

ECOTOURISM POTENTIAL AS PART OF SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN DOBRUDGEA

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Abstract:

The development of ecotourism activities in the protected areas implies socio-economic benefits for the neighbouring settlements. Taking into consideration the natural and anthropic tourism resources, the tourism types and forms, and the tourism infrastructure, Dobrudgea is a region where ecotourism is an important instrument for preserving nature, educating visitors and supporting sustainable rural development. In this context, the aim of the paper is to identify the necessary measures for the improvement of the management of ecotourism activities development in Dobrudgea's countryside. The statistical data were completed with information from papers and studies published in specialty books and journals, in governmental documents, as well as in other development strategies related to tourism and rural development.

Key words: *ecotourism, sustainable rural development, development strategy, Dobrudgea.*

JEL Classification: L83, R10, Q01.

1. Introduction

The tourism activities developed under the aegis of ecotourism offer to tourism industry, tourists, authorities and local people the possibility to cooperate for the organization and development of responsible journeys into the natural areas unaltered by the anthropic activity, in order to admire the ecological richness, to study, understand and enjoy both nature and cultural diversity, in a manner that will take into account the environmental impact, in the idea of maintaining the viability in the respective area on an indefinite period of time (Nistoreanu, 2006).

At the same time, the ecotourism activities can contribute to the economic recovery of villages, to infrastructure modernization, they can attract different investors, if the inhabitants of the rural areas adopt a favorable attitude, which can be appreciated by the tourists who prefer this type of tourism, and if the local authorities are sufficiently involved in the development of this profitable economic activity.

Romania has a lot of natural attractions, making it one of the most attractive ecotourism destinations in Europe. The authenticity and the uniqueness of those attractions create a story that is looking forward to be revealed to all tourists visiting Romania (Isbăşescu and Fîntîneru, 2013).

Among the zones where ecotourism programs are developed, we can also mention Dobrudgea, a historical province from Romania's South-East extremity, with an area divided into two counties from the administrative point of view: Tulcea and Constanța, consisting of three geographical relief units: delta, plateau and seashore (Sima, 2016).

In this context, the aim of the paper is to identify the necessary measures for the improvement of the management of ecotourism activities development in Dobrudgea's countryside. The statistical data were completed with information from papers and studies published in specialty books and journals, in governmental documents, as well as in other development strategies related to tourism and rural development.

2. The main areas with ecotourism potential in Dobrudgea

Situated in the South-East of Romania, Dobrudgea's area totals 15,570 km², divided between two counties: Constanta and Tulcea; this is an extremely important zone from the bio-geographic point of view, where a large number of flora and fauna species of conservation

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interest exist, with the interference of the floristic species from the Central European, Mediterranean and Asian areas.

In Dobrudgea the main areas with ecotourism potential are the following: the Danube Delta and Razim-Sinoe lagoon complex, the Măcin Mountains National Park, the Romanian Black Sea Coast and the Northern Dobrudgean Plateau (Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of the main areas with ecotourism potential located in Dobrudgea

Name	Characteristics
Danube Delta and the lagoon complex Razim-Sinoe	With a great diversity of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems, which has a triple international status at present: Biosphere Reservation, Ramsar site (wetland of international importance) and World Natural and Cultural Heritage Site where real opportunities exist for ecotourism activity.
Măcin Mountains National Park	Located in the north-western part of the county Tulcea, with maximum altitude 467 m (the mountain peak Greci-Țuțuiatul), which is fascinating by its unique geo-morphology and bio-geography.
Romanian Black Sea Coast	With its specific ecotourism potential represented by the Sites of Community Interest, such as: sea dunes from Agigea and sea zones from Tuzla, Costinesti, Vama Veche.
Dobrudgean Plateau	With ecotourism potential, yet totally un-explored (large forests and a rich hunting fund).

