

Quality Management in the Romanian Tourism Industry: An Approach Regarding the Rural Mountain Areas

Corina Aurora Barbu
Elena Condrea

" Ovidius" University of Constanta, Faculty of Economic Sciences, Romania

coribaru@yahoo.com

elenacondrea2003@yahoo.com

Abstract

More and more people are putting a special emphasis on health and relaxation and when it comes to vacations, they seek to escape from routine in places where nature and tranquility predominate. Personal and true experiences take the place of the standardized holidays offered by mass tourism, satisfying to a greater extent the desire of tourists to detach themselves from the daily life of crowded and hectic cities. In this context, there is a movement of tourists to nature and to places that can offer traditional outdoor activities such as hiking, horseback riding or kayaking, etc. Authentic food, clean air and tranquility have also become the criteria of tourists in choosing a destination. Thus, tourism in rural areas of Romania, especially in the mountains, has become very sought after and appreciated. The stressful daily life and the fast pace of the cities make people want to spend their holidays in the most relaxing environment. Unfortunately, the rural tourism in our country is not very well developed and, consequently, has a lot to recover in terms of tourist offer. Although nature and people can offer unique experiences to tourists, few of the foreign tourists manage to reach these places and get to know the local natural beauties. For this reason, the focus of this paper is on tourism quality management in these areas, in order to identify the current situation and to develop possible suggestions as ways to improve the quality of rural tourism services.

Key words: quality management, tourism, mountains

J.E.L. classification: Z3

1. Introduction

Rural tourism has developed with the pressure of the hectic lifestyle that most people in urban areas feel. Although the need to escape from a city can turn a place outside of it into an attractive one, it is not the only reason why rural tourism is in high demand. Rural experiences are a tourist getaway described by romantic notions of people and traditions, which offer tourists the vacation they need, through simplicity, hospitality and friendship.

Rural tourism in Romania is characterized by rich villages from a natural point of view and welcoming locals but, on the other hand, by the multiple shortcomings related to infrastructure, utilities and material poverty, which place living standards in Romanian villages on the periphery of the European civilization. It is considered necessary to develop the rural tourism product in Romania in order to be in line with the requirements of the European market, to meet certain quality standards and facilities for modern tourists. However, this does not mean removing the defining elements of village life and their deep cultural resonance, but achieving the necessary quality standards for a comfortable and pleasant stay. It is very important to adapt to European tourism standards in terms of rural tourism in order to be able to develop and make known the beautiful and rich places in culture and traditions and to foreign tourists. This involves initiating and promoting actions that include emphasizing sustainable development in rural tourism areas in Romania, but also the development of processes of education and training of a mentality open to change and development. Efforts need to be coordinated at both regional and national level, addressing larger gaps such as infrastructure or spatial planning, which involve the development of projects with spatial implications. The steps

required to transform rural tourist areas into European tourist destinations are difficult and multiple, but I have chosen to approach this issue from the point of view of quality management to establish the current level and possible adjustments that can be made.

2. Literature review

Rural tourism is that type of tourism that takes place in rural areas and is defined by different characteristics and functions. Rural tourism is a form of tourism that takes place in rural areas and has a functional structure of heterogeneous services and accommodation. The incomes from the rural tourism have a permanent character and the services are offered by an employed and specialized personnel (Dinu, M., 2002, p.261). Sharpley and Roberts (2004) mentioned the location of the destination in the countryside, the small-scale buildings and settlements and the connectivity with the locals as characteristics of holidays in rural areas. (Sharpley and Roberts, 2004, p. 123). Moreover, the concept of rural tourism includes rural customs and folklore, local traditions, values, beliefs and common heritage. According to Negrusa et al. (2007), rural tourism is "a form of tourism offered by locals in rural areas, with small-scale accommodation, rural activities and living habits". (Negrusa et al., 2007, p. 1). Another author defines rural tourism a few years later as "a tourist product that offers visitors a personalized touch, a taste of the physical and human environment of the rural environment and, as far as possible, allows them to participate in activities, traditions and lifestyles of the locals" (Aref and Gill, 2009, p. 68). Rural tourism is seen as tourism that takes place "in the country", but what constitutes "in the country" varies significantly between and even within countries (Lane, 2009).

