

MOUNTAIN TOURISM AS A TOOL FOR REVITALIZING ISOLATED VILLAGES

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Abstract: Mountain tourism represents a sustainable development alternative for isolated rural communities facing demographic decline, economic stagnation, and limited access to infrastructure. This paper explores the role of mountain tourism in revitalizing remote villages by stimulating local entrepreneurship, creating new employment opportunities, and promoting the preservation of natural and cultural heritage. Through an integrative approach combining economic, social, and environmental dimensions, the study highlights how small-scale tourism initiatives—such as agritourism, ecotourism, and experiential tourism—can foster community resilience and sustainable livelihoods. The findings emphasize that effective revitalization depends on participatory local governance, the use of digital technologies for promotion and management, and the implementation of environmentally responsible practices aligned with the principles of the circular economy and sustainable rural development.

Key words: mountain tourism, rural development, revitalization, isolated villages, sustainability, community resilience

INTRODUCTION

Rural and mountain areas around the world are facing increasing challenges such as depopulation, economic stagnation and the erosion of cultural identity. Many isolated villages, once vibrant centres of traditional life, are now struggling to survive due to limited economic opportunities and the migration of younger generations to urban centres. In this context, mountain tourism is emerging as a viable and sustainable strategy to stimulate local development, preserve cultural values and revitalise declining communities.

In many mountain regions of the world, remote villages face a combination of problems: aging populations, depopulation, lack of jobs, poor infrastructure and limited access to public services. Recent studies show that, globally, the population of mountain areas increased significantly between 1975 and 2015, but a significant part remains concentrated in vulnerable rural settlements with limited economic opportunities [9].

At the same time, mountain tourism has become one of the important segments of international tourism. A 2023 UNWTO report estimates that mountain tourism accounts for approximately 9–16% of international tourist arrivals in 2019, corresponding to approximately 195–375 million tourists [20]. This significant volume shows that mountain areas are not just peripheral spaces, but can become important poles of attractiveness and development.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and UNWTO emphasize that responsibly organized sustainable tourism can increase and diversify the incomes of mountain households, support local jobs, alleviate poverty and contribute to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage [15]. Publications dedicated to mountain tourism also highlight its role in the sustainable development of mountain regions, especially when integrated with rural tourism and agro-tourism [8].

In Europe and the Carpathians, public policy documents (OECD, European Commission, Carpathian Convention) show that tourism – including mountain tourism – is one of the few activities capable of generating income and jobs in isolated rural areas, if supported by infrastructure, services and effective local governance [16].

In Romania, several studies highlight both the potential and vulnerabilities of mountain and rural mountain tourism. For example, the analysis of the evolution of accommodation capacities in the Romanian Carpathians shows a significant increase in accommodation structures between 2014 and 2019, especially in the Western Carpathians, where the number of units almost doubled [6]. In parallel, other research draws attention to the challenges: underdeveloped infrastructure, inconsistent promotion, and environmental pressures [1].

Against this background, a systematic analysis is required to understand not only the scale of mountain tourism development, but also the mechanisms through which it can effectively contribute to the revitalization of isolated villages.

Starting from these premises, the purpose of this article is to analyze, based on the specialized literature and some case studies, to what extent mountain tourism can be used as a tool for the revitalization of isolated villages. The focus is on the economic, social, cultural and environmental mechanisms through which tourism can contribute to local development, as well as on the necessary conditions for these benefits to be effectively manifested.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper aims to examine the potential of mountain tourism as a catalyst for the revitalization of remote villages. It explores the mechanisms through which tourism initiatives contribute to sustainable development, highlights best practices from successful rural destinations, and discusses the challenges that need to be addressed to ensure long-term resilience and inclusion in mountain regions.

The research methodology applied in this study combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of how mountain tourism contributes to the revitalization of remote villages. The study follows a descriptive and analytical framework designed to identify the key drivers, patterns and impacts of tourism-based rural development.

This article is a theoretical synthesis and policy analysis, relying exclusively on secondary data and specialized literature. No field research or original data is presented; all factual statements come from sources that can be verified online or in scientific databases.

The methodological approach enables a structured comparison of international and national experiences, allowing the identification of recurrent patterns, enabling factors and constraints relevant for isolated mountain villages.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The study demonstrates that mountain tourism plays a crucial role in revitalizing isolated rural communities by generating economic opportunities, encouraging cultural preservation, promoting environmental sustainability and strengthening local governance. The combination of natural beauty, traditional heritage and community participation creates a foundation for long-term rural resilience and inclusive growth.

Overall, the discussion confirms that mountain tourism can contribute significantly to the revitalization of remote rural areas when guided by sustainable principles, community participation and strategic governance. The findings highlight that successful

tourism development depends not only on attracting visitors, but also on empowering local communities to become active agents of change.

The study results highlight the significant potential of mountain tourism to serve as a catalyst for economic revitalization, social cohesion and sustainable development in remote villages.

For analytical clarity, the results are structured according to the main dimensions through which mountain tourism influences the revitalization of isolated villages: economic, demographic and social, cultural, environmental, and governance-related.

