (plan) or in a tourist circuit. As a rule, the tourist offer includes several thematic tourist objectives (pastoral roads, glacial lakes, dinosaur nests, brandy or wine road, old churches road, etc.).

The *tourist objective* represents a natural or anthropogenic entity well delimited in space that constitutes a permanent tourist attraction (Densuș Church, Retezat Massif, mountain pastoral life, brandy boilers in Răchitova, hot dog farms in Sălăș, etc.).

The *tourist infrastructure* includes the existing and/or necessary facilities and technical equipment for the organization and general touristic development of the territory,

localities, and rural houses.

### **Rural tourism typologies in Hațeg Country**

The different types of rural tourism have taken shape in Hațeg Country depending on the *natural and anthropic resources (and tourist attractions)* and the existing *tourist infrastructure* (or potential development) of the rural area.

The types (forms) of tourism practiced in Hațeg Country (Popa, 1999) are:

- **Mountain tourism** has the largest spread area determined by the exceptional natural resources offered by the Retezat, Țarcu, Șureanu, and Poiana Ruscă mountains. By far, the Retezat Massif represents the “royal” resource of the Hațeg Country thanks to the unparalleled beauty offered by the Retezat National Park, the Gemenele Scientific Reserve, with its 40 peaks over 2000 m high, and 12 peaks over 2300 m, and its 82 glacial lakes. A variant of mountain tourism is *sports tourism for winter sports* on the slope equipped with a cable installation at the Râușor Complex (Râu de Mori) or *sports tourism for water sports* on the reservoir on the Râul Mare. Due to the wildness and spectacularity of the mountain massifs, a species of sports tourism extremely destructive for the environment, landscapes, and the deep silence of the mountains has recently started to be practiced – *enduromania* (car and motorcycle circuits on rough terrain). This type of sport mountain tourism is increasingly contested by both locals and ecologists, foresters and tourists who love peace and unspoiled beauty. Mountain tourism (hiking) has, as its starting point, the depressed area of Hațeg towards the peaks of the surrounding mountains. The most spectacular and, therefore, the most frequented routes start from the southern part of the depression, the areas Râu de Mori – Brazi, Sălașu de Sus – Nucșoara, Pui – Hobița, towards the high central area of the Retezat massif. There can be visited the National Park, the glacial relief, the numerous glacial lakes, or the pyramidal peaks that exceed 2300 m in altitude. Other circuits emphasize the karst and pastoral settlements in the Ohaba-Ponor plateau (Șureanu Mountains), while others go from Clopotiva and Hobița – Grădiște to the Țarcu Mountains, or from Densuș to the Poiana Ruscă Mountains. Mountain tourism is associated with winter sports, being practiced in an organized manner only in the Râușor Complex, where a ski slope was laid out and a cable transport facility was built. In natural conditions, some winter sports are also practiced in other favourable locations, especially in the northern valleys of the Retezat Mountain.

- **Cultural, spiritual, and scientific tourism** took shape and evolved thanks to the cultural and architectural objectives, to the archaeological remains (ancient and medieval), to the churches, parks, and natural and scientific reserves offered by the settlements and rural areas of Hațeg Country.

A special place in scientific tourism is occupied by the wealth of biodiversity (particularly in the Retezat massif) and geodiversity (Dwarf Dinosaur Geopark in Hațeg Country). Historical sites, such as the Dacian amphitheatre at Sarmizegetusa, Roman remains (*villa rustica*), medieval castles (mansions) (Sântămăria Orlea, Berthelot, Nalațvad, Densuș), fortresses (Suseni-Colți, Răchitova, Crivadia, Sălașu de Sus, etc.). Also, the rural architecture, ethnography and authentic Hațegan folklore represent exceptional tourist attractions for Hațeg Country. Depending on the natural and anthropic resources, the tourist attractions, and the tourist infrastructure existing in the rural area of Hațeg Country, different types of rural tourism have been defined. The types (forms) of tourism that are practiced in Hațeg Country are: *mountain tourism, cultural, spiritual, and scientific tourism, weekend tourism, transit tourism and agritourism*.

**Weekend tourism** is the most widespread in Hațeg Country mainly due to the expansion of tourist guesthouses and holiday homes both in the Clopotiva – Râul Mare – Gura Zlata area (over 100 guesthouses and holiday homes), as well as in the Râușor Valley and in many other areas (almost in all villages in the Retezat, Șureanu, Țarcu, and Poiana

Ruscă mountains). Weekend stay is practiced by many families from the cities of Hunedoara County and even from Timiș County who still have their parents' houses in Hațeg Country or who have built new ones. Many weekend houses, if they also have a household (vegetable garden, tree garden, vineyard or even livestock), are also used as hobby farms.

**Transit tourism** is practiced by tourists who are on a wider circuit, such as Banat – Hațeg – Valea Jiului – Oltenia, or Banat – Hațeg – Deva – Hunedoara. This type of tourism is favoured by the existence, especially in the western area of the depression, of a varied range of tourist attractions (Dacian and Roman vestiges, old cult monuments, medieval fortresses, noble castles, anthropic dam lakes, paleontological sites, etc.) and a dense network of roads, generally well maintained.

**Rural tourism.** The rural area, through its components and resources, satisfies a wide range of motivations for the tourist: rest, recreation, sports, air cure or spa, customs and traditions offering the rural tourist a wide range of leisure possibilities. In this way, rural tourism is a means of fully exploiting the resources of the rural environment, with its agricultural, forestry, tourist, human, and technical-economic potential.

