

# RESEARCH UPON THE PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE DANUBE DELTA, AS (ECO)TOURISTIC DESTINATION

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## Abstract:

*The aim of this paper is to analyze the functioning, knowledge and appreciation of ecotourism, as a specific form of tourism, in the Danube Delta area, known as a biosphere reservation, and considered as one of the most beautiful areas in Romania, mainly characterized by wilderness. The land of Danube Delta is still continuing to form, and is considered as the youngest land of the country. The size of the Danube Delta it is the second in Europe (after the Volga Delta), covering more than 500,000 ha, between the three arms: Chilia, Sulina, and St. George. Considering the special status of the area, the paper tries to review the relevant literature and web resources dedicated to sustainable tourism. The research method used for development of the proposed topic is the fundamental research, based on the questionnaire method, considering a sample of 300 interviewees, both from visitors and the planners to have a tourism experience within the considered area. Based on information above collected, the conclusions try to outline some possible improvements in order to develop a responsible, and environmental friendly tourism in the Danube Delta area.*

**Keywords:** ecotourism, tourism, sustainability, management, strategies

**JEL classification:** M21, O44, Q26

## 1. Introduction

The concept of “sustainable development” has the roots in the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development “Our Common Future” to the General Assembly of the United Nations. Based on the simultaneous approach to development and the environment, the sustainable development was defined as a development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 15). During various stages of development of human society, there can be identified some states of development that easily could be considered as “sustainable”. Pearce and Warford (1993, p. 42) emphasize that the “development” during these stages is equivalent with less or even none intrinsic value for “sustainability” in itself; that is, the challenge of the concept resides not so much in the word “sustainable” but in “development”. Throughout a very long historical period, sustainability was considered as such and not as an explicit goal; but, implicitly, there were no human society that ever promoted consciously its own un-sustainability (Mieilă and Toplicianu, 2013).

According to the acknowledged approach in the literature, sustainable development represent a tool for substantiating the correct level of evolution of the tourist activities in a certain region / location, as well as the possibility to evaluate its perspectives (Boghean, 2007; Frant, 2008; Istrate et. al., 2006; Stănciulescu et. al., 2000). Thereby, development in tourism must meet the requirements and needs of the present without compromising of the actual resources (Dachin, 2003).

The Danube Delta represents concomitant an old and new nature reserve, and the sustainability of its’ ecosystem may be impacted by the deployment of the tourism activities. Therefore, studying of the tourist consumption behavior represents a topical point, as well as

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the possibilities to apply the principles of rural tourism, or ecotourism, searching for the Romanian tourists motivations to visit the Danube Delta.

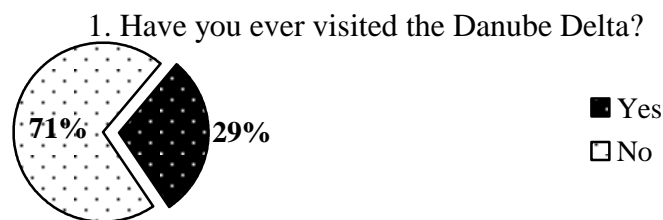
The Danube Delta is the second largest delta in Europe, after the Volga Delta, encompassing an area of approximately 500,000 hectares (ha). It is properly considered as the newest land of the country, as its conformation changes continuously, according to the floods brought by the water. Its three arms, St. George, Sulina and Chilia together with the related canals and lakes, host a rich biodiversity, covering 1830 fauna species, of which 341 bird populations, and over 133 fish of fresh and salt water species. There are also 44 species of mammals, ten species of amphibians, and eleven species of reptiles (RAMSAR, 2012) . Considering the variety and wilderness of the landscapes, and the richness in species of flora and fauna, the main area of the Danube Delta has been declared a natural reserve, under three major environmental protection statements:

- Declared as *MAB UNESCO Biosphere Reserve* under the UNESCO Programme "Man and Biosphere" (1990);
- The site declared as *Wet area of international importance*, especially for aquatic birds, under the RAMSAR Convention (in 1992);
- Part of the UNESCO Convention for the Protection of the Universal Cultural and Natural Heritage, as Site of the UNESCO World Natural and Cultural Heritage (2001).

There has to be stated that the site of the Danube Delta is not entirely reserved, meaning that yet there is an important area which may be visited without restrictions; an important part may be visited with certain limitations; and the there is a portion reserved only to the specialists. Tourists can visit the first two abovementioned areas of the delta, enjoying the landscapes, going by boat, fishing and having accommodation and meals in hotels and pensions; not least, the area is opened for settlement as and alongside the locals, for the persons which meet certain conditions.