One of the most significant attempts to define rural tourism is that of the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), together with Bernard Lane (Lane, 2009, p.). This definition describes rural tourism as a discreet activity with distinctive features such as its size, location and character. In his 1994 paper, Lane described a typology of rural tourism ranging from "pure rural" to urban. He suggested that the demand for rural tourism is directly related to the specific characteristics of rural areas (such as location, physical environment, etc.) and that the main motivation of tourists to visit rural areas is to experience "rurality". (Lane, 1994, p)

Tourism is often understood as a form of escaping from the pressures of everyday life, and this can be especially true in rural tourism, where the combination of an often-idealized notion of "rural", simple and easy, is combined with fun and relaxation of the tourism and vacation. Therefore, rural tourism can be defined as a form of tourism characterized by authentic elements that define the rural environment as a whole and which, for people in urban areas or other regions or countries, can be novelties that contribute both to the relaxation of tourists and as well as to their entertainment.

Rural tourism is characterized by the variety of rural tourist destinations and natural riches, picturesque landscapes, as well as deep-rooted culture and traditions. The main characteristics of rural tourism are related to space, population, community, food, leisure, recreation and treatment. The main distinguishing feature of rural tourism refers to the fact that it develops outside urbanism, being an alternative source of activities, which offers multiple possibilities for the development of national tourism, because it contributes to the diversification of the tourist offer. Another extremely important feature refers to the fact that rural tourism uses a wide range of natural, cultural, historical, ethnographic and culinary resources, being a factor that promotes cultural heritage, having multiplier effects.

By using all the characteristic elements, rural tourism can bring multiple benefits if managed properly. According to Okech et al. (2012), there are three main benefits of rural tourism for rural areas, namely:

- (1) providing opportunities for transactions and businesses.
- (2) economic growth, job creation, emigration, development of public services, development of infrastructure, social contact and environmental protection.
- (3) facilitating access to remote and non-urban areas. (Okech et al., 2012, p. 41).

We can say that rural tourism has benefits for the economy and society, for the environment, locals and tourists in general. Rural tourism should be seen as an opportunity for developing countries.

On the other hand, due to the pressures determined on sensitive environments, rural tourism is in a position where it needs a very well-developed quality management system. Although the quality of services in rural tourism is a frequently debated topic, it is not put into practice in tourism in rural areas. The quality of services is closely and indivisibly linked to satisfaction, and its relationship and influence on customer loyalty has been the subject of a great deal of research. Tourist satisfaction has been measured and evaluated through a variety of tools, namely overall satisfaction, performance, expectations, positive recommendation, etc. (Yoon and Uysal, 2005, p. 47). Given the importance of this topic, I consider it necessary to approach it in the context of tourism in rural areas of our country, where, although landscapes and natural resources are superlative, the tourism industry does not know how to capitalize on them to the fullest.

In rural tourism in Romania, quality management represents, first of all, the modernization of facilities for customers in order to improve the quality of tourist services in this area. This should be seen as an integral part of the entire tourism sector, which could benefit the national economy, as each link in the tourism value chain provides important elements to the overall product. The quality of the tourist services offered in the rural area, together with the experience obtained in the chosen rural destination determines the customer's satisfaction with his trip / vacation and implicitly forms an opinion about the tourist services in Romania.

Although the quality of tourist services is the accumulation of perceptions and subjective opinions of each tourist, which are also influenced by personal sensibilities, psychological and social influences or simply by everyone's preferences, the overall picture is given by the degree of satisfaction of tourists to facilities and hospitality. Thus, the rural tourist areas in Romania need to be improved, first of all in terms of accommodation conditions, transport, food, but also the approach of the hosts. We must specify that in the rural tourist areas there are many "guest houses". Thus, the locals offer accommodation in their own homes or outbuildings of the houses, built in order to provide accommodation. Although the experiences in such accommodation are authentic and unique, it is necessary to have slightly minimum quality standards for guests, which take into account the rules in force so that the stay of tourists is fully satisfactory and they want to return to the places visited. In addition to natural and cultural resources, tourist facilities, accommodation, restaurants must be the basic resource of any tourist destination, including those in rural areas. The use of quality management in all this can bring the success of Romanian tourism in tourist destinations in rural areas.

In rural tourism, it is difficult to use quality assurance tools and apply techniques such as certificates and rewards. We could say here that there is a lack of completeness because quality management techniques are applied in a selective manner, without taking the concepts of TQM as a comprehensive philosophy. These quality management processes have less accessible monitoring and feedback tools for tourism practitioners in rural areas. The problem becomes even more complicated as tourists consume other elements of the total tourism product during their overall experience, such as the destination area. Thus, it is even more difficult to control the quality of all elements of the tourism product offered by suppliers operating in the rural tourism area.

