The Touristic Capitalisation of Cultural Services Offered by Natura 2000 Sites. Experiences from Romanian Less Developed Regions

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Abstract

In order to protect the geographical areas with valuable ecosystems and for their sustainable valorisation in economic purposes, in the last 20 years in Romania have been delimited many protected natural areas, which were integrated into the European network of Natura 2000 sites.

This study aims to identify solutions for a better capitalization of the tourist potential offered by Natura 2000 sites, located in non-traditional tourist areas. At the same time, using the results of the evaluation of ecosystem services we aim to provide policy makers an instrument to integrate environmental objectives, into the development policies of neighbouring communities with the Natura 2000 sites. To this end, the authors realised an adaptation of the integrated European system of tools for assessing ecosystem services, to the case of cultural services identified in 15 Natura 2000 sites, located in the North East Development Region of Romania.

Key words: ecosystem services, economic valorisation, sustainable tourism
J.E.L. classification: Q26, Z32

1. Introduction

In the last 20 years, on the Romanian territory, numerous natural protected areas with fragile and valuable ecosystems have been identified, being integrated in the European network for sites Natura 2000. Thus, if in 2007, the network of Natura 2000 sites counted 273 Sites of Community Importance (SCI) and 108 Special Protection Areas (SPA), in 2011 the network was extended to 408 SCI and 148 SPA, while in 2018 it reached 435 SCI and 171 SPA. In 2011, the Natura 2000 sites on Romania's territory occupied a surface of 54,067 km^2, representing 22.68% of the national territory (Geacu et al., 2012). Their ecosystems are complex and offer a wide range of benefits (services), which have an essential role in supporting the economic performances and directly or indirectly contribute to the human welfare (Constanza et al., 2014). Some ecosystem services are essential for the survival of humankind, such as the supply ones (food, water, energy etc.) or the regulating ones, while others are enjoyed for recreation, such as the cultural ones (Small et al., 2017). A major role in the promotion of the concept of ecosystem services, in providing a baseline for the description of different services the ecosystems offer to people and in highlighting the way in which the degradation of ecosystems endangers human welfare was played by Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005).

The management of lands and ecosystems depends on the demand of ecosystem services, expressed by the society at a certain time. The functions of the ecosystems are subjected, on one hand, to natural pressures (climate changes), and on the other hand to anthropogenic pressures, namely the management practices which influence the destination of lands and determine changes in the biological diversity existing on a certain field (Wolff et al., 2015, Cumming, 2016).

The evolutions that took place on an economic and social level have led to changes in the ways lands are used and to a greater interest in establishing natural protected areas. Within these ones, the valuable ecosystems will be preserved and will represent spaces which provide cultural services such as: the development of recreational activities, the conservation of the cultural identity, getting and harnessing some products which reflect the cultural identity of the region/ area, showcasing spiritual and religious values etc. (Willemen et al., 2010, Plieninger et al., 2013, Wolff et al., 2015). Under these circumstances, the interest in the reevaluation of lands/ natural reserves has increased from the perspective of the cultural services offered by ecosystems (Holmes, 2008, Sikor et al., 2013). In the case of ecosystem cultural services, the benefits for the society are capitalized on by the residents of the geographical area where the site is located, while if we refer to the regulating services, their benefits lie on more extended areas and their consequences are felt in neighboring or far away areas.

2. Literature review

The entire process of evaluating the ecosystem services by taking into consideration the ecological, social and economic benefits, is a highly complex and subjective one (Talmaciu, 2015). At the same time, it proves its use in solving conflicts that may occur between the potential beneficiaries of services offered by the ecosystems, in order to set up compromises between these and to ensure a more sustainable management of ecosystems (Small et al., 2017).

In crisis conditions, the local exploitation of tourist resources remains a solution that ensures the resilience of destinations (Talmaciu and Manolescu, 2021). Educational tourism and ecotourism have become fields of increased interest in recent years; local, national and international projects are implemented for the development of these forms of tourism with certain advantages for actors in the field of tourism (Manolescu and Borza, 2015, Marinescu, 2017, Zeybek and Arslan, 2015). Countries with a relatively low tourism potential or regions considered non-traditional from a tourism point of view are oriented towards forms of niche tourism, exploiting their tourism resources locally (Manolescu and Talmaciu, 2021).