## 2. Methodology and results of the field research

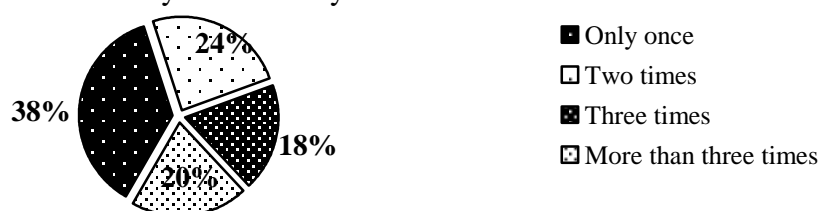
The data set used in this study was collected from a special organized research. Considering the random survey approach, the research sample was set to 300 people, in order to ensure a significance level of 5%. As the study was conducted using the face-to-face interview method, there has not been cases of non-responses or incomplete answers. The field collection of the interviews questionnaires has been deployed in the period between May and October 2019. The questionnaire comprises 14 questions addressing the aspects regarding land and water transportation, accommodation, entertainment, and the possibilities of leisure.



**Fig. 1. The distribution of answers to question nr. 1 (Q1).**

From the answers to Q1 (fig. 1), there may be noticed that the majority of the respondents in the sample, over 70%, did not visit the Danube Delta. That expresses the important room for increasing the tourism in the Danube Delta; besides some economic advantages for the local operators in the area, there has also to be considered the contingent environmental risks, particularly in case of an fast growth rate.

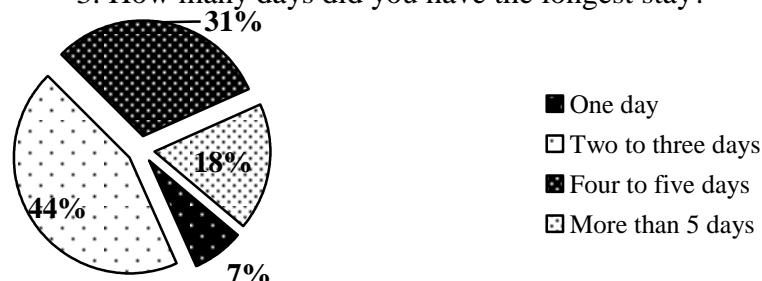
2. How many times have you visited the Danube Delta?



**Fig. 2. The distribution of answers to Q2.**

Q2 (fig. 2) has been addressed only to the respondents which indicated a positive answer to Q1. From the distribution of the answers to Q2 (fig. 2) there may be noticed that an important ratio of the tourists in the area (almost 40%) did not come back; there may be considered a positive side of this situation, that is, the diminution of excessive tourism risks in the research area.

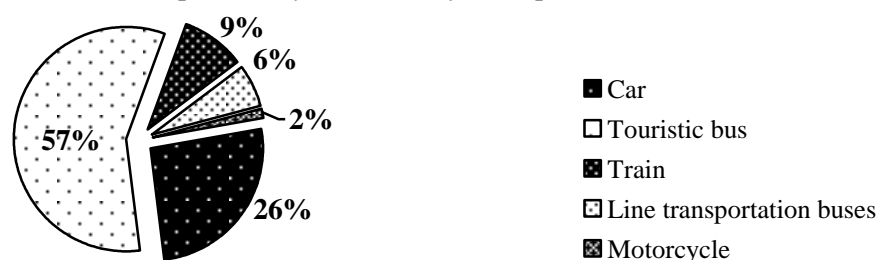
3. How many days did you have the longest stay?



**Fig. 3. The distribution of answers to Q3.**

As in the case of Q2, Q3 (fig. 3) has been addressed only to the respondents which indicated a positive answer to Q1. The answers tend to indicate a prevalent preference to stay two to three days; almost one-third stay for to five days, and about one-fifth in the respondents indicate long stays. With regards to the about one-tenth in the sample which had the longest stay of one day, this may have various explanations, from a circuit or a break trip to situations of dislike; consequently, there is difficult to forecast their measure to return.

4. The mean of transportation you used for your trip to the Danube Delta was...



**Fig. 4. The distribution of answers to Q4.**

The answers to Q4 (fig. 4), regarding the mean of transportation used for the trip to Danube Delta, the tourists indicate in majority the bus (56%), followed by car (26%), train (9%), and the line transportation buses. The predominance of common transportation means for the research destination, provided that, in Romania the tourism by personal owned car is prevalent, can be explained as result of the transportation infrastructure specific situation in the area, less developed. The situation is expected to change amid the completion and commissioning of the bridge over the Danube at Braila. With regards to the ratio of using the

motorcycle, although marginal, it may explained by considering the Danube Delta as an adventure destination.