Source: www.ddbra.ro/, <http://www.parcmacin.ro>, <http://www.anpm.ro/>

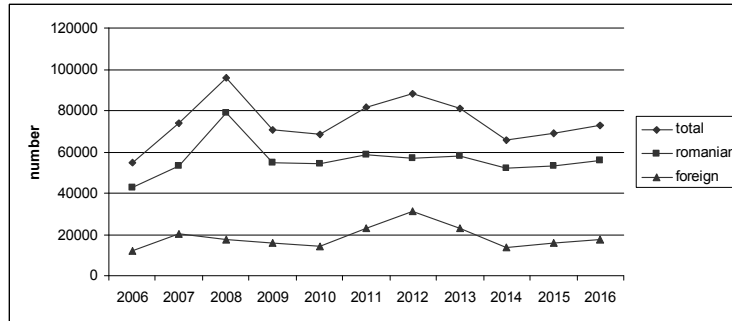
In most protected areas from Dobrudgea, networks of tourism routes have been created, in majority homologated or on the way to be homologated. Most routes are for camping, but also cycling routes or water routes (in the parks located in wet areas) were established.

In the *Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve*, with an old tradition in tourism and ecotourism, different other variants of access were also developed over time, respectively transport by boats and by ships of various sizes.

In this area, the ecotourism activities can include:

- types of adventure activities (e.g. rafting, canoeing, on horse tourism on pre-established routes, bicycle trips on established routes, etc.);
- guided trips / organized journeys;
- tours for nature observation (flora, fauna);
- experimentation trips for nature preservation activities;
- trips to local communities (visits to cultural objectives, visiting traditional farms, viewing traditional cultural manifestations, traditional food products consumption, acquisition of non-food traditional products, etc.).

In the year 2008, in the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve (Tulcea municipality included), 96090 tourists were accommodated, out of which 82% were Romanian tourists and 18% foreign tourists (Figure 1); in the year 2012, the same area accommodated 88021 tourists, out of which 64% were Romanian tourists and 36% foreign tourists (NIS, 2017).



Source: NIS, Tempo-online, 2017

Figure1. Number of tourist arrivals in the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve

In the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, the most frequented localities are: Crișan and Maliuc located along the arm Sulina; the localities Nufăru, Mahmudia and Murighiol located along the arm Sfântu Gheorghe; the locality Jurilovca, on the bank of lake Razim. For tourism purposes, the helio-marine potential of the marine beaches from Sulina, Sfântu Gheorghe and Gura Portiței is also put into value.

The Macinului Mountains National Park represents a new and a special attraction point for the tourists who are fond of ecotourism, due to the special values of the area: various landscapes, special biodiversity, with species defended by the law and declared monuments of nature, the oldest territory in Romania and one of the oldest territories in Europe. The natural tourism potential of the Macinului Mountains National Park is represented by many ecotourism objectives, such as: Țuțuiatu Peak (467 m); Căpușa Peak (433 m) and the neighbouring zone; Moroianu Peak (434 m); Priopcea Peak (410 m); Sulucu Mare Peak (370 m) and Pricopanului Peak; the fossil point: Bujoarele Hill; the Forest: Valea Fagilor – a botanical natural reserve; the Salty Lake.

According to the data of the National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism (NIRDT) from Bucharest, most visitors in the National Park Macinului Mountains are Romanians from the zones near the Park (the local communities or the municipalities of Brăila, Galați, Tulcea, Constanța), with an average duration of stay of one day (and a minimum economic impact upon the local communities); the main visitor groups are local people from the localities near the park (for a picnic), bird-watchers, rovers in small groups (2-10 persons), organized groups of 20-40 persons who ask for a guide from the park administration, cycling tourists, climbers, families with caravans and personal cars (NIRDT, 1998).

3. Measures for ecotourism organization in Dobrugea

The Romanian effort to develop and promote tourism in the rural area (e.g. rural tourism, agro-tourism and ecotourism), has been completed by the support provided by the EU funds since the year 2000, in conformity with the priorities and rural development directions of the National Rural Development Program (NRDP), established in close connection with the community priorities and in relation to the analysis of the socio-economic and environment situation, obtained on the basis of available statistical data. The European Pre-Accession Program 2000-2006 granted community financial support through under SAPARD (Special pre-Accession Program for Agriculture and Rural Development). The European post-accession programs 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 have granted and still grant community financial support through the EAFRD funds (European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development).

The development of Romanian tourism in the rural area have largely benefited from the EU funds implemented through the Agency for Rural Investment Financing (ARIF), which

took over the patrimony of the Agency for Payments and Intervention in Agriculture (APIA) and the attributions resulting from the monitoring function of SAPARD Program, as well as the attributions for the technical implementation, payments and monitoring for NRDP 2007-2013. In addition, ARIF complies with the accrediting criteria throughout the period for which it was conferred the assistance management through the European Commission's Decisions (<http://www.afir.info/>).