One of the greatest challenges in the process of evaluation of the ecosystem services is the evaluation and valorization of non-tangible benefits that are by definition intangible and subjective. In order to define these, Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) uses the concept of cultural services which is composed of: touristic and recreational services, landscape and educational services, medical and health services, spiritual and religious context, values and identity of the cultural heritage. One of the main ideas found in Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) related to cultural and recreational services provided by ecosystems is that nature and ecosystem conditions influence and shape the human activities, the knowledge systems, religions, inherited values, social interactions and recreational services closely connected to the respective ecosystem. The importance of cultural services and values of the ecosystems must be taken into consideration in the planning and management processes of landscaping, thus contributing to a better understanding of the way communities influence ecosystems and the way in which these, in their turn, are intertwined with the cultural, spiritual and religious systems (Tengberg et al., 2012, Neculaesei, 2016).

Cultural identity is at the interface between nature and culture, between the tangible heritage and the non-tangible one, between biological and cultural diversity. Thus, the concept of landscape (ecosystem) and of geographical location represents a bridge between the results of the ecosystems' functioning and the cultural values they produce (Tengberg et al., 2012, Gee and Burkhard, 2010). The approach of ecosystem services from the perspective of values and the identity of the cultural heritage implies taking into account certain non-material benefits people capitalize on by means of ecosystems such as: the cultural diversity determined by the variety of ecosystems, the informal (traditional) or formal knowledge systems, the spiritual and religious values, the educational values offered by the ecosystems or by the components or processes that are born inside them, inspirational values (the ecosystems represent a rich source of inspiration for art, folklore, architecture, national symbols, etc.), the esthetical values provided by the natural frame specific to ecosystems, the social relations influenced by the types of ecosystems whose existence depends on them (agricultural systems, pastoral, forest or aquatic/fishing ecosystems), the feeling of the place according to which members of a community identify themselves with the place they live in (they feel profoundly attached to it), the values and cultural identity, recreational values and ecotourism (Tengberg et al.,

2012, Pascua et al., 2017, Borza and Manolescu, 2015). Thus, when evaluating the ecosystem services, we should not take into consideration only their physical or spatial parameters, but also their psychological, social, historical, religious, identity or traditional connotations (Lewicka, 2008, Tengberg et al., 2012, Tătărușanu and Medeleanu, 2022).

The tight connection between man and nature has an important place in the spiritual and religious context of many traditional societies, be it Christian, Hebrew, Buddhist, Muslim, etc. (Nelson, 2013, Thathong, 2012). The interaction between people and nature gave birth to beliefs, spiritual and religious practices while songs, dances, prayers and religious rituals were perpetuated, specific to the place and associated with the features of the ecosystems (Pascua et al., 2017). The spiritual relationship between man and environment can play an important role in the protection of the natural reserve. The ecological crisis is seen by certain authors as a consequence of the crisis of the human spirit, stating that if the "spiritual pollution" in the peoples' minds diminishes, the pollution of the environment will also decrease (Thathong, 2012, Cremo and Goswami, 1995). Thus, it is underlined the importance of the conservation of the spiritual world values in order to solve certain problems related to the environment. The sacred context of the area, the heritage and the religion, combined with the physical features of the natural landscape can provide a solid base for the development of tourism, especially by attracting tourists/pilgrims who seek to live authentic experiences unspoiled by modernity (Andriotis, 2011).

The environment, through its components and available resources, represents one of the most important providers of medical and health services. In a nutshell, the ecosystem services produce essential benefits, since they also have the ability to contribute to people's welfare and implicitly, to human health. In accordance with Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Report (2005), human health depends on the services and products of the ecosystems, while the dependence on the ecosystem goods and services lies beyond the health area, to cultural, social and economic needs. Nowadays, there is a topic which is increasingly discussed, namely the relaxation tourism by means of different types of activities which require the direct contact with natural factors; they have the role to support a mental and physical state adequate to a healthy human lifestyle. The specialty literature has underlined and described the beneficial effects of nature and landscaping as well as the need to connect to nature in order to have a balanced physical and emotional state of health (Huijbens, 2017). It has also analyzed the way in which the types of landscapes and the health programs can contribute to the improvement of the relationship between emotions and life satisfaction, whose lack significantly affects the quality of life in itself (Lee and Kim, 2017). By simply admiring the landscapes and making direct contact with nature, on a short term important contributions can be made to reduce stress, with benefits for the mental health (Huijbens, 2017). Significant associations have been identified between the experience of relaxation holidays, touristic satisfaction and life satisfaction in general, given the fact that open air activities are medically proved to be beneficial for human health (Talmaciu et al., 2020, Lee and Kim, 2017).

