

Ecotourism in Valea Vaserului

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Abstract

Throughout this paper we study the eight principles of ecotourism by combining the theory with the observations made at the site, in Valea Vaserului, during two years, 2017 and 2018, which had a major impact on the increase of tourism and especially ecotourism on the local level. Each of these principles is analyzed in the light of the details observed at the site and it is demonstrated that in this area they are fully applied and ecotourism turns from tourism for a small number of tourists into mass tourism, mass ecotourism.

By combining economic achievements with people's desire to visit and preserve nature, ecotourism is one of the most important directions of tourism development. As a consequence, we need to create more areas similar to the one we are studying in this article, which is an example of good practice in ecotourism.

Key words: tourism, ecotourism, sustainable development

J.E.L. classification: Q01, Q 56, Q 57

1. Introduction

One of the most beautiful areas in Romania in which tourism and more precisely ecotourism has increased substantially is Maramures, that includes a mountainous region: Oaş Mountains, Gutâi Mountains, Țibleş Mountains, Rodnei Mountains, Maramures Mountains; depressions crossed by rivers such as Tisa, Vişeu, Ronișoara, Iza, Mara, Cosau, Săpânța; flora with rare plants: yew tree, edelweiss, Arolla pine, snake's head, larch; fauna: deer, buck, wolf, fox, bear, wild boar, marten, capercaillie, golden rooster, huchen; caves full of non-ferrous ores; architectural vestiges of great value: wooden churches, Maramureș houses; customs and cultural traditions. Given this both natural and anthropogenic wealth, Maramureș is a large area to explore in terms of tourism and it is for this reason that from this part of the country we will take Vişeu de Sus and more precisely Valea Vaserului as an example of ecological tourism since a day's visit to a natural area with special landscapes that brings economic benefits to the people and does not disturb the environment is also thought to be ecotourism.

Tourism development in Maramures has also been the result of the development of tourism based on the steam train in Valea Vaserului which is one of the attractions of the area.

2. Theoretical background

The concept of ecological tourism or ecotourism was defined in the literature in 1988 during the Belize Program initiated by Rio Bravo Conservation & Management Area: "ecotourism is a form of tourism with low impact on the environment based on its appreciation and where a conscious effort is made to reinvest an adequate amount of the revenue to conserve the resources on which it relies. It is a form of sustainable tourism that provides benefits to the local population". (Dragu, 2015, p.9).

UCN (World Conservation Union, now) defined ecotourism in 1996 as: "environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features - both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations" (UNEP, 2002, p.9).

Another definition shows that "Ecotourism is a form of tourism that takes place in natural areas, whose purpose is to learn about and appreciate local nature and culture, which involves conservation measures and ensures active involvement generating benefits for the local population." (Nistorescu *et al.*, 2003, p.76)

In recent times, the Ecotourism Association in Romania, which is a partnership for nature conservation and tourism development in Romania made up of administrations of protected areas administrations, tourism associations, local development and nature conservation non-governmental organisations, governmental organisations, nature preservation projects and tourism agencies has defined ecotourism as "a form of tourism where the main motivation of the tourist is to observe and appreciate the nature and the local traditions related to it in accordance with the following conditions:

- to contribute to the preservation and protection of nature;
- to use local human resources;
- to have an educational character, to cultivate respect for nature - the sensitization of tourists and local communities;
- to have a minimal negative impact on the natural and socio-cultural environment." (AER, 2011).

Through its new concepts, ecotourism ensures the sustainable development of areas involving tourists and locals to preserve a clean environment, creating added value by preservation of cultural heritage and economic growth.

3. Methodology

This article is based on the field research method, a cross-sectional method that uses as a criterion of the relation to the time factor and is based on observation.

The observation was made during several days in 2017 and 2018, during different months, in order to have an overview, as it is known that during the summer months of June-August and especially in August the flow of tourists to any destination increases, due to the fact that in many companies the employees are on vacation only in these months so the flow of tourists during these months depends on the time off for the employees offered by the companies.

The principles of ecotourism in Valea Vaserului have been exemplified, described and explored to achieve the following objective: the assessment of the area from the new perspective of ecotourism.