Economic dimension: income diversification and job creation

The joint FAO–UN Tourism report on tourism in mountain areas highlights that sustainable, community-managed tourism can increase and diversify household incomes, generate local jobs and reduce vulnerability to external shocks [15].

Similarly, UN Tourism publications on mountain tourism highlight that this form of tourism is often linked to: accommodation in guesthouses and chalets, local gastronomy, guiding services, sports and adventure activities, as well as consumption of local agri-food products and handicrafts [8]. All of this creates local value chains and opportunities for microenterprises and family businesses.

Case studies from the Romanian Carpathians show that, before the pandemic, the number of accommodation facilities in mountain areas increased significantly. In the Western Carpathians, for example, the number of rural mountain accommodation units increased by approximately 100.55% between 2014–2019, which means that it approximately doubled [6,14]. This growth indicates that investors and entrepreneurs perceive mountain tourism as a real business opportunity.

Another study, focused on consumer behavior in rural mountain tourism, shows that there are segments of tourists interested in accommodation in rural guesthouses, authentic experiences and local products, which supports the development of a diversified local economy (accommodation, gastronomy, services, agri-food production) [3].

In other regions, such as Yakouren (Algeria), research demonstrates that rural mountain tourism can become an important tool for local development, by capitalizing on natural and cultural potential and creating new jobs in tourism services [5].

In conclusion, in isolated mountain villages, tourism can:

- ❖ generate complementary income for agricultural households;
- ❖ create seasonal and, in some cases, permanent jobs;
- ❖ stimulate the emergence of local micro-enterprises (guesthouses, guiding, transportation, traditional products).

These findings indicate that the economic impact of mountain tourism extends beyond direct revenues, contributing to the creation of local value chains and increased economic resilience in isolated villages.

Demographic and social impact: countering depopulation, but also risks

Reports on the mountain population emphasize that a significant part of the population living in the mountains is located in rural settlements, often with aging trends and migration to cities [4]. At the same time, rural development strategies developed by the OECD and the European Union recognize tourism as a possible tool for retaining the young population and attracting new residents (tourism entrepreneurs, seasonal workers who later settle in the area) [17].

Zivkovic MB et al, 2025, studying rural tourism in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, argues that it represents a key strategy for revitalizing rural areas, including by increasing attractiveness for residents and reducing migration [10].

In Romania, studies on rural mountain tourism during the pandemic show that tourists preferred more isolated destinations, perceived as safe and uncrowded, which created a new interest in guesthouses in mountain villages [6].

Mountain tourism can reduce migration pressure in isolated villages if it generates income and job opportunities for young people. At the same time, the literature on tourism and sustainable development warns of risks: rising land and housing prices, seasonality of income, possible over-reliance on tourism [19]. These risks are considered negative consequences of tourism development and the promotion of sustainability, but their concrete extent depends on the local context and the specifics of each area.

Thus, while mountain tourism can mitigate demographic decline, its long-term social impact depends on balanced development models that address both economic benefits and potential social risks.

Cultural heritage and local identity

FAO and UNWTO emphasize that, when community-managed, tourism can support traditional systems, encourage the preservation of agricultural and craft practices, and strengthen the cultural identity of mountain communities [15].

The UNWTO "Best Tourism Villages" initiative shows, through concrete examples, that villages that capitalize on cultural heritage (traditional architecture, gastronomy, festivals) and integrate it into the tourism offer can obtain substantial benefits: income, jobs, international recognition, but also the community's motivation to preserve this heritage.

The development of mountain tourism is often linked to local branding (legends, traditions, gastronomy, customs). Tourism can motivate communities to preserve wooden churches, traditional houses, folk costumes, local music and dances, as they become economic and identity resources. In the absence of tourism or other income-generating activities, there is a risk that these cultural elements will disappear through the migration of the young population and the abandonment of practices considered unprofitable.

In this context, cultural heritage becomes both a development resource and a key element of community cohesion, reinforcing local identity in the face of socio-economic change.

Environmental dimension and green transition

Mountain regions are characterized by fragile ecosystems. Reports by the European Commission and the Alpine Convention insist that the development of mountain tourism must be explicitly sustainable, otherwise the risk of degradation of natural resources (forests, waters, biodiversity) is high [8, 11].

UNWTO publications dedicated to mountain tourism show that, when responsible tourism principles are adopted (limiting flows in sensitive areas, waste management, sustainable mobility, use of renewable energy), tourism can contribute to environmental conservation and raising awareness about nature protection [13].

National mountain tourism development strategies (including in Romania) already include recommendations on diversifying tourism products to reduce seasonality, investments in "green" infrastructure, as well as environmental impact monitoring tools, thus supporting sustainable development of mountain areas.

The development of tourism in mountain areas can be considered simultaneously both an opportunity (financing of protected areas, new sources of income) and a risk (overcrowding, pollution, pressure on ecosystems). In the absence of well-defined legislation (carrying capacity, building regulations, control of private car transport), the risk of degradation may outweigh the economic benefits, especially in isolated villages where administrative capacity is limited [18].

Therefore, environmental sustainability emerges as a critical condition for ensuring that tourism-led revitalization does not compromise the ecological integrity of mountain areas.

