

***Rural Tourism and Ecotourism –
the Main Priorities in Sustainable Development Orientations of Rural
Local Communities in Romania***

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Abstract: *At this moment, both in our country and in the European Union, rural tourism and ecotourism are among the most dynamic forms of tourism, a result of the advantages which it offers bouth tourists and host communities.*

Rural areas are rich in ecological and rural diversity. For a long time in their existence, rural communities have relied on the abundance of natural resources.

But in the 20th century, major changes in technology, political or economic reasons have brought a profound transformation in agriculture, as well as other industrial resources were renewable, which has led rural communities to be dependent on their face.

For rural areas, the fast pace of change has brought with it not only opportunities but also favourable challenges.

Sustainable development of Romanian local communities through ecotourism and rural tourism represents a requirement and at the same time a tendency of contemporary evolution.

This process includes a suite of particularities of nature followed from tourist activity, specify in its complexity and interacting with the environment and other sectors of the economy, the magnitude and variety of social relations which they generate, on the one hand, and the characteristics of sustainable development, in general, on the other hand.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the existing relationship between rural tourism and ecotourism, between the need for sustainable development and the need to preserve the local traditions, and to observe if such equilibrium is feasible between these two terms.

Keywords: *ecotourism, communities, rural tourism, sustainable development*

Introduction

Tourism is an important economic activity in the European Union. It comprises a wide variety of product and destinations and many different stakeholders are involved. Tourism has great potential as regards its contribution to achievement of several major EU objectives, such as sustainable development, economic growth, employment and economic and social cohesion. The strategic approach process is to create the conditions and provide the basis for sustainable, high-quality tourism and competitive Romanian tourism [9].

Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of tourists and host regions, protecting and expanding the possibilities for the future. Tourism can bring both advantages and disadvantages in the area. It can stimulate the development of other economic activities such as agriculture, local production of food and crafts, and help increase revenue.

Rural tourism and ecotourism have a significant role in the economic development of those areas or regions as touristic attractions. The most important positive contributions refer to the state revenue generated by tourist spending and export / import of goods complementary for receiving countries, and the boost of investment in various sectors, so the multiplier effect of tourism by contribute to the economic prosperity of the country.

Rural tourism started from the of idea gathering together the traditional activities related to hospitality and rest and from the following basic premise: agriculture takes place a natural and unpolluted environment, framed in natural resources nutrition organic, trend that has so sharply divided the European food markets in recent years and, finally, in an area potentially rich in traditions and ancestral customs, which, at least for foreign tourists, providing that the necessary dose the exotic and unknown to attract and convince the decision of leisure.

Ecotourism is a form of tourism where the main motivation of the tourists is the observation and appreciation of nature and local traditions related to the nature and must meet the following conditions:

- preserving and protecting nature;
- use local human resources;
- educational character, respect for nature - awareness of tourists and local communities;
- minimum negative impact on the natural environment and socio-cultural (established definition of the World Tourism Organization).

Some experts of tourism prefer to speak about sustainable tourism development rather than about sustainable tourism, the first referring to all aspects of development, and the second in some aspects and components of tourism - such as long distance air transport that can easily simply is not sustainable under current technologies, even with the use of best practices.

The main priorities for having a sustainable development regarding the ecotourism concept means: promoting the concept and development of ecotourism for the support of nature conservation, promoting the ecotourism concept and principles at the local, regional and national, promoting ecotourism as a tool for nature conservation, promoting the natural and traditional values that respect nature, as tourism attract and involves local communities in ecotourism services and infrastructure development, promoting the ecotourism as a tool to generate income for local communities, encouraging tour operators to use local resources, developing and maintaining a quality service system in ecotourism [10].

1. Needs for a Sustainable Tourism

The place of sustainable tourism is given by the role of this activity. Tourism is one of the industries that must be involved in sustainable development as an industry of resources, dependent on the natural and human potential, cultural heritage of a society. It is essential for tourism to be active in sustainable development issues and to cooperate with other industries in providing quality resources for all tourism activities. Tourism has become one of the phenomena in the contemporary era, and it is an important vector in the development of local communities, showing its impact on many levels, exerting positive influence on many socio-economic environment, given the negative aspects, especially on the natural. So, in this meaning, it must be ensured the sustainable development of tourism that have role balance preservation of natural heritage, socio-cultural and meeting the demands of tourists and local population in host communities [13].

Over the past decades, tourism has become the largest industry worldwide in terms of employment and share of global gross domestic products. The tourism industry has been very dynamic and fast growing over the past three decades. This sector has so far created opportunities in areas characterized by natural attractions, wildlife and wilderness habitats [1].

Sustainable development and its derivative, although intuitively appealing, widely adopted by international organizations and many governments, and enshrined in legislation, are concepts that have been much criticized because of their lack of precision and because of the difficulties that have been experienced with their implementation [23].