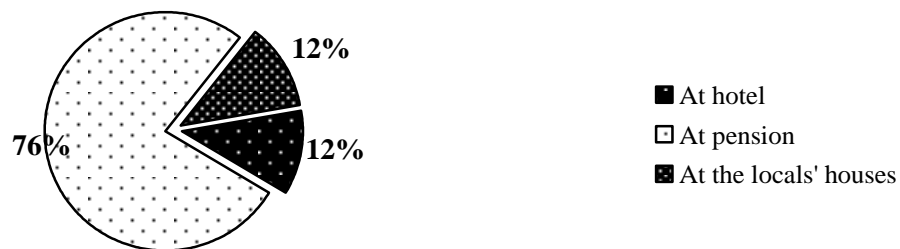
5. The type of water transport you used to get to the accommodation was...



**Fig. 5. The distribution of answers to Q5.**

The answers to Q5 (fig. 5), with regards to the specific type of water transportation mean used by tourists to get to the accommodation indicate in majority the ship (56%), followed by pinnacle (about one-fourth), and boat (about one-fifth); the catamaran, despite its large world usage, driven by the tourists preferences, in the research area appears marginally (2%).

6. When you visit the Danube Delta, you prefer the accomodation...



**Fig. 6. The distribution of answers to Q6.**

The answers to Q6 (fig. 6), with regards to the accommodation indicate in over three-fourth of the situations, the preference of tourists to stay at pensions (56%), followed, in equal ratios (about one-eight each) by the hotels and the locals' houses. In this context, has to be pointed out that, both the old and the new accommodation structures in the Danube Delta represented, on the one side by the local houses, and by the hotels, on the other side, are still in a development stage. The collected answers tend to indicate that the intermediary structures between the two aforementioned are the best adapted to an increasing tourist accommodation demand.

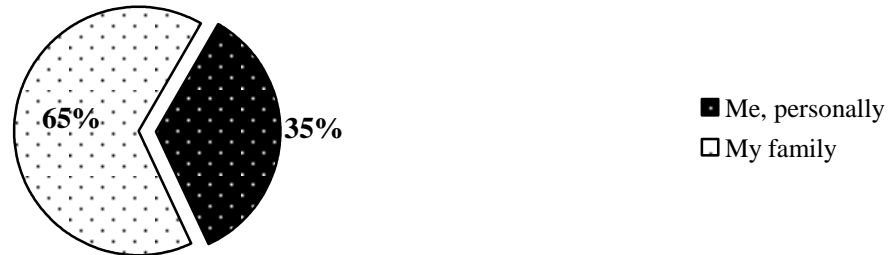
7. The company you prefer for travelling is...



**Fig. 7. The distribution of answers to Q7.**

The answers to Q7 (fig. 7) indicate in over one-third for both, the preferences for travelling accompanied by the family or the friends, immediately followed, by more than one fourth of the situations, the preference to travel in a group; with regards to the solitary trips, the research sample indicate them marginally (1%).

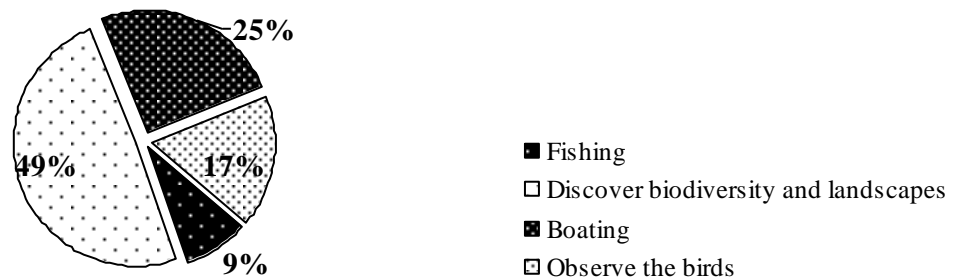
8. The decision to go on a trip is made by...



**Fig. 8. The distribution of answers to Q8.**

With regards to the person(s) who make the travelling decision, the answers to Q8 (fig. 8), indicate in about two-third of the cases, the family, and, for the remaining one-third of the cases, as a personal decision.

