

Ecotourism - A Direction for Sustainable Development in Romania

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Abstract

Ecotourism is an important component of tourism and consists in visiting natural areas for relaxation in nature, for psychic recovery, knowledge, appreciation of nature and its effects. Ecotourism plays a significant role in the economic development of an area or region of tourist attraction. The most important positive effects refer to the contributions in the state revenues, generated by the tourist expenses and the export and import of complementary goods for the receiving countries, and to the stimulation of investments in various sectors, thus, through the multiplier effect of the tourism contributing to the economic prosperity of the country. Ecotourism is and will be an important direction for the sustainable and economic development of Romania, our country being one of the first countries in the world where a standard for the evaluation of ecotourism destinations is applied. It is adapted according to the criteria of the World Council for Sustainable Tourism and is under the administration of the Ministry of Tourism. This article presents the new opportunities for developing and supporting ecotourism in Romania.

Key words: Economic development, ecotourism, nature conservation, sustainable development

J.E.L. classification: O1, O180

1. Introduction

Any form of tourism brings changes to the environment, which is why the tourism industry recognizes the need to keep those elements attractive for tourist, striving to correlate costs and benefits of ecotourism in protected natural areas

Ecotourism is that part of sustainable tourism that refers to visiting relatively untouched natural areas, including protected areas. The annual growth rate of 15% of ecotourism and other nature-based tourism activities is higher than that of many other segments of tourism.

Romania has a very varied natural capital. Due to the physical-geographical conditions, which include mountains, plains, major hydrographic networks, wetlands and one of the most beautiful delta systems (Danube Delta), Romania is the only country on the continent in whose territory there are 5 of the 9 biogeographic regions of the European Union (continental - 53% of the country's surface, alpine - 23%, steppe - 17%, panonic - 6% and pontic - 1%).

In Romania, ecotourism is widely recognized - at government level, in the private sector and at the public level. Ecotourism is recognized as being specific to the rural areas within the communities that have a tradition in agricultural activities, and covers also access to the flora and fauna of the area, as well as to the social habits and lifestyle of the people from the visited areas.

A nationally recognized definition is: ecotourism is tourism form in which the main objective is to observe and raise awareness of the value of nature and local traditions and which must meet the following conditions:

- to contribute to the conservation and protection of nature;
- to use local human resources;
- to have an educational character, respect for nature -awareness of tourists and local communities;
- to have an insignificant negative impact on the natural and socio-cultural environment.

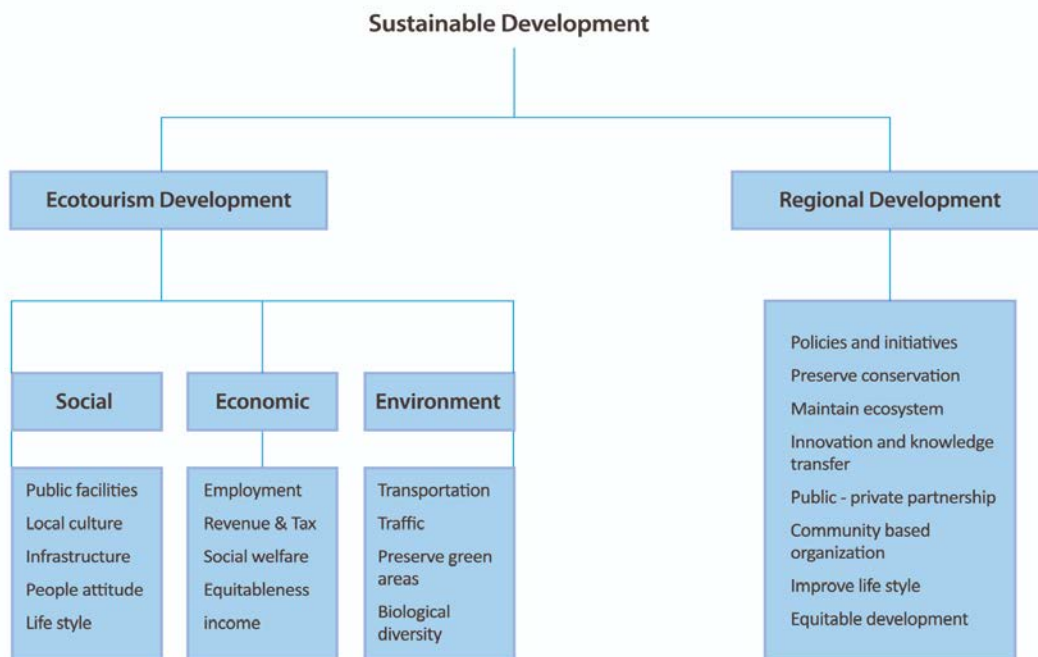
Making the most of the natural environment is one of the fundamental requirements of ecotourism. This statement actually leaves a wide door open to a wide range of activities, provided they comply with the conditions set out above.

