

Ecotourism and Its Importance on the Tourism Market

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Abstract

Ecotourism is the main form of sustainable tourism and takes into account the natural environment, the cultural and social environment as well as the economic impact on the local communities. These features make ecotourism an attractive form for tourists who want to travel in the areas that constitute the appropriate environment for practicing ecotourism.

The actions of conservation of the natural environment have generated this form of tourism that is addressed to a small segment of tourists, namely the segment of ecotourists. Therefore, protected areas play a decisive role in the practice of ecotourism.

In turn, ecotourism generates a minimal negative impact on the natural and cultural environment, contributing to the well-being of local communities.

In Romania, the existence of relatively unaltered natural resources, the preservation, revitalization and capitalization of cultural resources, as well as the support of local communities in these areas, had the effect of developing ecotourism materialized in increasing the number of ecotourists.

Key words: tourism, ecotourism, protected areas

J.E.L. classification: L80, L83.

1. Introduction

At present, there is an increasing emphasis on the development of sustainable forms of tourism. Unlike mass tourism, ecotourism is a form of tourism that has lately been an attractive form for tourists and tourism operators, but it is also an area that is continuously researched to provide the best solutions. for the environment, tourists, service providers, but also for the local community.

This is why, in Romania, ecotourism is a form of tourism that knows positive trends, and the protected areas have a major role in developing this form of tourism.

2. Theoretical background

In practice there are two separate dimensions for the sustainability argument applied to travel and tourism: the physical environment and the social and cultural environment (Middleton and Hawkins, 1998, p.7). In other words, if ecotourism initially aimed only at respecting ecological principles, at present, it also implies the impact it has on local communities.

This impact is aimed at:

- relations between tourists and residents;
- the economic benefits obtained by the local community;
- the customs, traditions and culture of the respective area

In essence, ecotourism experiences are sustainable in respect both to the environment and local populations, their culture, needs and desires (Wearing and Neil, 1999, p.7). Also, many remote and fragile environments and cultures may come increasingly under the influence of tourism as specialized forms of tourism, under such names as alternative tourism, ecotourism, adventure tourism, and green tourism (Heath and Geoffrey, 1992, p.37). This highlights the importance that ecotourism has on the tourist market. Ecotourism must maintain its characteristics that define it as

the main form of sustainable tourism and not become a form of mass tourism.

This character would have a huge negative impact on the natural and socio-cultural environment in a certain area.

In theory, several terms are used to designate ecotourism. Common terms used to describe ecotourism and related activities are (Cook *et al*, 2010,319):

- Adventure tourism
- Low-impact tourism
- Rural tourism
- Wilderness tourism
- Green tourism
- Nature-based tourism
- Sustainable tourism
- Responsabile tourism

Tourism development will invariably require the sacrifice of natural landscape to make way for tourist facilities (Holloway, 1998, p.319). Ecotourism has been declared to conserve the natural areas, enhance small-scale development, educate both tourists and locals as well as provide an incentive for long-term attractiveness of the destinations (Knowles *et al*, 2001, p.118). Therefore, ecotourism is an important solution on the tourism market.

Swarbrooke, consider that, in simple terms, ecotourism simply means that the main motivation for travel is the desire to view ecosystems in their natural state, both in terms of wildlife and the indigenous population (Swarbrooke, 1999, p.318). In The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1999, p.454) ecotourism is 'tourism directed towards unspoiled natural environments and intended to support conservation efforts'.

In Fennell's conception (Fennell, 2003, p.25) 'ecotourism is a sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism that focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, and which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive, and locally oriented (control, benefits, and scale). It typically occurs in natural areas, and should contribute to the conservation or preservation of such areas'.

The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as 'responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education' (<https://ecotourism.org/what-is-ecotourism/>). This organization believes that those who implements, participates in and market ecotourism activities should adopt the following ecotourism principles (<https://ecotourism.org/what-is-ecotourism/>):

- Minimize physical, social, behavioral, and psychological impacts
- Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect
- Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts
- Provide direct financial benefits for conservation
- Generate financial benefits for both local people and private industry
- Deliver memorable interpretative experiences to visitors that help raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climates
- Design, construct and operate low-impact facilities
- Recognize the rights and spiritual beliefs of the Indigenous People in your community and work in partnership with them to create empowerment.

Consequently, ecotourism differs from other forms of tourism by educating ecotourists as well as the local communities involved.

Benefits and importance of ecotourism are (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2009, p.486):

- Provides jobs and income for local people
- Makes possible funds for purchasing and improving protected or natural areas to attract more ecotourists in the future
- Provides environmental education for visitors
- Encourages heritage and environmental preservation and enhancement

3. Research methodology

For the analysis of ecotourism and the importance it has on the tourism market, statistical data were used regarding this form of tourism in Romania. The research method is based on the systematic observation and analysis of the phenomenon in order to unravel the recorded trends and to discover the factors that were the basis of these trends.