Governance, public policies and digitalization

OECD reports on tourism and rural development highlight the importance of integrated policies: coordination between transport, environment, education, digitalisation, agriculture and tourism [16].

In many countries, including European states, there are national plans dedicated to mountain areas, which include: the development of basic infrastructure (roads, water, sewage, internet), support schemes for rural tourism entrepreneurship, hospitality and management training programs, and mechanisms for monitoring the quality of services.

Studies on the resilience of rural mountain tourism in Romania, in the context of the pandemic, show that adaptation and recovery depended not only on natural resources, but also on the organizational capacity of local actors (entrepreneurs, associations, public authorities) [2].

The role of digitalization It is mentioned in several reports: the online presence of guesthouses, booking systems and promotion on digital platforms can compensate for geographical isolation, making otherwise little-known destinations visible [16].

In conclusion, lacking a minimum infrastructure (road, internet, basic services), isolated mountain villages have little chance of attracting and maintaining sufficient tourist flows for a real revitalization. Public policies that combine support for tourism with programs for rural innovation, building rehabilitation and public services can create a favorable framework for the revival of mountain communities [17].

These examples illustrate that governance capacity and policy coherence are decisive factors in transforming tourism potential into tangible development outcomes for isolated mountain villages.

Mountain tourism supported through investment and planning, can transform a relatively isolated mountain area into a competitive destination, providing jobs and support for the local economy. We can recall, in this regard, the Yakouren area (Kabylia, Algeria) where the valorization of tourism resources and integrated planning led to the revitalization of rural mountain tourism, becoming a valuable tool for local development, and local actors have emphasized the importance of appropriate projects to increase the attractiveness of the destination [5].

Redman M. et al., in the paper Policy brief - Southern Romanian Carpathian Mountains - Certified Ecotourism shows that localities such as Bran and Moieciu have become "hotspots" of mountain tourism, with a diversified offer of accommodation and activities, mainly targeting the domestic market [7].

The study on the evolution of mountain and rural mountain tourism in the Carpathians before and during the pandemic highlights: a significant increase in the number of accommodation facilities in the period 2014–2019 (for example, +100.55% in the Western Carpathians); maintenance of investments in accommodation facilities even in 2020, despite the crisis, with increases of 8–11% in the number of units in different Carpathian subregions [6,11].

These data suggest that mountain tourism has been – and continues to be – a driver for investment in areas that might otherwise have remained marginal.

Also, the analysis of the behavior of tourists interested in rural mountain areas in the Carpathians shows that there is a real demand for tourism products that combine nature, local culture and authentic experiences, thus directing development towards more sustainable models of rural mountain tourism [3,13].

The "Bergsteigerdörfer" ("Mountaineering Villages") initiative in Austria and other Alpine countries aims to create an image of quality mountain tourism, with an emphasis on small, mountaineering and nature-oriented communities with relatively controlled tourist pressure [12].

This example shows that: identifying mountain villages with a clear identity and valuable natural resources, establishing strict criteria for development (capacity limits, architectural style, quality of services) and involving the community in tourism governance, can transform isolated mountain villages into recognized tourism "brands", reducing dependence on mass tourism and limiting pressure on the environment.

CONCLUSIONS

Research demonstrates that mountain tourism plays a crucial role in revitalizing isolated rural communities by generating economic opportunities, encouraging cultural preservation, promoting environmental sustainability, and strengthening local governance. The combination of natural beauty, traditional heritage, and community participation creates a foundation for long-term rural resilience and inclusive growth.

Based on the analyzed sources, the following conclusions can be formulated, supported by the specialized literature:

Mountain tourism has a significant weight in global tourism, represents between 9 and 16% of international tourist arrivals, which confirms the economic potential of mountain destinations.

It can be an important tool for the economic revitalization of isolated villages, creating local jobs (accommodation, public catering, guiding, transportation) and stimulating investments in accommodation structures and related services.

Contributes to the consolidation of cultural identity and the preservation of heritage. Cases documented in initiatives such as "Best Tourism Villages" and "Mountaineering Villages" show that tourism can support the preservation of traditional architecture, local gastronomy and customs, to the extent that they are integrated into the tourist offer.

Supports environmental protection, if managed sustainably Mountain tourism can provide resources for the protection of natural areas, but, in the absence of rules and planning, can amplify pressures on mountain ecosystems.

Mountain tourism contributes to revitalization only if it is approached within a broader, integrated strategy that includes infrastructure, public services, education, digitalization, and economic diversification.

The tourism development of isolated mountain villages is based on a series of essential conditions: minimum infrastructure (practicable roads, digital connection), support for local entrepreneurship and the development of authentic tourism products, community involvement in decisions and governance, and tools for monitoring socio-economic and environmental impact (including tourism sustainability indicators).

Overall, the analysis confirms that mountain tourism represents a complex, multi-dimensional development tool rather than a standalone economic solution.

In conclusion, mountain tourism is not just an economic activity - it is a transformative process that can regenerate isolated villages, reconnect people with their environment and preserve the cultural soul of mountain regions. When managed sustainably, it becomes a key tool for balanced territorial development and long-term community resilience.

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