This paper is structured in 4 parts. After the introduction, the second section presents the literature review with a short description of the necessity of elaborating a ecotourism strategy and ecotourism market trends. It is followed by the presentation of the main funding opportunity, namely: "Promoting the sustainable development of tourism and the capacity of SMEs in tourism through transnational cooperation and knowledge transfer", within the European program" COSME "2014-2020. In the final part are presented the proposals and conclusions.

2. Literature review

The idea of adopting the concept of sustainable development in tourism emerged at the beginning of the 90's, thus creating sustainable tourism. A branch that has rapidly gained importance also in the academic and research fields, as well as in the tourist activity or industry. Sustainable tourism responds to the needs of tourists and the receiving regions regarding the protection and improvement of resources for future generations. It aims at integrated management of all resources, aiming at meeting economic, social and aesthetic needs without endangering the preservation of cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and the environment. On May 30, 2019, the Government of Romania adopted the Strategy for the development of ecotourism, a normative act that aims to promote ecotourism destinations and which creates the necessary legislative framework for the tourism development in protected areas without having a negative impact on the natural environment. This Strategy is beginning to outline a sustainable development of green tourism, in areas with potential and, more than that, raising awareness among local authorities in this area. An important aspect of this document concerns the educational component, through which the authorities and local people are aware of the value of preserving the natural environment.

Figure no. 1. Ecotourism in Sustainable Development



Source: <https://www.intechopen.com/books/advances-in-landscape-architecture/role-of-ecotourism-in-sustainable-development>

Developing ecotourism activities within local communities and within the protected natural areas implies a number of socio-economic benefits (Fig.1) , respectively:

- generates the appearance of jobs locally (directly in the tourism sector or in the related sectors);
- by raising incomes and living standards for the local population, young generations are encouraged to remain within the community;
- stimulates the local economy by developing tourism infrastructure and services (accommodation, food, transportation, recreational facilities, handicraft products and guide services, souvenirs);
- stimulates the rural economy by creating or increasing the demand for agricultural products needed to provide tourism services;
- it promotes the development of the infrastructure, which brings benefits to the local population as well;
- stimulates the development of peripheral regions through capital insertions; stimulates the improvement of intercultural relations in a region.

Within project "Improving the financial sustainability of the system of protected areas in the Carpathians", the potential impact that tourism can have for five analyzed parks within the pilot project (Retezat National Park, Piatra Craiului National Park, Vânători Natural Park, has been calculated Neamț, Apuseni Natural Park and Maramureș Mountains Natural Park). According to the analysis from "National Strategy for the Development of Ecotourism in Romania- context, vision and goals -2016-2020", the value of tourism and recreation activities is estimated at just over 109.5 million euros at the level of 2020.

Also, considering the multiplier effect, it is estimated that tourism within the pilot protected natural areas can generate 365 million euro per year (or 0.3% of GDP) and can create around 37,100 full-time equivalent jobs.

In addition, through sustainable management, the five pilot protected natural areas have the potential to generate over 2.6 billion euros over the next 25 years. Another argument in favor of developing this form of tourism is provided by statistics produced by The Romanian Ecotourism Association (AER). According to these data, the economic impact produced by the ecotourism programs carried out by the AER tour operators in our country is clearly increasing from about 1.6 million euros in 2008 to about 3 million euros in 2014. This increase is generated by the increase in the number of AER members running ecotourism programs, but also increasing the volume of tourists on ecotourism programs. But what is remarkable is that the impact on the local level is well above the average of the classical tourism. In the case of AER members, more than 50% of the expenses incurred by tourists remain in the area of the tourism program, mainly in the rural area.

Given that the above data refers to a small number of economic operators, AER members (14 tour operators and 10 tourist pensions in 2014), quite territorially concentrated, can deduce the huge potential that Romania has it in the development of ecotourism.

Once recognized the importance of this sector for the protection and conservation of the natural and cultural heritage, for the economic and social development of the local communities in the natural rural areas and for the increase of the tourist experience, all efforts should be made for the efficient use of the rich heritage of our country.