4. Principles and Observations

Starting from these definitions and together with the observations made in Valea Vaserului, we can say that tourism in that region takes place respecting the above definitions and also the principles of ecotourism.

Figure no. 1 The Steam Train

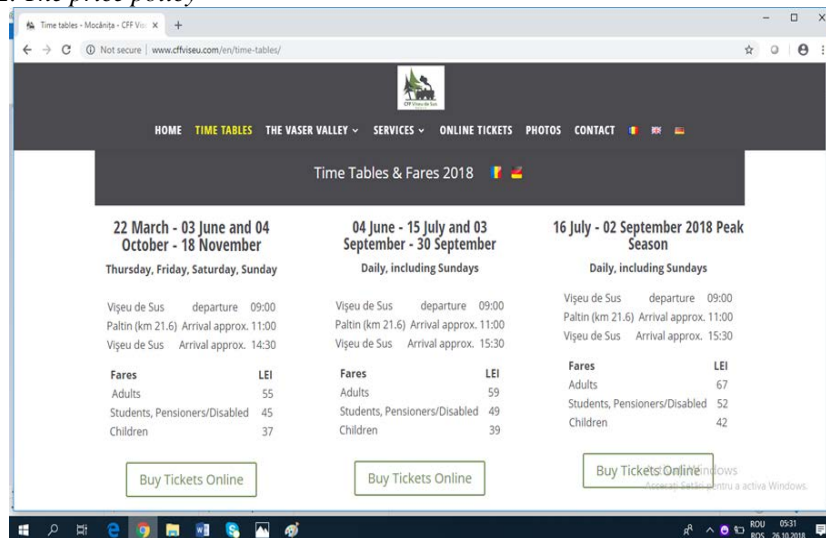


Source : (CFF Viseu de Sus. 2017)

The steam train in Valea Vaserului is the main means of transportation in the area and sustainably contributes to the development of the local community. By providing transport from Vișeu de Sus railway station to the final station for recreation, meal, rest and walks in nature, Paltinu station provides jobs for local people, offers the possibility for local craftsmen to sell their goods in their own households and brings income to the community by providing accommodation (the trains have a fixed schedule: the first one departs at 9:00 am every morning and the last returns at 17:00) and of course the tourists spend money on the goods and services needed to meet their needs; as a result they ensure sustainable development in Vișeu de Sus and Valea Vaserului from an economic point of view.

CFF Vișeu de Sus provides tourists with complete and reliable information on the website www.cffviseu.com, at the ticket office, where the employees are very friendly and helpful, on the train where the tourists are given a brief presentation and described the route to be followed. All these factors contribute to achieving quality marketing which leads to the increase of tourist satisfaction and the respect for the nature and culture of Valea Vaserului. An example is given by offering varied packages to allow all categories of tourists to visit this natural tourist destination (another principle of ecotourism).

Figure no. 2. The price policy



The screenshot shows the website www.cffviseu.com/en/time-tables/ with a navigation menu including HOME, TIME TABLES, THE VASER VALLEY, SERVICES, ONLINE TICKETS, PHOTOS, and CONTACT. The main content is titled "Time Tables & Fares 2018" and is organized into three columns representing different periods:

- 22 March - 03 June and 04 October - 18 November**
Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday
Vișeu de Sus departure 09:00
Paltin (km 21.6) Arrival approx. 11:00
Vișeu de Sus Arrival approx. 14:30
- 04 June - 15 July and 03 September - 30 September**
Daily, including Sundays
Vișeu de Sus departure 09:00
Paltin (km 21.6) Arrival approx. 11:00
Vișeu de Sus Arrival approx. 15:30
- 16 July - 02 September 2018 Peak Season**
Daily, including Sundays
Vișeu de Sus departure 09:00
Paltin (km 21.6) Arrival approx. 11:00
Vișeu de Sus Arrival approx. 15:30

Fares (LEI) are listed for each period:

Fares	LEI
Adults	55
Students, Pensioners/Disabled	45
Children	37

Fares	LEI
Adults	59
Students, Pensioners/Disabled	49
Children	39

Fares	LEI
Adults	67
Students, Pensioners/Disabled	52
Children	42

Each column includes a "Buy Tickets Online" button.