In Romania, tourism in rural areas needs considerable improvements in terms of service quality to attract more tourists, and even more so from outside our country. It is very important for locals and owners of boarding houses and hotels to understand that a quality management system can help increase customer satisfaction and thus increase the number of tourists as well as revenue. Quality management involves the continuous improvement of the services offered in order to meet the expectations of customers as best as possible. For this to be possible in rural tourism areas in Romania, it is necessary for small entrepreneurs to understand all the attributes of tourism services that contribute to customer satisfaction and loyalty. Therefore, the quality in rural tourism approached by setting individual quality standards, must be resized with the growing needs and expectations of tourists.

3. Research methodology

The Alba Mountain area was chosen for the research, given the fact that it is an area rich in exceptional mountain natural settings, ancient cultural and culinary traditions. Also, here you can see historical monuments such as the Museum of Mines in Roşia Montană, Sebeş Fortress, Aiud Fortress,

medieval buildings but also cathedrals and churches. Moreover, here we find the Scărișoara Karst Complex, Huda lui Papară Cave, Arieș Gorge, but also gorges and valleys with imposing landscapes. The mountain, hill and high plateau regions predominate in this area. Alba County is covered by the Târnavelor and Secașelor Plateau to the east and the Apuseni Mountains to the west. To the northwest, the area is guarded by the Great Mountain and the Bihor Mountains.

Given the geographical location and the main resources of Alba County, its economy is characterized by the industry and services sectors. The industries that have developed in Alba are: the wood processing industry, the food and beverage industry, the chemical industry, the leather and footwear industry, the textile industry, the extractive and derived products industry, the furniture industry and the machinery and equipment industry.

The area of the Apuseni Mountains and the Șureanu Mountains can find in tourism a way of sustainable economic development. A major resource of tourism in Alba County is and will remain the rural space both through the multitude of types of natural attractions and through multiculturalism. In mountainous areas, rural settlements are scattered and sometimes isolated, which determines the absence of a stimulus in terms of the development of utility infrastructure, which in turn is an obstacle to the development of tourism. In addition, awareness of the option of using unconventional utility solutions is limited.

The aim of this research is to identify the factors that can influence the quality of tourism in this area. The objectives of this study are to establish the evolution of the number of tourist structures in operation and the accommodation capacity, as well as the number of tourists in the last four years. The focus was on identifying the number of foreign tourists and its evolution during the analyzed period. We also aimed to identify the attractions and tourist activities in this area, as well as the opportunities offered by the rural tourism region of Alba.

In order to achieve these objectives, we analyzed from an evolutionary point of view the data collected with the help of the statistical directories available at national level regarding the accommodation structures in operation, the accommodation capacity and the number of tourists in the analyzed period. The information on tourist activities and attractions was obtained from nationally validated sources and in terms of identifying possible opportunities and challenges in the upland region in rural areas in terms of tourism we chose a qualitative research approach - based on interviews and their analysis with GABEK. Qualitative research is recognized as suitable for providing "strong descriptions" and detailed accounts of complex phenomena. The GABEK method of qualitative analysis is applied in social science studies, as well as studies related to tourism, being applied to locals who have an accommodation structure of any type in rural areas. The present study is based on empirical data that emerged from semi-structured interviews applied to the owners of structures with accommodation function in the upland rural area of Alba.

4. Data, results and discussions

4.1. Analysis of the evolution of tourist accommodation structures and tourists

Following the analysis of the numerical data published at national level, we made the table below (see table 1) in which a relatively small total number of accommodation units can be observed.

Table no. 1. Tourist reception structures with accommodation functions by types of structures in Alba