Trends in the ecotourism market - over the last six decades, tourism has been steadily expanding, with average annual growth rates ranging from 5 to 10%, becoming a major sector, providing economic and development opportunities worldwide. According to "National Strategy for the Development of Ecotourism in Romania - context, vision and goals -2016-2020", international tourist arrivals globally increased from 25 million in 1950, to 278 million in 1980, 527 million in 1995 and reaching in 2017 a total of 1.323 billion people.

Also, revenues from international tourism increased from \$ 2 billion in 1950, to \$ 104 billion in 1980, \$ 415 billion in 1995, to \$ 1,340 billion in 2017.

The tourism industry contributed 8.3 trillion dollars or 10.4% to the creation of global GDP in 2017. Also, in the last year, approximately 313 million people were employed (directly or indirectly) in the tourism sector , and by 2028 their number is expected to grow to 414 million, and the contribution to the global economy will reach 11.7% of GDP.

According to the long-term forecasts of "National Strategy for the Development of Ecotourism in Romania - context, vision and goals -2016-2020", (Tourism Towards 2030), the number of international tourist arrivals worldwide is expected to increase with 3.3% per year in the period 2010-2030. It is expected that by 2020 international arrivals of tourists will reach a total of 1.4 billion, and by 2030 to 1.8 billion people.

3. Funding and development opportunities for ecotourism

The European Commission, through the Executive Agency for SMEs (EASME) in Brussels, has opened the call for proposals for 2019 projects "Promoting the sustainable development of tourism and the capacity of SMEs in tourism through transnational cooperation and knowledge transfer", within the framework the European program "COSME" 2014-2020 - EU Program for the Competitiveness of Small and Medium Enterprises on October 24, 2019; Budget: 5,000,000 euros.

The sustainability of tourism is particularly important and refers to the environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects of the development of the sector, it being necessary to establish an adequate balance between these three dimensions in order to guarantee a long-term growth. The sustainability of tourism thus covers a number of different aspects, including: the responsible use of natural resources, the environmental impact of tourism activities (waste production, water pressure, land and biodiversity, etc.), the efficient use of "clean" energy, protecting the cultural heritage and preserving the natural and cultural integrity of the destinations, the quality and sustainability of the jobs created and the respect for the local communities.

- General objective of the action is to stimulate sustainable tourism development and the capacity of SMEs in tourism through transnational cooperation and knowledge transfer.
- The action aims to:
 - strengthening transnational and cross-border cooperation to enable sustainable growth of tourism SMEs;
 - promoting the capacities and abilities of SMEs to explore and adopt viable solutions, which would improve the sustainable management and sustainability of tourism in general;
 - promoting innovative solutions for sustainable tourism.
- The specific objective of the action is to develop and implement schemes for transnational and cross-sectoral support in order to develop the sustainable growth capacity of SMEs in the tourism sector.

A transnational network of public and also private stakeholders (including business incubators, accelerators and business support organizations that provide business support to SMEs and start-ups that cooperate with sustainable solutions providers, recycling centers, environmental education centers, social economy associations, professional associations) will act as an intermediary that organizes specific activities for SMEs in the tourism field from different countries. The consortium will organize and provide direct support to companies to develop their capacities to achieve and implement sustainable and circular standards / models / strategies in their services and operations, but will also facilitate cross-border / transnational cooperation, learning peer-to-peer regarding the exchange of knowledge and best practices to increase the sustainability of tourism.

- communication activities regarding the objectives of the project to reach the potential SMEs and the expected results for the project;
- selection of SMEs from tourism for participation in the project support scheme;
- mapping the specific needs of the SMEs involved in the project, in order to adopt sustainable innovative solutions;
- mapping innovative initiatives, guidelines, best practices, key actors, sustainable solutions providers, opportunities for the tourism sector to
- it becomes more sustainable (activities relevant to the SMEs involved in the project). organizing online, offline courses, workshops, study visits, awareness-raising activities;
- production of training materials, webinars;
- coaching and guidance services;
- twinning, confrontation, peer learning, knowledge sharing;

- B2B activities (business to business); development of ICT solutions, platforms for the exchange of knowledge and expertise and involvement of the local community;
- organizing activities to strengthen the cooperation of the SMEs involved with organizations
- of intersectoral and extension support, including: technology centers, research institutes;
- innovation hubs, service providers, incubators and accelerators;
- reporting on the results of the capacity building activities implemented and on the concrete adoption of innovative solutions by tourism SMEs that improve tourism sustainability;
- other activities proposed by the project partners, according to the objectives of the call.