Ecological education has become a priority for more and more institutions (Borza, 2020) with an education role all around the world. At global level, within educational institutions, special programs intended for ecological education have been designed, supporting and promoting learning by means of, about and for nature. The educational programs organized by the educational institutions have as goals the significant improvement of knowledge and attitudes in regard to the direct and indirect relationships with the environment. The ecological education can be a very useful guide when attempting to reach a compromise between modern society and nature in order to have a more sustainable human welfare (Farber et al., 2002).

Human experiences related to the environment (ecosystems) are highly complex social constructs, they have symbolic dimensions and are multidimensional (Winthrop, 2014). Under these circumstances, the methodology to evaluate the cultural services provided by ecosystems has its limits in terms of highlighting all the socio-ecological interactions which can occur between people and ecosystems (Small et al., 2017). As regards the evaluation and valorization of cultural services offered by ecosystems, the literature is faced with certain challenges: the evaluation methods are in rare occasions comparable because they were developed to solve some specific problems; the quality and repeatability are seldom feasible since these methods are based on provisional data; the lack of certain data regarding the persons who benefit from cultural services and their location; certain obstacles highlighted by researchers related to the interdisciplinary nature; the long time and high

costs to collect detailed data (Small et al., 2017).

3. Research methodology

Our analysis included 15 Natura 2000 sites (12 sites of SCI type and 3 sites of SPA type) from the North-East development region of Romania, a region poorly developed and which can be considered non-traditional from a touristic point of view. Two out of the three counties where the sites are located belong to the last category at national level in terms of number of tourists while the touristic infrastructure is weak. For each of these sites a complex study was undertaken, which included the identification and evaluation of the value of ecosystem goods and services. To decide on the usefulness and consequences of measures and actions directly related to the management of ecosystem services, it is necessary to make a comparison between the current state and the alternative state of the use of ecosystem services, based on two types of scenarios: Business as Usual Scenario (BAU) and the Sustainable Ecosystem Management Scenario (SEM).

Of the 4 categories of ecosystem services (supply, regulatory, cultural and support services), using the instruments used at international level for the evaluation (McCathy and Morling, 2014), we took into consideration only the first three categories (the last one being found in the products and services provided). We started from the yearly total value of the ecosystem services, we conducted estimations for the following 5 years for 2 scenarios (SEM and BAU) and then, taking into account as constant the value obtained at the end of year 5, we calculated the net present value (NPV) associated to each component and the total one for a 25-year horizon.

We used information from the following sources: the city halls of the towns in proximity of the sites, the local action groups, the agencies for environmental protection, the agricultural agencies, the county statistical agencies, the INS Tempo Online database. Various other types of informal knowledge (local, traditional or indigenous) gathered from the population living in the areas close to the sites were also used.

The stages of the descriptive and economic analysis are as follows:

1. the identification and description of the main habitats within the site in their current state;
2. the identification of ecosystem services within the site in their current state and of the population benefitting from these services;
3. the definition of alternative states by identifying the evolution of habitats and ecosystem services in their alternative states;
4. the determination of yearly and total values, for each component and for each site in particular;
5. the correlative analysis.

The variables under consideration are the size of the site (small - up to 1,000 ha, average - 1,001-5,000 ha, big - over 5,000 ha), its type (SCI or SPA), the type of the main habitats located on the territory of the sites (homogenous - a main habitat with over 70% weight or mixed - several habitats with a significant weight), the diversity and the nature of the natural and anthropic resources found on the sites' territory, viewed in terms of the importance of the anthropic and natural resources (low, average, high).

4. Findings

In a synthetic way, the results of the descriptive and economic analysis are presented in table no. 1. For the sake of comparison with other studies, relative indicators were preferred. For a more accurate highlight of the superiority of SEM compared to BAU, we grouped the sites by size (small, medium and large) so as to differentiate the adequacy of SEM or BAU scenarios. For each of the 3 groups we considered the importance of the anthropic heritage and the attractiveness of the area, as main variables of comparison.

Of the 15 sites analyzed, 5 are of large dimension, 3 medium and 7 smalls. By grouping the sites by size and the favorability analysis of the two scenarios, we notice that:

1) The sites in the category of large ones (5 units) are composed of lake, forest, meadow and crops. Their anthropic importance is predominantly medium, being high only for SCI12 (forest) and low for SPA2 (with mixed composition). The attractiveness of the sites from this group is low and medium. Various differences are identified for the SEM and BAU scenarios, both for the total NPV and for the cultural component, with the specification that the largest differences are registered for the cultural component. Thus, for this group of sites it proves that the BAU scenario can remain viable compared to SEM, excepting the cultural component, only if the BAU scenario focuses on activities that protect the site's resources for the purpose of the cultural capitalization.

