

Ecotourism in Puglia Region, Italy – A Competitive Advantage in the Current Context

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Abstract

Italy is one of the most attractive destinations in the world and represents a reference point for international tourism. The impressive number of tourists flows concentrated, especially in the northern part of the country has caused many issues among the local population. In this context, rethinking tourism activity and make it more sustainable becomes essential. A first solution can come from the Puglia region, which is one of the main ecotourism destinations of the country. This article describes the image of Puglia in the online environment and investigates whether tourists also perceive this region as an ecotourism one. Based on the experience of the stakeholders in the region regarding ecotourism activity, and taking into account the actual context caused by the COVID-19 health crisis, Puglia can take momentum and consolidate its brand on the international market.

Key words: ecotourism, Puglia region, Italian ecotourism.

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1. Introduction

Italy is one of the most famous tourism destinations in the world, attracting every year numerous flows of international tourists. The wide range of UNESCO sites, natural landscapes and cultural heritage make Italian destinations preferred by millions of tourists. The most attractive regions in terms of tourists' flows are located in the North part of the country, Veneto and Lombardia being the most preferred regions. However, the health crisis from the beginning of 2020 showed how volatile could be the tourism industry and stressed the need for change. Italy was already facing the negative aspects of mass tourism, so a change in tourism approach to a more sustainable one is not a new idea. Italy is in the situation when it should reconfigure its tourism business model and focus more on nature-based activities. In this regard, ecotourism should be a solution easy to implement, based on the natural landscape that is well-known in all the country. It would also support less developed region, like Puglia, to recover the economic and social gap.

The current paper approaches the ecotourism potential of Puglia, one of the four regions from the south of Italy and focuses on the way the region is promoted online as an area where tourists can experience a wide variety of outdoor activities. The research represents a part of a complex study about alternative tourism niches, like rural wellbeing tourism, in countries that have an impressive tourism potential both in terms of ecotourism and health tourism, like Italy, Spain and Romania.

2. Theoretical background

Ecotourism represents a niche of the sustainable tourism industry that focuses on conservation of nature, traditions and communities. Its specific activities are nature-based and involve sustainable approaches (Smith & Csurgó, 2018). The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) states that ecotourism is non-extractive and creates ecological behaviour, including ethics in

relation to nature (Ute & Kesinee, 2017). The experience of ecotourism development varies from country to country and depends on the social and economic background of each destination (Elgar, et al., 2020). Ecotourism includes many other types of tourism and outdoor activities (Satyendra, et al., 2016) and takes part of the rural tourism umbrella that also comprises adventure, sport and heritage tourism (Schiavone et al., 2016).

Ecotourism was developed around 1970s and started to become attractive for the industry since 2000. Even in Academia environment, the evidence shows that the interest for this subject increased dramatically after 2000. In a bibliographic research based on the Cabi international database, about the published papers that approached this subject, it was observed that the interest for ecotourism in research depended on the period of time. In 1980s, there were identified only three mentions of this subject in the published works; in the 1990s there were 567 mentions, and in 2000s, the numbers of papers increased to 1871 mentions. This international recognition of ecotourism in the last decades is based on the concerns of the authorities and population regarding the negative impact of mass tourism on the destinations. In this context, it appeared the need for more responsible behaviour from each stakeholder (Boyd, 2012) and for an alternative of mass tourism (Kamila & Faouzi, 2019) which helped ecotourism to be part of national tourism strategies. Recently, the interest for ecotourism activities increased significantly, based on a series of trends, such as the development of local sustainable tourism destinations; demand for authentic travel experiences; interest for health and wellness travel experiences; co-living and Sharing Economy that promote accommodation options like Airbnb platform; the threat of overtourism and the increasing concern of tourists regarding the living standards of local communities (Joyner, et al., 2018). However, there is evidence that even ecotourism damages the natural environment and affect flora and fauna, especially when it comes about seaside areas (Monti, et al., 2018)

One of the European countries that started to promote alternative tourism forms is Italy (Fennell, 2020). It focuses its ecotourism offer on mixed programs based on nature, sports activities and cultural experiences (Rauschelbach, 2002). Mass tourism affected many regions of the country, especially in Veneto region which conducted to developing specific touristic nature-based programs, such as cycling holidays and other similar initiatives to direct the guests flows to less-visited areas, but also with impressive touristic potential (Euromonitor, 2019).