The need to conserve natural resources, cultural heritage and social equilibrium of the tourism destinations was understood by everyone, both internationally and nationally. International organizations and European institutions have addressed the issue and support the efforts made in this regard by the regional and local authorities, national and tourist industry. Of a great importance is also the fact that national policies for sustainable tourism development and the initiatives of local and regional authorities nowadays have a support from the part of the public and may be reinforced by the action of each tourist. In addition, tourism professionals, either in hotels or transport industry, have recognized that their activity affects the environment and the necessary infrastructure from multiple points of view and is therefore in their interest increase sustainable tourism development [19].

Sustainable development of tourism improves itself like a necessity that the authorities, communities, business and travel agents must respect based upon some guidelines principles [7]:

- the environment has intrinsic value, especially great for travel,
- tourism must be seen as a positive, complex task, which should benefit the environment, local communities and, of course, tourists,
- the relationship between environment and tourism can be developed so that the environment can support the tourist activity and long-term development of tourism, in turn, it must not lead to environmental degradation, but on the contrary, to the protection, preservation and improvement of it,
- development of tourism activity must comply with the characteristics of the place where it is taking place: ecological, social, economic, cultural, architectural,
- the development of tourism must always balance the needs of tourists and those of their hosts and destinations,
- the tourist industry, the Government, the authorities responsible for environmental protection and international agencies must comply with these principles and work together to implement them in practice.

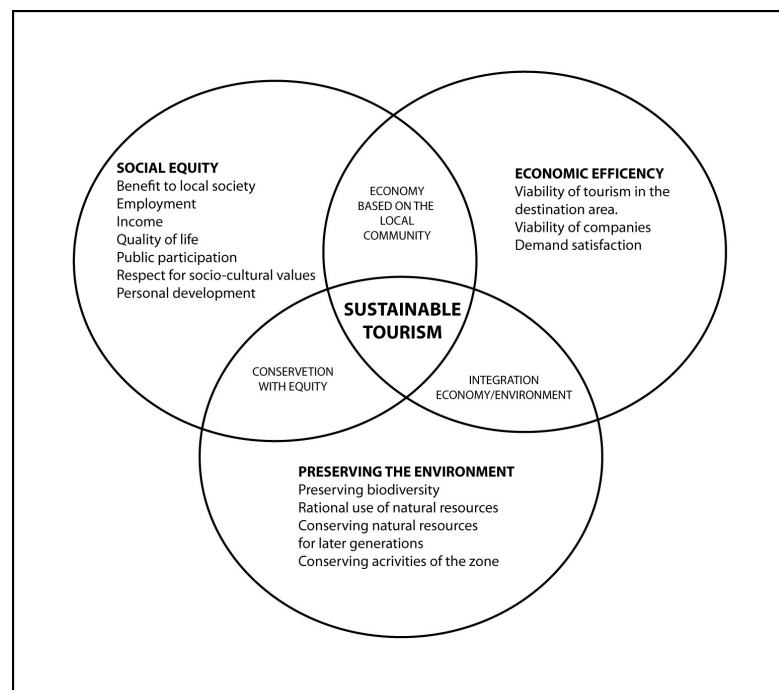


Figure no. 1 Sustainable development model
Source: [22 p. 552]

One of the most important objectives of sustainable tourism development should be to minimize the negative effects. This aim cannot be achieved only by upholding procedures for transport "friendly" with the environment and by transforming the existing means of transport which affects the environment as little as possible. Tourists must be aware of the problems and constraints of tourist destination and concerned. Therefore, they must request the information tour operators to adopt appropriate behaviour and to minimise any possible impact of their activities on the environment during your stay.

To truly protect the environment, tourists should meet the following requirements [19]:

- showing goodwill towards some degree of comfort, its destination received which means that existing resources are used only, indigenous cultures and economies are supported and natural resources are protected,
- agreeing to use public transport because transport with own car is one of the major sources of negative implications it has on tourism environment,
- proceeding to relaxation and afford your own free time, whereas knowledge of a culture and of a stranger environment takes time,
- showing interest and respect for local traditions and in general for the way of life of the locals,

- demonstrating enthusiasm for actively protecting the environment, i.e. to minimize the negative effects of recreational activities,
- being sensitive to the existing problems,
- reducing the frequency of journeys, by increasing the length of stay of each holiday, thus the number of travel and traffic caused by transport,
- promoting local products that give value to the region concerned, which means that the purchase of local products benefit the local economy and reduce traffic generated by transport.

Trying to conclude we can say that the achievement of sustainable tourism at any tourist area (rural, mountain or seaside) involves close cooperation between all the parties involved: Governments, local authorities, the regional offices, the hotel industry and transport, tour operators and tourists. All of whom have responsibilities in the realization of sustainable tourism and implicitly in the protection of the environment.