2) In the medium-sized sites (SCI3, SCI10, SCI11) characterized by habitats composed of lakes and meadows, anthropogenic habitats predominate at medium level, the attractiveness of the area is medium and even low, while NPV differences are large for the important anthropic heritage medium (5.08 and 5.95) and low for high anthropic heritage. Regarding the cultural components, the differences are very large and large for the SCI10 and SCI11 sites (with values of 15.46 and 29.93) and very small for the SCI3 (2.74). Given the anthropic importance of these sites and the low degree of attractiveness, given the relatively small differences for the two scenarios regarding NPV, we consider that in these sites the economic activity specific to the BAU scenario can have continuity, but only in compliance with related restrictions to protect the biodiversity. The SEM scenario is the solution resulting from the relatively high percentage of the cultural component and from the differences registered between the NPV and the cultural component.

3) For the small sites (7 units) with predominantly forest and meadow habitat, the anthropic importance of the heritage is predominantly low and partially medium and only for SCI 8 it is high, and the attractiveness of the sites is medium and low. The differences in scenarios for NPV are significant, especially in forested sites, which indicates the predominance of the SEM scenario for these sites. For the cultural component, the differences in scenarios are greater, respectively this component holds significant percentages in the group of these sites, which indicates the orientation mainly towards the SEM scenario.

In conclusion, the SEM scenario is preferable for the analyzed sites, especially regarding the cultural component, and the BAU scenario can be considered viable especially for the SPA sites and given that the continuation of the economic and social activities is done in compliance with the principles of sustainable development and an equilibrated level of exploitation, oriented towards predominantly ecological activities. Thus, for all 15 sites under analysis, one can notice the long-term superiority of the SEM scenario over the BAU scenario, with percentages varying from 0,84% to 13.97%. For the cultural component, the differences between the two scenarios are much higher, varying from 1.65% to 33.67%. Greater differences occur for the small-size sites with a homogenous structure from the point of view of the habitats. Smaller percentages occur in the case of SPAs, which are easier to be capitalized on through business.

Though apparently a paradox, the importance of natural and anthropic resources is not strongly correlated with the NPV difference for the cultural component. This apparent paradox can be explained by the capping of the touristic offer specific for the non-traditional areas from a touristic point of view as well as by the current valorization of these resources. Even if the proportion of the cultural component from the total net present value of the ecosystem services is very low, the role of this component can be decisive for making up the minds of the decision makers to preserve the natural area of the areas.

Identifying and assessing the socio-economic benefits associated with Natura 2000 sites is useful for several reasons, and first of all we refer to the awareness of the importance of conserving the environmental factors, thus making it possible to ensure the continuity of the socio-economic activities in the sustainability conditions. In this sense, the local population near the sites, and not only, must be informed about the values of the nature indicated by the direct and indirect benefits that they determine. Also, demonstrating the socio-economic importance of a site can significantly increase its support, fact which allows the positive changes in the favor of the Natura 2000 policy objectives (WWF, 2012).

In estimating the socio-economic value of the nature, the literature (WWF, 2012) mentions that it must take into account four guiding principles:

1) the biodiversity benefits that are multiple and cannot always be converted into monetary units;
2) the environmental services and the benefits that they bring are defined by their users, so it is considered that there are no services if there are no beneficiaries, some services being potential;
3) the identified benefits must be used in a sustainable manner, respecting the general objectives of the biodiversity conservation and the management plans specific to the Natura 2000 sites;
4) the environmental services are often interrelated, and these connections must be understood to avoid the overestimating the total value of a Natura 2000 site.