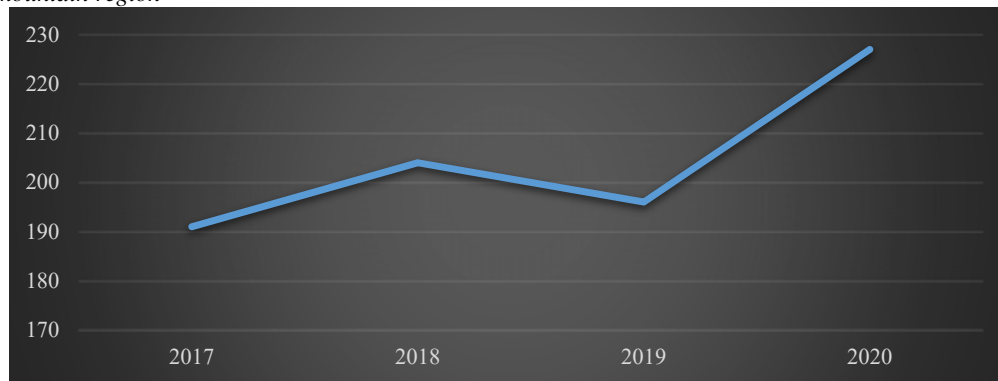
Types of accommodation	2017	2018	2019	2020
Hotels	19	19	18	19
Hostels	4	3	3	4
Motels	5	6	6	6
Tourist villas	10	12	10	29
Tourist chalets	11	6	7	6
Bungalows	0	3	1	3
Camping	1	1	1	1
Tourist stops	2	3	3	2
Tourist houses	0	0	1	1
Student camps	3	3	3	3

Tourist pensions	28	29	30	27
Agrotourism pensions	108	119	113	126
Total	191	204	196	227

Source: INSSE

The agrotourism pensions are the ones that have the largest share of the total tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation function in Alba. Thus, out of a total of 227 accommodation structures, 126 were agritourism pensions in 2020. This means more than half. There are 29 tourist villas and 27 tourist hostels. There are only 19 hotels in this region. The fewest accommodation structures are campsites and tourist houses, numbering 1 in 2020. Regarding the evolution of accommodation structures in the analyzed period (see graphic 1), there is an increase followed by a decrease and then another growth. However, in total, there is an increase in the number of accommodation structures with tourist functions in the Alba Mountain area during this period.

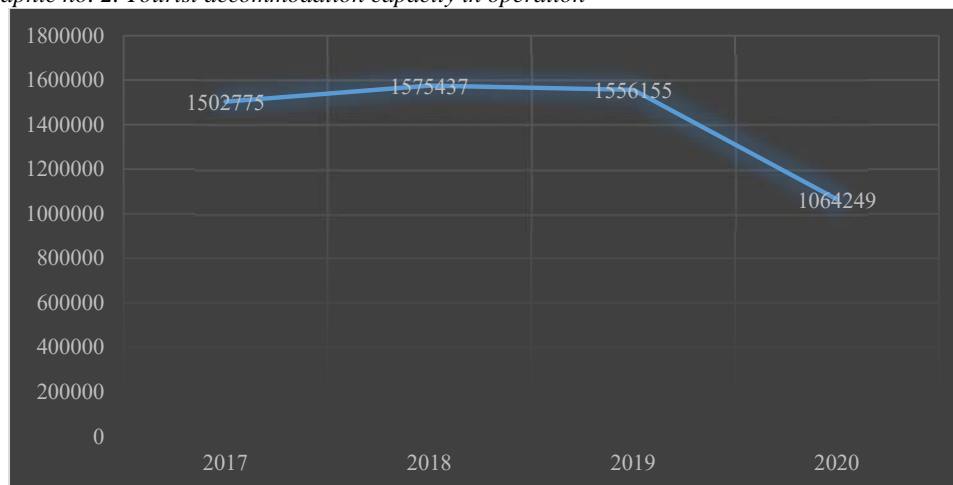
Graphic no. 1. Evolution of tourist reception structures with accommodation functions in the Alba mountain region



Source: made by the author based on INNSE data

Regarding the tourist accommodation capacity in the analyzed mountain region, a rather large decrease was observed in 2020 compared to 2017, although in the period 2017-2018 it knows a slight increase. This drastic decline in 2020 could also be caused by the emergence of the new SARS COV-2 virus and the beginning of an epidemiological pandemic that we are still facing.

Graphic no. 2. Tourist accommodation capacity in operation



Source: made by the author based on INNSE data

The number of tourists in this area has experienced an upward curve until 2019, increasing little by little, but constantly. In 2020, however, with the pandemic, the number of tourists in the Alba region decreased drastically, by over 30%, the region registering with over 100,000 fewer tourists. The number of foreign tourists is small compared to that of Romanian tourists, decreasing in 2020 by over 80%, representing a huge loss for rural tourism in the Alba Mountain region. Given the major importance of the impact of the pandemic on tourism in general and rural tourism in this region in particular, it is necessary to take this into account when assessing the data analyzed.