Puglia is one example in this regard; the region is famous for its natural landscapes. The region consists of a mix of agriculture activity with cultural heritage, attractive climate and natural resources that recommend the area for ecotourism. Also, the gastronomy and the production of wines (Fabio, et al., 2019) support ecotourism and determine tourists to choose this destination for authentic experiences (Fiorini, et al., 2019). The tourism stakeholders focus the developing strategy in Puglia on the regional advantages, having as main objective to mitigate the seasonality and promote the less popular areas through modern marketing (Flavia & Davide, 2015). The reason for this approach is the increased interest of the guests for the natural landscape and the combination of culture, history and nature that can be met in the region (Trono & Castronuovo, 2016).

Puglia has a resident population of 4,050,072 inhabitants, representing almost 7% of the Italian population. Almost 97% of the region consists of rural areas and compress 85% of the population. The main activity is agriculture, which plays a vital role in economic and social activities. However, it is characterized by severe structural problems (Marilena, et al., 2016). Based on the advantages of rural tourism that allows the local community to diversify the activity and to have additional income sources, in the last years has developed ecotourism in the region (Schiavone, et al., 2016). Nowadays, the region is one of the most dynamic, with an ongoing transition from a primary sector to a tertiary one (OECD, 2010). The most international tourists that are coming to visit Puglia are from Germany, France and the UK. Starting with 2016, there were recorded increases in the number of guests from the Eastern European countries, mostly because of the flight connections from Bari (Anon., 2020).

3. Research methodology

This paper represents a descriptive study of the ecotourism in Puglia, based on the following research question *What is the image of Puglia in the online environment as a tourist destination?*. The research was conducted between May and June 2020, and in order to see the interest of the

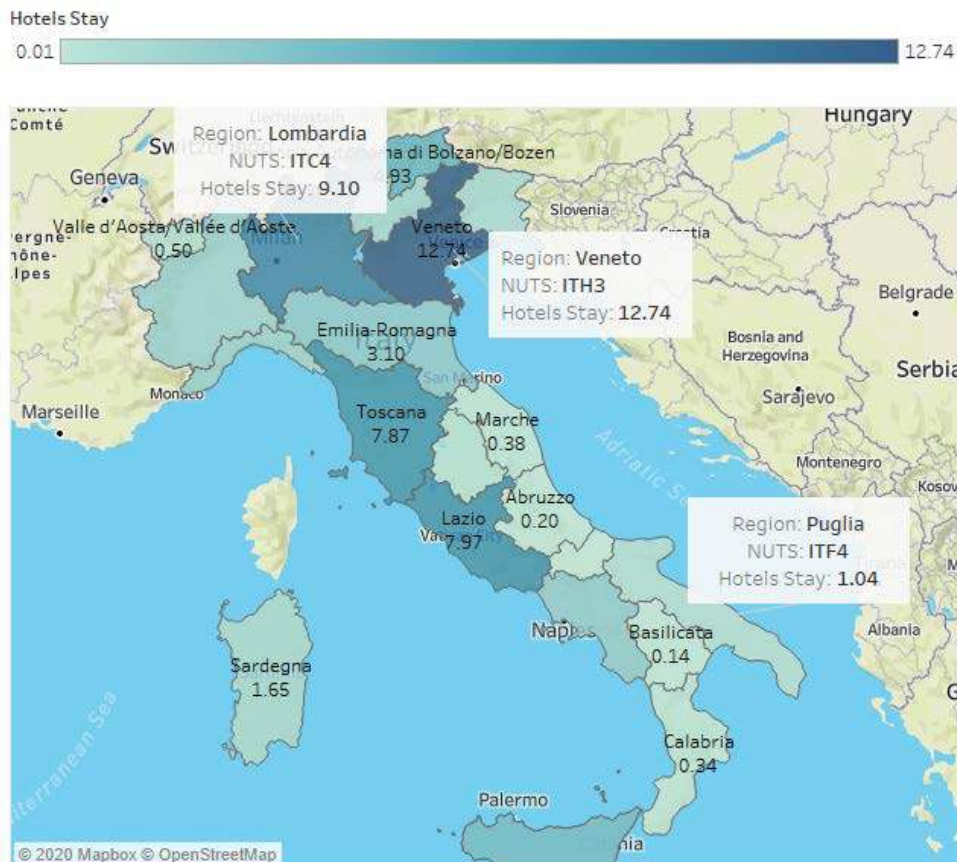
tourists for the region, we mapped the area considering the number of the stays in hotels units in 2018. We also investigated how the local authorities promote the region through the official tourism website and if the guests perceive the region as an ecotourism destination. To accomplish our primary objectives and to answer the research question, we considered the following research design:

- (i) mapping the regions of Italy regarding the number of stays in hotel units – we coded each region after NUTS 2 classification and used the open-source software *Public Tableau* based on the most recent data published by Eurostat.
- (ii) the image of Puglia promoted by the authorities – we investigated the official tourist website and checked the information about tourist attractions, advice and ideas for spending the holiday in the region.
- (iii) the perception of the guests about Puglia in terms of ecotourism – we analyzed the information posted on the TripAdvisor platform and focused on the Top attractions (a rank generated by the guests' opinion). We investigated if the first ten attractions include ecotourism activities/spots and if the guests perceive them as being related to ecotourism.