2. Rural Tourism and Eco-Tourism - Theirs Places in Sustainable Development of Tourism

The term rural development has appeared for the first time in the latter part of the 20th century, a process based on the following principles: the need to ensure consistency between economic globalization and environment, sustainable development and analyses of the economic appraisal of the mondo process of sustainable development on a time horizon as long. Rural development aims to increase individual productivity, sustainable community and institutional, which can result in higher income for individuals. Rural areas should be so organized and directed as to allow improvement of the level of development of the national economy, by exploiting its potential and well-being of residents of rural areas.

Rural areas still retain unspoiled traditional and spiritual values, especially the ethnographic, the socio-economic life and its environment, thus enabling the development of rural tourism, with a great future, being in a direct relationship with other forms of tourism [17].

In several European countries rural tourism is a relatively important sector of the tourism industry. Rural tourism can be defined as, at least, one overnight leisure trip to a place situated in a rural setting or in a setting outside cities and tourist centres, aiming to participate especially in other than urban activities (e.g. shopping). The clientele for rural tourism is often mostly domestic, although lots of efforts are targeted to improve rural tourism internationalization [18].

Tourism in rural areas, in addition to other forms of tourism, contribute to its support, providing the conditions necessary for processing travel tourism circuit in subsistence. Rural areas, respond not only to the cultural tourism motivation and knowledge, but also the other modern requirements: that of leisure in nature, which incidentally found in other countries.

Rural tourism is a form of tourism that takes place in rural areas and involve exploitation of natural and anthropogenic tourist resources of the rural area, and the conduct of social and economic activities that generate benefits for local communities [20].

In the next table we present the main differences between classic/standard tourism and rural tourism, sources adapted from Degan D. (2011) and Nistoreanu P.(2010).

Tabel no.1 Differences between classic/standard tourism and rural tourism

Classification criteria	Classic/standard tourism	Rural tourism
Main activities characteristics	Activities developed at national or international level	Family activities developed locally
Location of space built	High density commercial space built in, faced with an acute shortage of space	Low density in commercial space, has built itself into an open space
Resident population	Urban settlements involved in tourism activity have over 10,000 inhabitants	Rural settlements in practice rural tourism have under 10,000 inhabitants
Infrastructure	Infrastructure well shaped	The least developed infrastructure

Classification criteria	Classic/standard tourism	Rural tourism
Architecture	Building with modern architecture, and in general new	Constructions with local architecture, being generally old
Structure of tourist activities	Towns people activity is in its own right (the employment is full-time)	Complementary tourist activity of farming activities (jobs are mostly part-time)
The distance to the place of work	Considerable distances between residence and work	Approximation of the place of residence and activities of daily living
Tourist movement	Intense movement by attracting tourism by various segments of tourists	Low tourist movement by attracting certain segments of tourists
Seasonality	Classic tourism, being less affected by it	Sharp, rural tourism is influenced by departures and agricultural works
Relationship between host and tourists	Formal, impersonal relationships with tourists	Individualized, personal relationships with tourists
Tourist activities management	professional management	Rig Management

Source: [15, p.50]

By simply interposing carried out for us to state that, while tourism has classic, decreasing trends of industrialisation and holding tight warmth hospitality and stress city, rural tourism, the environment provides a relaxing, quiet. We can say that the environment influences the local color and atmosphere [15].

The concept of *eco-tourism* permits man to still comfort on the many benefits of nature, as well as to arrange, reconstitute, and revive what had been destroyed in the past [7].

Since its inception, *eco-tourism* has been applied only in protected natural areas, its action gradually expanded and on other forms of tourism. By its characteristics and propagated, *eco-tourism* differs from other forms of tourism by the proximity to nature, through a rational use of tourist resources [11].

In response to increased interest for the knowledge of nature, but also to the alarm signals coming from the most distant corners of the world, it has gradually outlined a new ethics of the journey called *eco-tourism* [13].

A form of materialisation and delivering sustainable tourism, the *eco-tourism* is defined by the most prestigious organization that deals with ecotourism [4], - T.I.E.S. (International Eco-tourism Society):” a responsible travel in natural areas, preserving the environment and sustain the well-being of the local population” [26].

Eco-tourism is a form of tourism in which the main motivation of the tourist and observation of nature and local traditions connected with nature and that must satisfy the following conditions: contribute to the conservation and protection of nature; use local human resources; to have educational character, cultivate respect for nature – awareness of tourists and local communities; have minimum negative impact on the natural and socio-cultural environment [15].

The number of those seeking holidays in nature, in rural areas, is on the rise across the globe. Tourism to the country, or in full nature, is ever desired a many money, but stressed, eager for return to the wild life in the rural communities. All these forms of tourism are called *eco-tourism*, and their development in Romania has just started [16].