Table no. 1. The results of the descriptive and economic analysis of the studied sites

Code/ Type (SCI/ SPA)	Dimen-sion	Habitat type	Anthropic heritage importance	Landscape attractiveness	Total NPV difference SEM – BAU (%)	Cultural component NPV difference SEM – BAU (%)	Cultural component percentage (%)
SCI 1	Small	Forest	Low	Average	13.97	24.18	3.28
SCI 2	Big	Mixed (lake, forest, meadow)	Average	Low	12.74	19.97	0.08
SCI 3	Average	Mixed (meadow, lake)	High	Average	1.44	2.74	5.37
SCI 4	Small	Meadow	Low	Low	10.42	29.47	5.81
SCI 5	Small	Meadow	Low	Low	1.16	15.07	1.19
SCI 6	Small	Forest	Low	Average	10.13	28.55	4.20
SCI 7	Small	Forest	Average	Average	3.71	29.43	19.94
SCI 8	Small	Mixed (forest, meadow)	High	Low	5.29	1.65	22.59
SCI 9	Small	Meadow	Average	Average	8.29	33.67	46,28
SCI 10	Average	Lake	Average	Average	5.08	15.46	13.95
SCI 11	Average	Meadow	Average	Low	5,95	29.93	7,24
SCI 12	Big	Forest	High	Average	7.24	24.06	2,11
SPA 1	Big	Mixed (crops, forest)	Average	Low	0.84	23.38	2.99
SPA 2	Big	Mixed (lake, meadow)	Low	Average	6.58	6.84	0.57
SPA 3	Big	Mixed (meadow, forest)	Average	Low	4.39	24.19	1.19

Source: author's calculations

Among the benefits provided by the ecosystems of the Natura 2000 network, benefits determined by the implementation of the SEM and BAU exploitation systems - in a sustainable manner, we mention:

- maintaining the water reserves
- avoidance of the water pretreatment
- reduction of soil erosion
- avoiding or reducing the impact of the natural hazards (floods, landslides, floods)
- benefits for the public health: clean air and water, regeneration, optimism
- the possibility of attracting new investments and European funds

- production and promotion of local brands
- development of the eco-tourism and agrotourism
- generating new jobs
- relaxing and spending free time in an optimal natural framework
- promoting the natural heritage and the culture
- opportunities for education, infrastructure, health, etc.
- supporting the entrepreneurship through small specific businesses of animal husbandry, collecting and processing fruit / plants from sites, making meat and milk products obtained in an ecological system, honey production, traditional non-alcoholic and alcoholic beverages, etc.

About the benefits resulting from the predominant orientation to the SEM or BAU scenarios - for the sites where these scenarios are viable, we mention that these benefits are in line with the principles of a sustainable development and are visible mainly on the medium and long term.

In principle, the main benefits obtained are ecological and social. In agreement with the European Commission, the Natura 2000 sites, identified in the categories of SAC (special areas of conservation) which are areas of Community importance, SCI and SPA benefit by the same level of protection, even if there are the content differences (European Commission, 2000). It is important to note that it is recommended to correct the confusion observed in the association of the nature conservation actions with those of the nature reserves protection - in which the economic and human activities are systematically excluded. In the Natura 2000 sites these activities are not excluded, but only approached from the perspective of a win-win relationship between the environmental and socio-economic factors.

The benefits of exploiting Natura 2000 sites in SEM scenarios do not exclude the economic activities, but only their approach is different, in the sense that the man with his specific activities is perceived as an integrant part of the nature. Thus, a first major benefit is identified, namely, a balanced human-nature relationship that is based on adaptations or modifications in order to protect the species and habitats for which the site has been designated. In most cases, the economic activities have continuity, but acquire a new approach from the perspective of exploiting the resources of the designated sites (European Commission, 2000). Moreover, also in line with the proposals of the European Commission, for some sites it is even recommended to continue those economic activities that support the conservation and protection of site resources: periodic mowing, grazing, control of bush milling etc.

5. Conclusions

By comparing the SEM and BAU scenarios for each of these sites, for all the ecosystem services, it was highlighted the context in which the elements that can be associated with the touristic valorization can represent the critical factor. This context is unquestionable for the decision makers in order to preserve the natural character of the sites. Despite the fact that the evaluation of both Natura 2000 sites and related ecosystemic services is not a usual/ current practice in less developed regions, it is considered that ecosystemic evaluation procedures highlight the numerous values of these programs, reflected in the pillars of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. Thus, our proposition is that through future research materialized by partnerships with public institutions responsible with these sites management, we will be able to extend the steps of ecosystem assessment, so that their intrinsic qualities can be better utilized, improving at the same time the measures of protection and conservation of the resources at risk of total degradation or loss. In a society dominated by constant change and evolution visible in multiple fields such as economy, social skills, culture, education, spirituality etc., reconsidering the ecosystemic values is not just an approach adjacent to the continuous flow of evolution, but an imperious change we have to make.

6. References

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