Table no. 2. Overnight stays of Romanian and foreign tourists in the Alba region

Tourists	2017	2018	2019	2020
Romanians	293,683	304,599	317,929	212,407
Foreigners	56,646	59,875	52,821	7,339
Total	350,329	364,474	370,750	219,746

Source: INSSE

The COVID-19 pandemic has been and continues to be an obstacle to raising the quality standards of tourism in the region under review and to the overall evolution of rural tourism. All the more so as in rural areas the regulations on restrictions and hygiene were less respected in Romania. The development of tourism projects of the development strategy of Alba County in terms of adaptation to European and international trends was stopped during the pandemic, which further hindered the integration of quality in tourism services in rural areas of the Alba Mountain region. The vision of this strategy is to further identify and address issues related to tourism shortages in this area, as well as to allocate resources for rural development and the implementation of indicators to monitor the quality of tourism services in order to make further improvements.

4.2. Tourist attractions and activities

Among the most important attractions of the rural tourist area of Alba are: Scărișoara Glacier - located in one of the most important caves in Romania; Transalpine - the highest road in Romania, reaching an altitude of 2,145m; Râpa Roșie - characterized by a spectacular landscape; Găina Mountain - famous for the annual fair, the Girls' Fair; Snail Hill - paleontological reservation; Rimetea village - one of the most beautiful villages in Romania; Galleries from Roșia Montană - a town with an ancient tradition in terms of the exploitation of precious materials. All these tourist attractions are located in rural areas of Alba County and represent true natural and cultural values of our country. Their capitalization through tourism is extremely important, attracting Romanian and foreign tourists can be achieved by providing quality tourist services, to meet the requirements of tourists not only visually but also the conditions of accommodation, food, transport, etc.

In terms of tourist activities, they can be numerous, but here, too, it is necessary to introduce quality in order to offer the widest and most satisfying experience possible for tourists. In order for the customer's satisfaction with the tourist product to be as high as possible, it is important to be satisfied with every component that tourism is responsible for. One of the most enjoyable activities that can be done in the analyzed area is the participation in the annual Fair of Girls from Mount Găina. In this ancient tradition, unmarried girls are promised to be married and the “moți” meet here to party. Visiting the monasteries in the rural Alba area, hiking, dining experiences as well as visiting the picturesque villages at the top of the mountain are special tourist attractions in this area.

5. Opportunities and challenges - interview

The structured interview included questions about the opportunities that accommodation owners see for the development of these areas from a tourism point of view and about the challenges they face in carrying out tourism activities, as well as how they view the idea of quality. within the tourist services it provides. A number of 20 managers and entrepreneurs were interviewed.

The first question regarding the reasons for success in the development of rural tourism was recorded the keywords most frequently mentioned by respondents of good mountain practices. Based

on the analysis of the interviews, we can identify six key groups that explain the success in the development of rural tourism. (see table 3).

The development of the quality of rural tourism is based on the strengths that these areas offer. The strengths identified following the analysis of the answers obtained in this study were all built on the natural and cultural environments offered by the rural tourist area Alba. In other words, the exceptional natural landscapes, ancient traditions, the authentic lifestyle of the locals in the rural area, the culinary experiences rich in natural products, created even in people's households, all these are part of the respondents' answers about the opportunities offered by the analyzed area. These issues should be taken into account equally and capitalized at the maximum.

Adding a surplus of quality, through the careful management of both natural and cultural heritage, would give visitors the opportunity to be satisfied with incredible experiences that lead to the successful development of rural tourism. Moreover, the results suggest that rural communities in the analyzed area are not only not deprived of mass tourism and its negative impacts, but also reject this classic approach to tourism development, thus indicating a commitment to a more sustainable form of tourism.

Table no. 3. The reasons behind the success of tourism in the analyzed rural area

	Domain	Key words	Answers
Factors that can determine the success of rural tourism in the analyzed area	Products and services	Quality	"The involvement of the locals in offering the most varied, quality and authentic services is essential in the rural environment".
	Participatory approach	Cooperation	"Cooperation plays a key role in rural areas. We always need financiers and allies. "
	Open approach	Opening Initiative	"In rural tourism, there is always a need for someone to take the initiative and involve others."
	Management	Organization	"Management in the field of tourism is essential from all points of view. Organization is the key to quality tourism. "
	Communication	Multimedia	"The use of modern information techniques is more difficult for some entrepreneurs in the country, so they need to be informed about the major importance of their internet presence. Romanian travel agencies should promote more rural tourist areas in our country.