Source. (CFF Vișeu de Sus, 2018)

Another principle of ecotourism is that it unfolds within nature and is based on the tourists' direct and personal experience with nature both while on the steam train and during the stops it makes.

Figure no. 3. Nature in Valea Vaserului



Source (CFF Vișeu de Sus, 2017)

Nature tells its story along the narrow railroad that, alongside the dances and the popular costumes worn and presented by the locals at the final station, reflects just one of the ways to exemplify the principle which states ecotourism contributes to a better understanding of the local nature and traditions and ensures visitors and locals joy and pleasure.

Figure no. 4. Local people wearing traditional costumes



Source (CFF Viseu de Sus, 2017)

The example of good ecotourism management in Viseu Valley the way the steam trains are managed through a schedule that restricts the number of tourists at the final station; when the fourth train is due to arrive, the first train will go to the boarding station. Another way of exemplifying quality management is to provide only 4 steam engines, which are known to heavily pollute the environment, while the rest of the transport is carried out with electric engines, producing low levels of pollution. A third example of good management is the handling of waste. Visitors, staff, disposable materials, household bags and food depart from Viseul de Sus on the first train, while the last train transports visitors, employees and all the waste, so that overnight the glade, the river and the forest can breathe and live again as pristine nature untouched by humans; practically the area develops sustainably from the point of view of nature preservation.

Through the work done by employees who provide waste management another principle of ecotourism is put into practice: providing the best tourism practices and planning from the point of view of nature conservation and sustainable development. The ecotourism product is a one-day visit to Valea Vaserului and to Paltinu station (final station of the day), visitors are brought to a natural environment protected by the inhabitants, and to a cultural environment created by the dancers who proudly wear the popular costume and who, after a short traditional dance demonstration, invite tourists to join in performing these traditions. The cultural environment is also supported by the museum at Paltinu station; this museum tells about the building of the railway, its necessity and the beauty of the steam-powered mini-engines, which even today give the travel a certain charm.

The degree of satisfaction of eco-tourists is essential and is achieved by means of this tourist product, travelling through Valea Vaserului, and meets their expectations through natural images, the people's peculiar way of speaking, pictures that turn into memorable memories and thus another principle of ecotourism is put into practice.

The following principle is to ensure a minimal negative impact on the local community, which is respected because tourists stay in touch with locals only for a few hours during which they walk in nature, take photographs, play, have lunch, rest, etc.

The final principle is that it brings ecotourism to the forefront of tourism because it is the only branch that positively contributes to the protection of natural areas and the travel by the steam train is an example of good practice due to all the actions undertaken, good management and protection of nature.

5. Conclusions

In recent years, tourism has had significant economic growth, turning into a whole industry, and because of its strong impact on the natural environment and local communities, it has now a role to play as a promoter of sustainable development, while ecotourism is where this role is essential, visible and achievable. Ecotourism is the newest form of tourism that has resulted from the need for sustainable tourism development, especially now that we can get anywhere in the world much more easily because of transport development and information comes directly to our homes through TV and the Internet.

The present article has presented relevant aspects and the basic principles of ecotourism in Valea Vaserului, a special tourist attraction due both to the natural landscape of the area and to the traditions and involvement of the local community in the economic development and the assurance of a high standard of living and, as a consequence, the objective of evaluation of the area has been attained.

The exploitation of the area through tourism and its promotion aim at sustainable development by means of the steam train day trip, a permanent tourist attraction with recreational activities in nature, cultural activities combined with rest, culture, traditions, local community with the economic benefits achieved.

Ecotourism has emerged as a variant of tourism for sustainable development, but it usually involves a small number of tourists. Here we have demonstrated that we can and must do mass ecotourism, because the number of tourists is constantly growing and we must preserve the natural and cultural values for the next generations.

Ecotourism can be present in any place on the Earth and the way tourism is done in Valea Vaserului can be an example of good practice for other local or regional communities and thus achieve sustainable development in as many natural areas as possible, being aware that this is how we can secure a future for our offspring.

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