

PRESENT AND FUTURE PROSPECTS OF ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *Ecotourism is defined through its objectives of nature conservation and local people support. Ecotourism has become a tourist market segment with high growth potential worldwide, due to its environmental, responsible, sustainable and righteous qualities. In Romania, the ecotourism programs have a relatively recent history. Currently, despite the fact that our country has a particular heritage ecotourism, with high potential for development, ecotourism is still a narrow segment of the tourism market. Some isolated ecotourism products will have to be promoted by park administrations or specialized tour operators, so that some ecotourism destinations will develop, offering an integrated ecotourism product, resulting from the stakeholders' partnerships.*

Key words: *ecotourism, sustainable tourism, strategy, sustainable development*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of ecotourism has emerged in the 1980s, as an alternative to mass tourism of intensive development. Although it was not established as such, ecotourism has direct links to declaring the first national park in the world (Yellowstone, USA), in 1872. The ecotourism activities developed within wild nature, in remote and fragile areas of the world. Ecotourism is also an alternative to traditional tourism of industrial type, from tourist resorts or overcrowded urban centers. [3]

The concept of "ecotourism" was defined in 1991, at an international seminar on ecotourism of the Expert Council for Environment Canada (CEAC). In 1991, the International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defined ecotourism as "the responsible travels to natural areas that preserve environment and support the welfare of local people" [12]

Ecotourism is a component of sustainable development and is often named "green" or "soft" tourism. The definition accepted by UNWTO is relevant in this regard: "Ecotourism is a form of tourism in which the main motivation is the observation and appreciation of nature and local traditions" [6].

Ecotourism is based on the observation of nature, offering distinct tourism products, specific to cultural, scientific, and research tourism, practiced in countries with remarkable biodiversity, with nature reserves, national parks and local communities with unaltered customs and traditions. Ecotourism helps protect vulnerable natural habitats and historical and cultural values threatened by degradation and destruction by intensive tourism, mass tourism or hunting. Ecotourism is thus a way to sustainable use of the environment and a tourism product with therapeutic (mentally or physically) properties [3].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Practicing current principles of sustainable tourism development in natural areas have led to a distinct form of tourism – ecotourism - aimed to respect the integrity of natural landscapes, ecological biodiversity, according with the requirements of certain segments of tourists who wish to spend their holidays in nature.

Ecotourism is perceived differently in different geographical areas: in North America, ecotourism develops in pristine natural areas with low human interference; in Europe, where the natural landscape is generally linked to human presence and local communities, there are close connections between ecotourism and rural tourism, and these two forms of tourism can hardly be separated. In the latest decade, Europe has given greater importance to natural landscapes, as support for biodiversity and ecotourism.

This study aims at analyzing ecotourism in Romania and its development trends, starting from the experiences of the countries with tradition in this activity.

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) identified the main trends of this form of tourism internationally:

- the classic tourism market has matured in tourist resorts and its growth will remain constant. In contrast, experience-based tourism (ecotourism, nature tourism, cultural tourism) are among the sectors that may develop very quickly over the next two decades;

- tourism expands mostly within and near natural areas;
- ecotourism has developed with 20-34% yearly since 1990;
- ecotourism has grown 3 times more than the global tourism industry, in 2004;
- the international market of nature-based tourism is growing by 10-12% yearly,

at present;

- sustainable tourism has continued to grow and it is estimated to reach 25% of global tourism market by 2015 [14].

Ecotourism is defined through its objectives of nature conservation and local people support. Therefore it is more difficult to quantify how many tourists visiting natural areas are motivated by the principles of ecotourism. Estimates show that ecotourism holds between 20% and 40% of the global flow of tourists, accounting for 10% of total international tourism. Some studies related to tourist motivation have revealed an increase of those practicing nature tourism and especially those visiting wild environments, although in ecotourism, the groups must be designed from 6 to maximum 30 visitors.

Ecotourism involves practicing tourism activities and related economic ones, in a natural, unpolluted environment, with meaningful and refreshing views. Lately, ecotourism has been associated with national parks and nature reserves, protecting, conserving nature, investing in it, but also supporting traditional rural economy and maintaining local community's social, cultural and historical traditions [6].

RESEARCH RESULTS

In Romania, the ecotourism programs have a relatively recent history. The first ecotourism packages occurred in 2000, when a series of national and natural parks began to develop projects with ecotourism components (namely, the national parks: Retezat Mountains, Vânători Neamț, Apuseni Mountains). The main focus areas with ecotourism programs in Romania [10] are:

- Dobruja and the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve (bird watching, boating);
- Piatra Craiului National Park and its surroundings (especially programs based on observation of large carnivores (wolf, bear, lynx), but also of specific plant species, equestrian tourism, cycling, hiking, etc.);
- Apuseni Mountains National Park (speleology, thematic trekking, cultural programs, skiing, equestrian tourism, cycling etc.);
- other protected areas, some having national or natural park status: Retezat National Park, Hațeg Country - Dinosaur Geopark, Măcin Mountains National Park, Rodna

Mountains National Park, Călimani National Park, Mureș Floodplain Natural Park, Vânători Neamț Natural Park, with programs focused on: equestrian tourism, cycling, thematic trekking, skiing, flora and fauna watching, cultural programs, canoe expeditions and so on;

- Transylvania - Târnava Mare (Saxon and Szekely culture discovery, horseback riding, thematic hiking, etc.);

- Maramureș (nature discovery programs, horseback riding, cycling, discovery traditional occupations and architecture, etc.);

- Bucovina (nature observation programs or thematic hiking combined with monastic tourism and cultural tourism).