Source: Authors' contribution

In terms of opportunities, we analyzed the possibilities for rural tourism in the Alba area. By generating direct and indirect employment opportunities, rural tourism opens up new economic dimensions for the local population. Entrepreneurial activities and local business can grow over time. The successful development of rural tourism can lead to a new vitality and dynamism in the rural areas of Alba County. According to the respondents, the revitalization of the communities is visible in the new products and services described by the quality that benefits visitors and leads to both architectural reconstructions and changes in demographic patterns.

The development of rural tourism creates and strengthens regional economic cycles and generates synergies between different branches and businesses. It can be a catalyst for community innovation, thus promoting local entrepreneurship and improving the quality of life of the local population. Finally, rural tourism initiatives are a way to rediscover a region and successfully position it as a tourist destination.

Following the analysis of the answers obtained following the application of the structured interview, the following groups of opportunities were identified in the tourist area in the rural area of Alba County (see table 4).

Table no. 4. Opportunities in rural tourism in the Alba area

New economic dimensions	Catalyst for rural innovation	Sustainability	Leadership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •job creation •raising the standard of living 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •innovation •entrepreneurship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •environmental protection •durability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •management •entrepreneurship •visibility

Source: Authors' contribution

Rising rural areas generally face weaknesses related to territory and settlement, but also specific challenges to the implementation of rural tourism activities (table 1.4.). The results of the interview suggest that acceptance among locals is usually one of the most sensitive topics. Generating interest in tourism is often difficult, as low self-esteem in the tourist attractiveness of the region in which they live often predominates among the inhabitants, considering that rural areas are not necessarily a tourist place, which could benefit them.

On the other hand, the respondents of the interview consider that the process of promotion on social media is a general aspect but also difficult to achieve in the absence of administrative support at a higher level. However, from the perspective of the interviewees, the promotion and visibility in the online environment remain some of the most important forces for the development of rural tourism in Alba.

From the point of view of respondents, especially managers, the success of a rural tourist destination depends on the satisfaction of tourists, which in turn depends on several individual components such as strategic planning based on a total quality management system, together with various tools and techniques that continuously improve the facilities offered to tourists. The aspect regarding the facilities but also the infrastructure from the rural tourist areas in Romania, in general, depends on the approvals and financing of the government. Even if hospitality, safety, attractions can satisfy some of the wishes and needs of tourists, it takes more than that to be able to develop this type of tourism at a higher level, which will bring its contribution to the national economy.

Following the analysis of the answers provided by the interviewees, a series of key words were extracted, based on which the main challenges faced by tourism managers and entrepreneurs in the rural highlands of Alba were outlined. (see table 5)

Table 5. Challenges in rural tourism in the Alba area

Distribution of responsibilities	The attitude of the locals	Communication	Quality
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •assumption •competence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •hospitality •opening 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •social-media •promotion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •accommodation facilities •infrastructure •TQM

Source: Authors' contribution

From the point of view of managers and entrepreneurs, the first step towards the development of rural tourism areas is the awareness followed by concrete joint actions, which should come from both the authorities and the locals. An integrated approach to rural tourism in Romania is needed to achieve success.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

Rural tourism is a form of tourism that offers a wide range of experiences and is characterized primarily by its location outside urban areas, which attracts tourists looking for a place to relax and escape from everyday life. On the other hand, rural tourist areas are defined by natural resources and cultural traditions that offer a special charm. However, while we believe that rural mountainous areas in Romania have much to offer and can be further developed as tourist destinations, it must be borne in mind that quality management must be applied to several sectors of rural tourism, depending on the type of location, owned resources and market.

The continuous improvement of the market segments in the field of rural tourism is a very important aspect, because the needs of the tourists are constantly changing. At present, they are extremely interested in tourism activities aimed at physical and mental health (retreat), as well as environmental issues. In this context, the requirements for high standards of accommodation and accommodation units are also increasing. In this sense, it is necessary to increase the quality that visitors feel, in order to improve their image compared to rural tourism.

The need to implement a quality management system in rural areas of the Alba upland region lies in the vitality of quality in tourism services, quality being a key element of tourism development in these areas. Quality depends very much on consumers' expectations of the performance of services and the delivery of services. Thus, the satisfaction with the quality of tourist services lies in the main differences between the expected and the felt quality. That is why it is recommended to constantly evaluate customer satisfaction and use specific methods to assess the quality of tourism services offered.

7. References

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