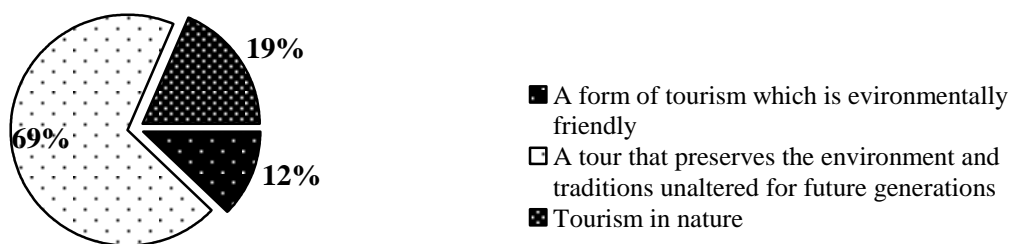
9. Your primary objective for a trip in the Danube Delta is ...



**Fig. 9. The distribution of answers to Q9.**

The importance of preservation of the Danube Delta as an ecotourism destination results from the answers to Q9 (fig. 9). Therefore, a half of the respondents in the sample indicate as their primary objective to discover biodiversity and landscapes; in the same thematic area may be considered about one-fifth of the answers, which indicate as purpose the observation of birds. Cumulated, the ratio of the two answers is about two-third in the sample. One-fourth in the sample stated the boating as the main objective, whilst less than one-tenth go to Danube Delta for fishing.

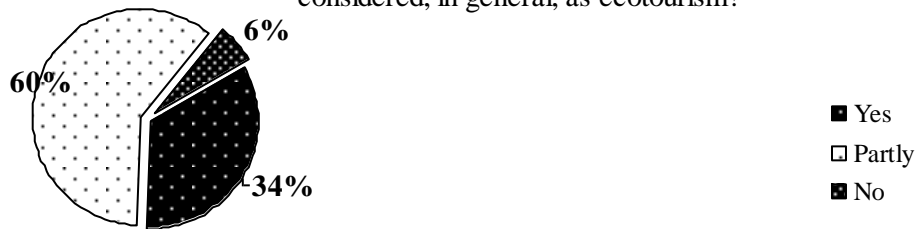
10. From your point of view, the ecotourism represents...



**Fig. 10. The distribution of answers to Q10.**

The question 10 has been addressed aiming to evaluate the public awareness in the field of environmental protection and ecotourism. Therefore, upon the answers to Q10 (fig. 10), about seven-tenth of the respondents in the sample indicate their perception according to the acknowledged definition.

11. In your opinion, the tourism activity practiced in the Danube Delta, may be considered, in general, as ecotourism?



**Fig. 11. The distribution of answers to Q11.**

The Q11 has been addressed aimed to an in-depth of the deployed analysis, and as an application of the Q10. 6% of the respondents in the sample, indicate a give a clearly negative answer, whilst six-tenth of the sample, consider that the tourism activity practiced in the Danube Delta, may be assumed as ecotourism only partly (fig. 11); however, one-third appreciate that the answer to Q11 is positive. There has to be observed to what extent the positive answers are correlated to the about one-third of the answers to Q10, which are in contradistinction to the definition of ecotourism.

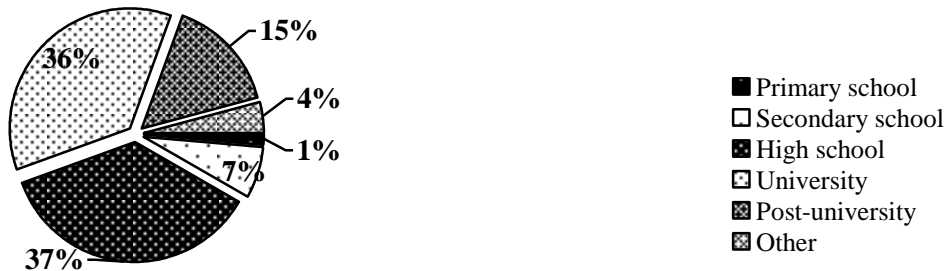
12. Your age belongs to one of the following ranges:



**Fig. 12. The distribution of answers to Q12.**

The distribution of answers to Q12 (fig. 12), shows that the Danube Delta represent a tourism destination especially preferred by the persons over 40 years, in a ratio over 90%, which appreciate quietness and wilderness, instead of parties or other types of entertainment, specific in majority to the young individuals; as there may be observed, the marginal ratio of the very young adults (2%), which state that they are tourists in the research area.