Table 2. Main measures providing financial support to ecotourism development and promotion in the Romanian rural area

Program	Measure	Eligible investments
NRDP - SAPARD 2000-2006	3.4 "Development and diversification of economic activities generating multiple activities and alternative incomes"	- Rural tourism - Other types of tourism activities in the rural area
NRDP 2007-2013	313. "Encouragement of tourism activities"	- Tourism accommodation infrastructure and recreational activities - Small-scale infrastructure (tourist information centres, installation of tourism signs etc, - Development and/or marketing of tourism services related to rural tourism
NRDP 2014-2020	06 – Development of farms and enterprises - sub-measure 6.4 "Investments in the creation and development of non-agricultural activities" - sub-measure 7.2 "Investments in the creation and modernization of small-scale basic infrastructure"	- Infrastructure on the tourist reception units of agro-tourism type, leisure activities (agro-tourism accommodation services, leisure services and catering) - Development/promotion of rural tourism services (to be continued from NRDP 2007-2013, through the transition procedure, by which 119 projects were transferred to be completed, out of which 161 under sM 6.4 and 38 projects under sM7.2)

Source: <http://www.madr.ro>

In this context, in Dobrugea, ecotourism is in an early stage, characterized by the existence of a few initiative groups, who wish to promote ecotourism. At the same time, in the present governmental context, there is an interest at the level of Ministry of Tourism in promoting and sustaining programs and activities in ecotourism. Their main goal is biodiversity preservation and development of tourism activities in the protected natural areas.

Another important factor in sustaining the ecotourism activities is the increasing interest in this kind of activity worldwide. An increasingly great number of tourists are involved in ecotourism and they wish to get engaged in this kind of nature preservation actions, for the appreciation and promotion of the traditional way of life, of valuable local traditions and customs.

A key factor in ecotourism development is the realization of a program to improve the present tourism infrastructure, which has in view:

- transport to the protected area,
- transport inside the protected area,
- trails and tourism signs,
- tourism trails,
- information and interpretation of tourism activities.

Another factor of ecotourism development is the realization of a program for the development of traditional products destined to increase the incomes in the local communities and financially support the activities in the protected area through the following initiatives:

- guided trips,
- tourism programs with complex trails, easy to make trails, specialised (professional) trails.

The marketing activity will focus on accessing specific market niches, at internal and international level, having in view reaching the following objectives:

- increasing the number of visitors, mainly outside the main tourism season,
- increasing the volume of tourists' expenditures in the park and in local communities,
- educating the visiting people in the spirit of responsible trips into nature.

The specific marketing methods of the ecotourism activities include:

1. web pages of protected areas,
2. tourism leaflets edited in collaboration with the Ministry in charge, containing all the necessary information for visiting the protected area,
3. detailed tourism maps, posters, postcards, booklets, etc.,
4. producing documentary films about the protected areas in collaboration with the national television stations, distributed overseas, also with promotional goals,
5. information packages regarding each tourism program, with information and images on the local accommodation structures and other local services,
6. the visiting centers and the information points, which will play a very important role in the promotion of the protected area, in which ecotourism activities are developed.

In order to promote and sell tourism programs, the administrators of the protected areas collaborate with the tour operators for:

1. participation in fairs and international tourism exhibitions,
2. establishment of more partnerships with the tourism agencies,
3. contacting agencies and tour operators abroad,
4. creation of an attractive and interactive Internet site.

Partnerships with tourism agencies are also important due to the fact that each of them will promote the activities meant to support eco-tourism development through:

1. maintaining the natural values and the zone clean,
2. the program of small funding for the bio-diversity preservation project,
3. promoting the idea of ecotourism as an alternative for the economic and social development of the communities and the organization of main directions for action linked to this purpose through:
 - a. informing and encouraging the local communities for the development of eco-tourism activities;
 - b. encouraging the creation and participation in local tourism associations and forums;
 - c. promoting and the maintaining alive the local traditions inside communities;
 - d. promoting traditional elements on the new buildings, encouraging the small farms to produce natural foodstuffs and traditional objects, to organize traditional events;
4. assisting the tourist villages and not only them in supplying edible water to farms and dwellings.
5. helping in all ways the local authorities to repair and renew the basic infrastructure inside communities: roads, public facilities, communication and transport facilities.