4. Ecotourism in Romania

In Romania, ecotourism is a form of tourism with huge potential, because there are numerous areas where the natural environment is little affected by human activity.

Protected areas play an important role in the development and practice of ecotourism. There are three main categories of protected areas in Romania: the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve (the largest protected area, representing 580000 hectares); 13 National Parks and 13 Nature Reserves. Their total area represents 7% of the Romanian territory, being a major resource for tourism. Activities can range from hunting and hiking to leisure and winter sports. (http://turism.gov.ro/web/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/masterplan_partea1.pdf).

In Romania, ecotourism programs have a relatively recent history. The first ecotourism packages were created around 2000. Currently, the main areas of Romania where ecotourism programs are concentrated are the following

(<https://patrimoniul.gov.ro/images/turismcultural/Romania/Strategie-ecoturism.pdf>):

- Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve (bird watching, boating);
- Piatra Craiului National Park and its surroundings (programs based in particular on the observation of large carnivores (wolf, bear, laughter), but also of certain species of plants, equestrian tourism, cycling, mountain hiking, etc.);
- The Apuseni Mountains Natural Park (hiking, thematic hiking, cultural programs, ski touring, equestrian tourism, cycling tourism, etc.);
- other protected natural areas, some with national or natural park status, with ecotourism programs focused on: equestrian tourism, cycling, thematic hiking, ski touring, flora and fauna observation, cultural programs, canoeing, etc. ;
- Transylvania
- Bucovina (nature observation programs, thematic trips combined with cultural tourism and monastic tourism).

The concern for the development of ecotourism in Romania has led to the appearance of associations and organizations that promote this form of tourism. Such an association is The Association of Ecotourism in Romania.

This is a partnership for nature conservation and tourism development among tourism associations, non-governmental associations acting in local development and nature conservation, nature conservation projects and travel agencies. Therefore, the innovative idea promoted by AER is to bring together the public and the private sector in a partnership for nature conservation and sustainable tourism development (<https://www.asociatiaaer.ro/en/mission-and-objectives/>).

In Romania, in many situations the ecotourism is identified with the rural tourism, not being a clear delimitation of them, because many activities specific to the ecotourism are found in the rural areas where there is a natural environment specific to the practice of the ecotourism. Although it is an important form of tourism for Romania, there is no clear statistical data on ecotourism.

Because the Danube Delta is the protected area with the largest area on the Romanian territory, it is very important the statistical image regarding the number of tourists in this area.

Thus, in the Table no.1 is presented the number of tourists in the Danube Delta compared to the number of tourists in Romania.

Table no. 1 Arrivals in the tourist reception structures with accommodation functions in Romania and in the Danube Delta, between 2015-2018

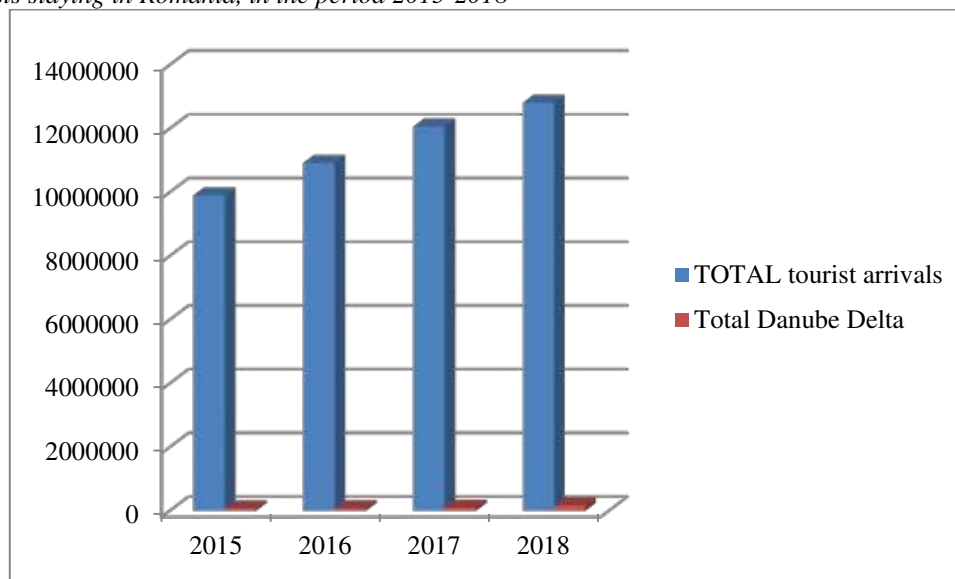
Year	TOTAL Arrive Tourists	From which:		Danube Delta (including Tulcea city)		
		Romanian Tourists	Foreign Tourists	Total Tourists	From which:	
					Romanian Tourists	Foreign Tourists
2015	9898610	7664378	2234232	69076	53384	15692
2016	10917561	8445949	2471412	73114	55747	17367
2017	12056276	9307004	2749272	100423	76281	24142
2018	12809887	10024482	2785405	165431	140077	25354

Sources: realized by the author, based on data provided by National Institute of Statistics (Seria turism 2015-2017: nr. 4/2015; nr. 4/2016; nr. 4/2017 <http://www.insse.ro/cms/ro/content/alte-publicati>; Seria statistica de turism Nr 4/ 2018, p. 3 http://www.insse.ro/cms/files/publicatii/publicatii%20statistice%20operative/seria_turism_in_anul_2018.pdf).