4. Findings

Italy is one of the most famous regions in the world in terms of touristic attractiveness, having an impressive cultural and natural heritage. According to Eurostat data, in 2018, Puglia region was one of the less-visited regions in the country (Figure 1). The total number of hotels stays was around 1.04 mil., compared to Veneto that recorded 12.7 mil. of hotels stays and Lombardia, with 9.09 mil.

Figure no. 1. Mapping tourist flows in Italy by region after the number of stays in hotel structures (or similar)



Source: Developed by the authors using Public Tableau Software based on (Eurostat, 2020)

According to Eurostat data, Puglia Region recorded in 2016 the highest increase (year to year) in the last five years, when the number of hotels stays rose by 6.63 % compared to 2015. After this peak, the annual increase reduced gradually.

The law performance of Puglia in terms of the number of stays (in hotels units) compared to the other regions of Italy offers the opportunity to develop a more sustainable model of tourism, based on ecotourism. The fact that the major flows of tourists are directed to the North part of the country, particularly in Lombardia and Veneto is not necessarily a weakness and in the context of the pandemic reality it can be transformed in a competitive advantage. Puglia can become one of the most preferred areas in the country based on the nature-based activities, its ecotourism potential and experience in this regard.

From our analyze, we noticed that Puglia is promoted on the *official tourism website* of the region (ii) as a nature-based destination with an emphasis on cultural spots. The pictures from the homepage illustrate natural landscapes that contain local flora and fauna, suggesting in this way the activities the tourists can try. There are also suggestions about activities that can be done by tourists, such as bike touring and hiking. The most promoted tourist activities include five main categories: art and culture; traditions and spirituality; nature, sports and wellbeing; food and wine and sea. The focus of the authorities is also evident. The official tourist website contains advice about how to spend your holiday in the region, and all the suggestions have some points in common with ecotourism activity: "A day in Casa Puglia"; "Historic Villages"; "Dauni Mountains", "Puglia: Castles, cathedrals and towers" and "Bike touring in Puglia" (Puglia official tourism portal, 2020).

In order to have a more comprehensive image about how Puglia is promoted in online environment, we also checked the information posted on Tripadvisor platform, at the Top attractions section (iii) and investigated if the most preferred attractions include ecotourism activities. We also wanted to see if the guests perceive these attractions as being specific to ecotourism and checked the most used words and phrases of the guests in their reviews. In order to accomplish this objective, we used the dedicated function provided by Tripadvisor, namely popular mentions. The results showed that from the first ten tourist attractions in Puglia, there are four attractions (table 1) that can be considered specific to ecotourism niche: La Cantina Frrud - Museo del Vino (3rd, rank, 196 reviews), I Pastini (4th rank, 295 reviews), Masseria Brancati (6th rank, 619 reviews) and L'Acropoli di Puglia (9th rank, 184 reviews).

Table no. 1 Top Tourist attraction in Puglia according to TripAdvisor platform

Trip advisor rank	Tourist Attractions	Reviews number	The most used words in guests' reviews
3	La Cantina Frrud - Museo del Vino	196	wine, tour, informative
4	I Pastini	295	wine tasting, wine making, winery tour, farm house
6	Masseria Brancati	619	processing area, olive oil, roman times, ancient trees
9	L'Acropoli di Puglia	184	olive oil, products, production, vinegars, factory

Source: (TripAdvisor, 2020)

Regarding the focus of the reviews posted by guests, it can be seen that each attraction has comments that emphasize ecotourism activities, such as: wine, tour, farm house, processing area, olive oil production. The results show that the guests also perceive the attractions as being connected with ecotourism and include in their opinions descriptions of the related activities and experiences.

5. Conclusions

Ecotourism can become a key point in the economic development of Puglia and a starting point to more sustainable tourism in Italy. Puglia's performance in terms of the number of stays in hotel units was modest in 2018, even though in 2016 marked one of the most impressive increases in tourism flows attracted among Italian regions. In the actual context that is characterized through a high degree of uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 health crises, Puglia can take advantage of its ecotourism experience and recognized potential and become one of the most visited areas in the country. According to the results of this study, the region is already promoted as an ecotourism destination, and the guests perceive it so. In this context, there is no major obstacle for Puglia to take momentum and to improve its attractiveness among domestic and international tourists.

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