The cooperation between authorities, protected areas, boarding houses managers-owners and other persons or associations interested in ecotourism will be essential in order to

implement the strategic guidelines for tourism development and promotion. For the purpose of this collaboration, the following measures are necessary:

- encouraging the creation of local forums consisting of organizations interested in rural tourism, agro-tourism and eco-tourism.
- collaboration with all key factors in the zone, including the land owners, who are playing an important role in the regional economic development.

The necessary finance for the development and promotion of ecotourism can be ensured through:

1. entry fees in the protected area, in cooperation with the local authorities; part of these will be used for biodiversity preservation, rehabilitation of tourist routes and keeping the zone clean; another part will be used by the local authorities for infrastructure improvement and for keeping the neighbouring areas clean as well as for funding the intervention teams in case of necessity;
2. parking fees in parking places, specially settled on the entry points in the protected areas;
3. voluntary contributions from the visiting people, destined to the improvement of the infrastructure in the protected area;
4. tourism programs developed by the neighbouring local communities to the protected area, in collaboration with third parties;
5. incomes coming from a small accommodation module organized by the forest ranges, coupled with the incomes realized from the visitor fee in the center and from selling local products, can also be an eventual income source for the protected zone.

The ecotourism inside and outside the protected areas imposes:

- close cooperation with the authorities of the protected areas;
- the tourist operators and guides who work in the protected areas must have high ecologic knowledge;
- practical and financial contributions of tourism operators for the preservation of the protected areas;
- rules for promoting and marketing of holidays based in the protected areas;
- guidelines for the local communities involvement;
- standards for the design and operation of sustainable and business tourism (Iova, Crețu and Constantin, 2012).

In order to obtain good results in the Dobrudgean ecotourism activity, the following are necessary:

- improvement of infrastructure to support the ecotourism business;
- continuing to reduce bureaucracy with regard to the establishment and operation of ecotourist boarding houses;
- a better information of the population with regard to the governmental programs for private initiative stimulation;
- popularization of the successful business examples of the Romanian entrepreneurs.

In the future, in order to improve the living standards in the rural areas, it is of utmost importance to create and maintain sustainable jobs, to initiate and consolidate businesses, to develop products, services and activities on the basis of the existing potential.

4. Conclusions

Tourism and specifically eco-friendly tourism industries encourage development activities in the regional and national Natura 2000 sites as a sustainable opportunity for people and nature. Following the example of other countries, the local community can create multiple niches to give the possibility for the local people to participate in the development of tourism promoting mechanisms. Together, these can promote their traditions and the local natural resources at national and international level.

Dobruđea represents an important zone from biogeographical point of view, with valuable ecosystems in scientific reserves, natural reserves, national parks and natural parks; the economic impact produced by the developed ecotourism programs is obviously increasing.

In most protected areas in Dobruđea, networks of tourist routes were created, in majority homologated or on the way to be homologated. Most routes are for camping, but also cycling routes and water routes were created (in the parks located in wet areas).

Once acknowledged the importance of this sector for the protection and preservation 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 valorization of our country's rich patrimony.

The support for the entrepreneurial initiatives in ecotourism means:

- investments for a continuous improvement of the quality of accommodation and leisure equipment,
- prevalence of association forms, with the empowerment of small-sized family units,
- tourism packages, which should respect the natural, economic and social integrity of the rural space and ensure the rational exploitation of the natural and cultural resources necessary for the next generations.

Ecotourism has the potential to contribute to labour employment and to rural development, to the development of the less-favoured and remote rural areas; at the same time, it plays an important role in the rural economy, where it represents a significant source of additional incomes through the promotion of entrepreneurial and innovation skills.

The Dobruđean ecotourism sector is adversely affected by the lack of organization, promotion and dissemination of information on the tourism centers and by the limited number of these centers activating at local level. Ecotourism is not fully developed so as to meet the market needs at national and international level, while the tourism infrastructures in particular do not comply with the requirements and needs related to the accommodation and recreational structures, from the qualitative and quantitative point of view.

As a consequence, the strategic direction of action for the next years must ensure the legislative foundation on which the entire system of institutional-legislative instruments should be based, meant to foster ecotourism development, as a strong and efficient platform for guaranteeing the sustainable economic and social development.

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