From the analysis of the data in table number 1, between 2015-2018 we can see an upward evolution of both the total number of tourists in Romania, as well as the number of Romanian and foreign tourists.

Although the data in figure no. 1 indicate an increase in the number of tourists in the Danube Delta, the share of these tourists in the total number of tourists remains small. Thus, if in 2015 the tourists staying in the Danube Delta represented 0.7%, in 2018 their share reached 1.3%, which represents almost a doubling. This fact is due to a better promotion of ecotourism in this area, as well as the emergence of new activities specific to ecotourism in the Delta.

Figure no. 1. The total number of tourists staying in the Danube Delta compared to the total number of tourists staying in Romania, in the period 2015-2018

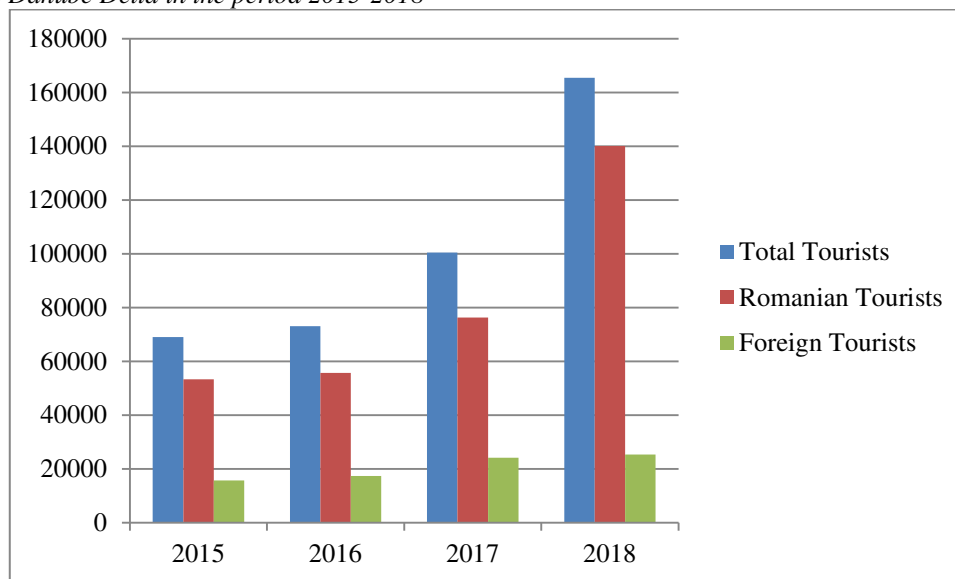


Source: realized by the author after Table no.1

If we take into account the number of tourists staying in the Danube Delta, there is an increase of 2.4 times in 2018 compared to 2015 (Figure no. 2). A similar increase is registered for Romanian tourists but also for foreign tourists from the Danube Delta.

However, it should be noted that the number of foreign tourists is small compared to the number of Romanian tourists. Thus, in 2015 Romanian tourists represented 77.3% and foreign tourists 22.7%. In 2018, the share of Romanian tourists increased to 84.7%, while foreign tourists represented 15.3%, which represents a decrease of 7.4% compared to 2015.

Figure no. 2. The total number of tourists, the number of foreign tourists and Romanian tourists staying in the Danube Delta in the period 2015-2018



Source: realized by the author after Table no.1

5. Conclusions

Following the analysis, it is found that ecotourism can play an important role in the tourist market, if the appropriate measures are taken to practice it. The development of ecotourism represents a beneficial strategy for the economy of a country, but especially for the natural, cultural and social environment in these areas.

The analysis of data from Romania has revealed that this form of tourism is not sufficiently promoted, especially at the institutional level. There is no statistical data to characterize this form of tourism. However, Romania has a huge potential for practicing ecotourism. For this, it is not enough a promotion of ecotourism areas but the realization of concrete actions that will contribute to the protection of the protected areas, because in Romania there are massive deforestation of forests, even inside the protected areas. This phenomenon generates the destruction of ecosystems and consequently a negative impact on ecotourism.

Although the Danube Delta is the protected area with the largest area in Romania, the number of tourists who practice ecotourism is very small.

In conclusion, for Romania, ecotourism is a huge opportunity for economic development, but also for the protection and conservation of the natural and cultural environment. But the development of ecotourism should not lead to its transformation into mass tourism that will generate negative effects.

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