While the details vary, most definitions of *eco-tourism* boil down to a special form of tourism that meets three criteria:

- a) it provides for environmental conservation;
- b) it includes meaningful community participation;
- c) it is profitable and can be self-sustained [25].

Table no. 2 Distinct characteristics between mass tourism and ecotourism

Characteristics of mass tourism	Characteristics of ecotourism
Large groups of visitors.	Small groups of visitors
Urban	Rural
Touristic general marketing activities	Eco-marketing activities.
Average prices for purposes of market penetration.	High price with purpose of filtering the market.
Impact on natural environment.	Little impact on the natural environment
Advanced control options	Limited possibilities of control
Management based on macroeconomic principles	Management based on local economic principles
Anonymous relationship between visitors and local community	Personalized relationships between visitors and local community
General development goals	Local development objectives
Behavior-oriented leisure activities / entertainment, opponents to education and training actions	Loyalty in the process of training and education for appropriate conduct for the natural environment
Intensive development of tourism facilities	Reduced development of tourism facilities

Source: [2 p. 70]

Sustainable development of ecotourism can be achieved through effective management, in order to satisfy, nowadays increasingly larger and more demanding tourist' needs or requirements [12].

3. Rural Tourism and Eco-Tourism – Guidelines for a Sustainable Development

The principles which underlie the development of a sustainable rural tourism are:

- sustainable use of touristic resources,
- maintaining the diversity of natural, cultural and social development of the countryside,
- agro tourism integration in the planning and development strategy for national, regional and local,
- sustaining the local councils in socio-economic development of the community, but also in the protection of nature and cultural values,
- the involvement of local communities in tourism sector by sustaining the initiative groups for the development and promotion of local tourism offer, to protect the environment and cultural assets,
- sustainable development of agro tourism must be supported by professional training, continuously high-performance, training of trainers from among the locals,
- marketing promotion among with agro tourism,
- research and monitoring the work of tourism activities and actions to protect and conserve the natural environment, as well as rural tourism resources.

Main reason for choosing rural tourist destinations is that the tourists want to enjoy the quality of the natural countryside, but also man-made. Maintaining the quality of the environment is a prerequisite for the zone to be attractive [21].

The guidelines of eco-tourism as they were laid down by the Tourism Laboratory who hosted a Sustainable Tourism Summit in Rhode Island – USA, are [3]:

- “First, does no harm”. It is basic to good destination stewardship. Do not abuse the product — the destination. Seek to avoid the ‘loved to death’ syndrome,
- Anticipate development pressures and apply limits and management techniques that sustain natural habitats, heritage sites, scenic appeal, and local culture,
- Conserve resources. Minimise pollution, waste, energy consumption, water usage, landscaping chemicals, and excessive nighttime lighting,
- Respect local culture and tradition. Visitors learn about and observe local etiquette. Residents learn how to deal with visitor expectations that may differ from their own,
- Aim for quality, not quantity. Measure tourism success not by sheer numbers of visitors, but by length of stay, distribution of money spent, and quality of experience.

These principles should be envisaged both for lovers of this form of tourism and service providers of such eco-touristic products.

Those presented are accompanied by a more and more accentuated tendency of the civilised world of living in good terms with the environment, of spending more time in nature, of being closer to all which is clean, alive and quiet [16].

Who are the eco tourists and what do they expect?

- they are between 30 and 59 years old
- they are highly educated people with a good social position
- they have above average incomes

Eco tourists usually expect: high quality services; professional local guides; small group tours (15 people maximum); educational programs; good and high quality food, prepared with local ingredients; quiet areas, far away from traffic; quality lodging, not necessarily deluxe, but clean and proper; environment conservation (they like to know that a part of the money they spent goes back into environment protection) [6].

Conclusions

Tourism is a social activity which involves an individual or group aiming travel to stay outside their usual environment within not too long period, for the purpose of satisfying leisure, business or other needs. Tourism has become a popular global activity. It brings in large amounts of income in payment for goods and services and creates opportunities for employment in the service industries associated with tourism (UNWTO, 2010).

Sustainable and responsible rural tourism development is unachievable without the application of ecological thinking. Consequently, tourism ecology naturally helps develop the tourism of rural areas based on local natural, social and cultural resources. Nevertheless, it is also an expectation that actors of the system, i.e. tourists must continue an active and responsibly sustainable practice [24].

The latter is relevant to a large extent to ecotourism. Unfortunately, for the last decade, the emphasis in tourism industry especially in terms of sea and mountain tourism in our country reveals an overexploitation of the natural resources. In such conditions an essential part of Romanian biodiversity is threatened for disappearance. This, in turn, could cause serious damages in ecotourism and other alternative tourism forms.

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