13. Your your level of education belongs to one of the following categories:

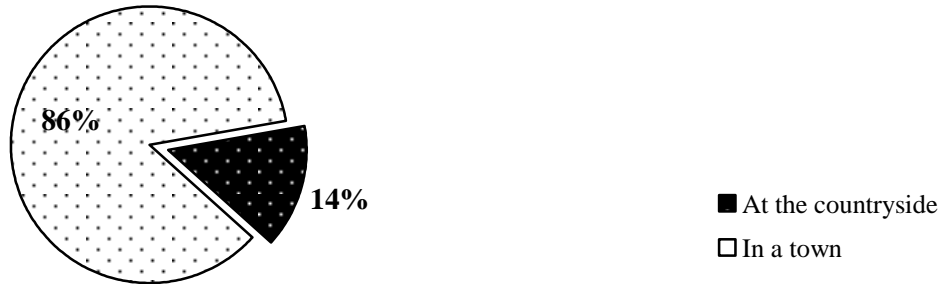


**Fig. 13. The distribution of answers to Q13.**

The answers to 13 (fig. 13), with regards to the level of education of the respondents indicate that the vast majority of the tourists in the Danube Delta is represented by the

individuals having a level of education of high school (37%) and above: university (36%), and post-university (15%). On the opposite, the persons with primary and secondary education which stated that they prefer the research area as a touristic destination are in a ratio of 1%, and 7%, which results in a total ratio of the latter categories less than 10%.

14. Your residence area is:



**Fig. 14. The distribution of answers to Q14.**

The answers to Q14 (fig. 14) indicate that in 85%, the demand for tourism in the Danube Delta is originated from the individuals which live in town, whilst the ones living at the countryside may not be as willing to pay for a stay in conditions very similar to those of ones they try to escape during the holiday.

### Conclusions

The study reveals that there is an important ratio of Romanian tourists, which did not visited the Danube Delta. This situation may be analyzed both from the perspective of possibilities to grow and the possible associated environmental risks, depending on the growth rate. From those which visited the area, an important proportion (about 40%) tried this experience only once, and it is difficult to consider whether it would be repeated in the future. On the other hand, Danube Delta has its fans, represented by the one-fifth, which visited the area more than three times. A slightly equal proportion declare the longest stay of more than five days; there may be noticed the prevalence of holidays of two up to three days (44%), whilst a significant ratio (7%) declare the longest stay of just one day.

One of the possible explanations for the reduced number of tourists can be represented by the underdeveloped infrastructure for land transportation: 72% of the tourists declare the using of means for transportation in common, of which it is noticeable the 56% using of tourist buses; this situation is not common in Romania, where the tourism by personal owned car is prevalent. Once with completion and commissioning of the bridge over the Danube at Braila, there may be forecasted a growth in tourism, and, as above, this development may be observed from two opposite perspectives which have to be harmonized: economic and ecologic. Also, with regards to the water transportation means used within the area, the answers indicate an obsolete offer, provided the predominance of ships (56%); instead, the catamaran appears marginally (2%). The situation in the accommodation shows that the old and the new structures, that is, the local houses and the hotels are still in a development stage, and the pensions, as intermediary structures between the two aforementioned are the best adapted to the actual accommodation demand.

The Danube Delta represents a destination for travelling mainly accompanied, either by the family or friends, either by a group; this finding is consistent to the one which indicate the family as the author of a travelling decision, in about two-third of the cases.

The socio-demographic feature of the sample indicate that the Danube Delta represent a tourism destination especially preferred by the persons over 40 years, in a ratio over 90%, which appreciate quietness and wilderness; there is noticeable the marginal ratio of the very young adults (2%) tourists in the research area. With regards to the level of education, the vast majority of the

tourists in the Danube Delta is represented by the individuals having a level of education of high school or above (cumulated, 88%), whilst, the persons with primary and secondary cumulate a ratio of less than 10%. The answers in the sample shows that the demand for tourism in the Danube Delta is mainly originated from the individuals living in town areas (86%). This may be easily explained through the perspective of the ones living at the countryside, which are less likely to pay for a stay in conditions very similar to those of ones they try to escape during the holiday.

With regards to the public awareness in the field of environmental protection and ecotourism, about 70% of the answers respondents in the sample indicate their perception according to the acknowledged definition. However, 60% of the sample, consider that the tourism activity practiced in the Danube Delta, may be assumed as ecotourism only partly; one-third agree with eco-touristic feature of the specific activity in the area, and 6% indicate a clearly negative answer. The importance of preservation the wilderness and the resources of the Danube Delta, in order to ensure the conditions to become a real ecotourism destination results from the answers from two-third of the sample, which indicate as their primary objectives to discover biodiversity and landscapes, and the observation of birds; only 9% go to Danube Delta for fishing. From these answers results a change in perception regarding the tourism in the research area, focused mainly on preservation and observation rather than exploitation.

The above presented findings regarding the actual infrastructure of the research area, the social and demographic structure of tourists and their objectives, represent sound foundations in order to draw the guidelines of preservation of the resources in the Danube Delta, of protecting the environment and for development of a sustainable, responsible, and environmentally friendly tourism.

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