In the Master Plan of National Tourism Development 2007-2026 [15] it is estimated that the total number of foreign ecotourists is between 10,000 and 25,000. In large part this is because of a limited number of ecotourism programs in a small number of parks, specific infrastructure deficit (visitor centers, information points, educational trails, fauna watching, etc.), and an inadequate promotion. Other category of tourists visiting the Romanian national / natural parks are the weekend tourists (in most parks, but especially those located near large cities), the tourists practicing religious tourism (Vânători Neamț, Cozia, Buila Vânturarița, Mureș Floodplain, Ceahlău, Comana), the tourists practicing fishing (Danube Delta, Iron Gates, Mureș Floodplain, Balta Mică a Brăilei, Lower Prut Floodplain, Comana), the tourists practicing mountain tourism (hiking, mountain hiking, mountain climbing, winter sports – in the natural or national parks located in mountain areas), the adventure tourists, the researchers, the students (scientific tourism), bicycler tourists, etc.

The main attractions of the natural parks and reserves, as well as the tourism activities suitable for these areas [15] are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Existing and suitable tourism activities in natural parks and reserves

The name of the park	Hiking	Cycling	Speleology	Trekking	Fishing	Water sports (canoe, kayak, rafting)	Skiing	Skiing	Scientific tourism	Cultural attractions	ornithology	Animal watching	Equestrian tourism
Danube Delta		E		E	E	E			E	E	E	E	E
National Parks													
Retezat Mts.	E	S	E	E	E		E	E	E		S	S	
Rodna Mts.	E		S	E			E	E	E		S	S	E
Semenic – Caraș Gorges	E	E	E	E		S	E	S	E	S	S	S	
Călimani Mts.	E	S		E				S	E		E	E	E
Ceahlău Mts.				E					E				

Bicaz Gorges – Hășmaș Mt.	E	E		E	E			S	E		E	E	E
Nera – Beușnița Gorges			E	E		S			E				
Cozia Mts.	E	S		E					E	E	S	S	
Domogled – Cerna Valley	E	S	S	E					E	E	S	S	
Măcin Mts.		E		E					E	E	E	E	E
Piatra Craiului Mts.	E	S	E	E			S	E	E	E	E	E	
Buila – Vânturarița Mt.	E	S	E	E					E	E	S	S	
Jiu Gorges	E	S		E		E			E	E		S	
Natural Parks													
Balta Mica a Brăilei					E	S			S		S		S
Grădiștea Muncelului – Cioclovina	E		E	E	E				E	E		S	S
Iron Gates		E	E	E	E	S			S	E	S	S	S
Apuseni Mts.		E	E	E		E	E	E	E	E	S	E	E
Bucegi Mts.	E	S	E	E	E	S	E	S	S	E	S	S	S
Vânători Neamț		S			E				E	E	E	E	S
Maramureș Mts.		S		S	S	S		S	S	E	S	S	
Putna – Vrancea	E				E	S	E	S	E	E		E	E
Prut Lower Floodplain		S			E	S			E	E	E	S	S
Comana Forest		S		E	E	S			E	E	E	E	S
Hățeg Country - Dinosaur Geopark		S							E	E			
Mehedinți Plateau Geopark	E	E	E	E			S	S	E	E	S	S	S
Mureș Floodplain		E		E	E	E			E	E	E	E	S
Upper Mureș Gorges													

E = existing; S = suitable

(Source: processed after *Master Plan of National Tourism Development 2007-2026*)

At present, despite the fact that our country has a special ecotourism heritage, with high potential for development, ecotourism is still a narrow segment of the tourism market, facing many problems such as poor cooperation at the local level, modest promotion nationally and internationally, limited and poorly diversified offers, unsuitable infrastructure for ecotourism in the protected areas, labor migration, low training level of the employees in this field, etc.

However, we may say that the first steps to ecotourism development have been taken: the main protected areas were established, most of them have their own administrative structures and began to develop conservation and ecotourism projects,

information programs for local communities, made management plans and models of good practices (the eco-label, the certification system Eco-Romania), etc.

There are two major directions for further developments in this field: creating some *functional partnerships* at local, regional and national levels involving stakeholders, and strengthening the *role of institutions* and increasing their capacity to implement policies and programs in the field of ecotourism.

In order to develop ecotourism products, one should consider that the potential ecotourists have high education. Therefore their expectations are much higher and it is essential to develop products to meet them. These educated ecotourists have to be offered full and responsible information, that increases the respect for the visited natural or cultural environment and the tourists' degree of satisfaction of tourists.