**Table 1.**  
**SWOT analysis – Rural tourism in Hațeg Country**

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Particularly large natural and anthropogenic tourist potential with development possibilities; Nature reserves in the nearby area: Retezat National Park, Grădiștea-Muncel Natural Park, and Dinosaur Geopark; Attractive area from a tourist and landscape point of view, the mountain area being suitable for the development of trails and slopes; Points of attraction, reservations, historical monuments, etc.; Craftsmen (and crafts) and keepers of customs and traditions; Restoration works of historical monuments that can be presented as models of good practices (e.g., Mălăiești Citadel); Prislop Monastery, the famous tomb of Father Arsenie Boca, currently the most important place of religious pilgrimage in the country; Numerous archaeological sites in the area.	Tourist potential not properly exploited; Routes with high tourist potential undeveloped; Weak promotion of cultural heritage, landscape, various tourist routes, etc.; Short duration of the tourist season, although the natural setting would allow a continuous flow of tourists; Small number of places for recreation, entertainment, various sports in the rural environment; Large number of historical monuments in an advanced stage of decay; Uncertain legal regime of historical monuments; High costs of maintenance and restoration of historical buildings; Insufficient promotion of historical monuments focused only on a few monuments of interest (Sarmizegetusa, Densus); Low level of investment in restoration works.
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
Increasing the level of information in accessing European projects; Possibility of developing agrotourism, ecotourism and cultural tourism, especially in areas with unexploited tourist potential; Framework conducive to the association of local tourism operators to promote services and the area; Possibility of urban development of the area respecting strict rules regarding the construction regime; Support framework favourable to the arrangement and development of rural family guesthouses; Possibility of introducing and practicing sports tourism; Possibility of superior exploitation of the fishing and hunting potential.	Decrease in the active workforce qualified for tourism; Difficult absorption of European funds; Absence of a long-term plan of tourism development; Absence of qualified personnel in tourist services and not giving due importance to this aspect, which leads to the discouragement of tourists; Decay of historical monuments; Complete destruction of archaeological sites following restoration works; Multiplication of art and decorative elements in bad taste; Significant degradation to the stage of ruins of some historical monuments and impossibility of reconstruction.

*Source: Data processed from field research and the Regional Development Plan of Hunedoara County 2014*

Tourism in Hațeg Country is in an early stage of development and organization, although it has a remarkable potential due to the quality of the natural environment, of the socio-cultural environment through the diversity of economic activities with a traditional

tone, mandatory conditions for attracting the most varied consumers to this form of tourism. Theoretically, all rural settlements with a still strong agricultural function have a potential for the development of agritourism. The reality, however, imposes a series of conditions, which belong to four large categories of factors: **position factors** (neighbourhoods with complementary attraction potential and easy accessibility), **site factors** (the quality of the local natural and anthropogenic landscape), **economic factors** (a personalized agricultural profile, energized by its complementation with other activities, the result of the modern exploitation of resources and local traditions), and **demo-cultural factors** (a vigorous, open and well-trained demographic support, able to internalize those values that could allow it to sell a quality tourist service). From this point of view, the practice of agritourism turns out to be a particularly complex one, especially when the question arises of the compatibility between the way of life of the rural population with the demands of the tourism consumer, more so as the villages that best preserve the values of tradition they are, at the same time, the least prepared (infrastructurally, materially, and even culturally) to offer attractive tourist services. Starting from the hygiene conditions (food, clothing, household) and up to the utilities indispensable for modern comfort (running water, hot water, sewage, Internet, telephone, relaxation possibilities, etc.) or to the appearance of the home and the sanitation of the household annexes, on the functionality of which, moreover, the agritourism practice is based, all require efforts to „be brought up to date” [11,12].

## CONCLUSIONS

Rural tourism and mountain agrotourism, through their specific internal agri-food consumption in the household where the food was produced, have an important function of economic enhancement of the capacity of mountain peasant households. In the case of foreign tourists, who spend their vacations in mountain guesthouses, rural tourism, mountain agrotourism is a form of „domestic” export of agri-food products.

Since most of the food consumed in agritourism activity comes from the household’s own production, it determines a high level of profitability of the agritourism activity and prices of the agritourism services below the level of the prices practiced in other forms of tourism. From the calculations made by the specialized tourist services, it follows that the price of an agro-tourism breakfast in all mountain agro-tourism guesthouses is 40-50% lower than a breakfast served in a restaurant in the network of tourist hotels (at the same level of classification).

The explanation is simple. The price of the agricultural products obtained and consumed in the agritourism guesthouse (household) does not include commercial additions, VAT, excise duties, transport, storage, storage costs, etc. Meat, meat preparations, eggs, cheese, milk, butter, jams, pickles, mushrooms, infusions, wine, brandy, sour cherries, cranberries, etc., prepared according to traditional processing methods, reach the tourist’s table directly from the own production of agritourism farms rural consumer.

On the other hand, rural tourism services (accommodation, services, etc.) do not carry additional indirect expenses (royalties, commissions, etc.), which makes the price of the agrotourism product much lower compared to the price of the urban tourism product. Agritourism policies must stimulate the advantages of rural mountain tourism, in the sense of exemption from taxes, fees, reduction of the fiscal pressure to reduce prices and maintain traditional customers (townspeople with lower incomes, foreigners eager to learn about Romanian rural traditions, children from urban environment, etc.).

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