Eligible applicants are represented by public and private entities legally constituted in EU countries or participating in the COSME program, for example: local, regional, national, national, associations, tour operators, NGOs, universities, research or training centers. , destination management organizations, chambers of commerce, and the responsible institution is the Executive Agency for SMEs - EASME Brussels.

Among other opportunities, we list:

- the support that the ecotourism enjoys at international level with the signing of the Declaration from Quebec;
- a tendency to increase internationally the number of tourists / visitors who have like main motivation ecotourism;
- the existence of the governmental interest in promoting this form of tourism in Romania;
- accession to the European Union has contributed to the country's international recognition;
- steps have been taken in the process of accession and post-accession to the European Union
- important steps in adapting the national policy and legislation to the European one;
- important steps have been taken regarding the ease with which a business can be opened Romania. According to a World Bank study, our country is 45th from a total of 190 countries analyze;
- the existence of European funds (eg PNDR, POIM, ROP, etc.);
- the existence of other reimbursable or non-reimbursable financing programs in the field environmental conservation and ecotourism;

Internationally, Romania is perceived as an unexploited country, this could be the basis of future promotional campaigns, the marketing potential of Romania as a tourist destination through ecotourism.

4. Proposals and conclusions

The following are the most important recommendations concerning the private sector:

- ecotourism business must be profitable for all stakeholders involved, owners, investors, managers, local communities and conservation organizations in the natural areas in which they operate business design, development and management;
- must minimize the negative effects and contribute positively to the conservation of fragile ecosystems and the environment in general, to bring direct benefits to local communities;
- entrepreneurs must ensure that design, planning, development and operate ecotourism facilities incorporate sustainability principles such as harmonious integration into the landscape, water conservation, energy, non-renewable materials and access to all categories of population without discrimination;
- to cooperate with governmental and non-governmental organizations involved in the protection natural areas and biodiversity conservation, ensuring that ecotourism operations are executed according to the management plans and regulations in the area, so as to minimize any negative effect and to act to increase the quality of the ecotourism product and the financial contribution to the conservation of natural resources;
- to use more local materials and products, as well as resources in the course of the business human and local logistics, to maintain the authenticity of the ecotourism product and to grow it the proportion of benefits that remain in the community;
- to invest in local labor force training;

➤ to actively collaborate with local community representatives to ensure that the elements of traditional culture are described and valorized with respect, that the staff and tourists are correctly informed about the local traditions, customs and history;

➤ to promote among the clients an ethical behavior towards the ecotourism destination visited, for example through environmental education or by encouraging voluntary contributions, to support community and conservation initiatives;

➤ to diversify the offer by developing a wide range of tourist activities at a destination given by expanding operations to other destinations, to avoid overcrowding, which would threaten the long-term activity sustainability.

Private operators must ensure to contribute to the implementation of some visitor impact management systems in destinations ecotourism to ensure a fair distribution of ecotourism revenues among operators, suppliers local services, local communities through appropriate tools and strategic alliances and to formulate sustainable development policies to be implemented in all sectors business.

Ecotourism is not important only for increasing the number of tourists, it is becoming a diverse and complex activity. Although mass tourism remains the predominant form, other tourism activities related to culture, environment, education, health etc. Tourists reflect the preferences for the quality of the environment and a more energetic and participative form of recreation. Ecotourism, as a market niche in tourism, is considered to be one of the fastest growing segments in the tourism industry. Interest in ecotourism is estimated to increase from 25% to 30%, and, in fact, is possible because of nature protection concerns, but also due to the special tourists interest for the nature experiences. In "National Strategy for the Development of Ecotourism in Romania - context, vision and goals -2016-2020", is also estimated that ecotourism, tourism in natural areas, cultural tourism and adventure tourism will grow rapidly over the next two decades and it is estimated that people will spend more on ecotourism products in the future.

According to estimates by the International Ecotourism Society (TIES), ecotourism could grow in the next six years to about 25% of the global travel market, and revenues could reach \$ 470 billion per year.

Ecotourism attracts those tourists who want to interact with the natural environment and want to increase the level of knowledge, understanding and appreciation. One of the tendencies that feeds the growth of this form of tourism is the travelers preference to choose holidays with an educational touch, which will enrich their existence rustic / with potential ecotourism. In Romania the Ecotourism is a strong direction for sustainable development.

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