Among the priorities identified by the *National Strategy for Ecotourism Development in Romania* [11] are the followings:

- developing national and international market research and constructing a database to be accessed by all organizations involved in this field;
- creating product offers / ecotourism programs integrated within the destinations with ecotourism potential, in order to improve the ecotourism experience and slower resource consumption;
- developing the distribution system of the Romanian ecotourism product, in order to improve its access to target markets.

A special role in this respect is the development of an Ecotourism Certification System to ensure nature conservation and sustainable development of local communities through tourism.

Ecolabels are certifications or accreditation schemes for products or services according to the environmental standards. These are run by government agencies, voluntary organizations or companies. There is a large variety of ecolabels and tourism certification schemes, such as those for tourist spots, certain tourism activities or tourist destinations. An ecolabel refers to the quality or „green” character of a tourist product or tourist destination.

The ecolabeling systems in tourism address to tourism service providers such as accommodation facilities, catering, tour operators, transport companies, tourism associations and so on, regarding environment performance of companies, businesses or destinations, product quality or social responsibility. The ecolabeling programs covers three aspects: environmental, socio-cultural and economic. From the environmental point of view, the use of ecolabels and ecolabeling systems in the tourism industry leads to a greater awareness among tourists and local communities, but also to a better protection of the local environment.

The ecologic labeling is voluntary, meant to promote and spread in Europe some products with high efficiency and low environmental impact throughout their life cycle. One of the objectives of reviewing this labeling system is to increase the number of product groups from 40-50 to 2015, so that the European consumers may have a wide range of products from which to choose.

Most ecocertification programs in tourism are run by government agencies or organizations with government involvement. Therefore, UNWTO supports governments and stakeholders in ecolabel implementation, verification and granting nationally. UNWTO also provides consulting services, marketing and communication for those interested and funds to obtain tourism ecocertification. There are over 500 ecolabels and

ecocertification in the world, but some are applied globally: NEAP, ECO Certification Program.

The *World Tourism Organization* advised governments, even since March 2003, to support initiatives that promote sustainable tourism certification. The Ecotourism Certification System of the Romanian Ecotourism Association (RAE), which adapts the international experience in Romania, was developed in accordance with the *Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program* promoted by the *Australian Ecotourism Association* (NEAP is the first ecotourism accreditation system) and Nature's Best of the Swedish Ecotourism Association (the first ecotourism accreditation system in the northern hemisphere).

The Ecotourism Certification System applies on two different categories:

- ecotourism programs offered by tour operators or guides (maximum 15 participants);
- small hostels in rural and natural areas (maximum 25 rooms).

Among the benefits that may result from the implementation of the Certification System are the followings [9]:

- allowing customers to identify easily those products that offer amazing experiences related to nature and rural culture;
- contributing to higher levels of trust in Romania ecotourism products on the international market;
- turning into a marketing tool for tour operators and hostel owners;
- ensuring higher levels of service quality;
- actively contributing to nature conservation and sustainable development at the local level;
- supporting local administrations in protected areas in developing tourism with minimal impact;
- providing a platform for joint activities between the business sector and the nature conservation organizations.

In addition, according to recent legislative initiatives, the accommodation facilities granted with ecolabels will receive, in addition to 9% reduced VAT, income tax exemption or tax, if applicable, for a period of ten years. This project amends the European directive in the field, transposed into the Romanian legislation in 2005, which does not provide, in its current form, incentives for tour operators who want to provide environmental services.

Freelancers, family associations and companies must meet at least three of the following criteria, in order to benefit from this normative act:

- use alternative energy at a rate of at least 15% for tourism;
- use at least 50% energy saving lamps;
- use environmentally friendly cleaning agents, collect selectively their waste, promote ecological Romanian traditional products, use only ecologic means of transport in the programs organized for tourists.

According to data published on the website of the European Parliament by now, the ecolabel "EU flower" was granted to six Romanian travel agencies (Eximtur of Cluj-Napoca, United Comtur Deva, Accent Travel & Events in Bucharest, Sind Gas in Ploiești Bibi Touring in Ploiești and Inter Tour Bacău), and Hotel Saturn, a 5-star hotel from the homonym resort.

CONCLUSIONS

Ecotourism, as the main form of sustainable tourism, should provide: optimal and sustainable exploitation of resources and environment, economic and social benefits for the

resident population; compatibility between local people and tourists; and interest in sustainable development. Therefore, when applying properly its basic principles, ecotourism should lead to careful sizing flow of tourists and tourist behavior modeling, establishing a tolerance threshold supported by the local population [3].

Romania has to promote isolated ecotourism products, made by park administrations or specialized tour operators, develop some ecotourism destinations, in which to be offered an integrated ecotourism product made by the stakeholders (park administration, local government, local communities, private investors) and promoted by local ecotourism associations and central public administrations.

These destinations could be developed on the skeleton of the natural or national parks and biosphere reserves, but other ecotourism destinations could be created in other natural areas with unaltered traditional life (for example, Natura 2000 sites). Retezat National Park, Hațeg Country - Dinosaur Geopark, Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, Apuseni Natural Park, Piatra Craiului National Park, Maramureș Mountains Natural Park, Călimani National Park, or Măcin Mountains National Park are some of the possible future ecotourism destinations.

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