Strategic Role of Ecotourism for Romania's Regional Development

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Abstract

The issues of ecotourism and regional development have become major priorities for public policy makers across the globe as ecotourism may increase sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climate. The main goal of the Romanian tourism is to achieve global recognition for the quality of services and natural and cultural treasures currently available. Therefore, this study investigates the potential of ecotourism in Romania, which is one of the major advantages of the Romanian tourism, being chosen by 40% of all foreign visitors. The Romanian nature (yet) untouched by human intervention, rural traditions, more than 900 protected natural areas throughout the country and beautiful landscapes are only some of the Romanian ecotourism's treasures. Ecotourism, as an alternative tourism, involves visiting natural areas in order to learn, to study, or to carry out activities environmentally friendly, that is, a tourism based on the nature experience, which enables the economic and social development of local communities.

Key words: sustainable tourism, ecotourism, environment, nature, sustainable development, competitive cities and regions.

Introduction

The idea of adopting the concept of sustainable development in tourism occurred in the early 1990s, giving rise to sustainable tourism, a concept that was quickly accepted by all international and national organizations. Thus, in 1991 the concept of sustainable tourism was defined by the International Union for Nature Conservation, World Federation for Nature Protection, the European Federation of National and Natural Parks as: "the development of all forms of tourism, the tourism marketing and management that would respect the natural, social and economic integrity of the environment, ensuring the exploitation of natural and cultural resources also for future generations" (Istrate & Bran 1996: 258; Bran, Simion and Nistoreanu 2000: 13). From this definition it follows that any form of tourism should respect the principles of sustainable development, whether it is about ecotourism, green tourism, rural tourism or business tourism.

According to the World Tourism Organization, "the development of sustainable tourism meets the needs of present tourists and those of the host regions, simultaneously with protecting and increasing future chances and opportunities. It is seen as a way of managing all resources, in a way that the economic, social and aesthetic needs would be fully satisfied, while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological dimensions, biological diversity and the life system" (Stănciulescu 2004).
Sustainable tourism covers all forms and activities in the hospitality industry: conventional mass tourism, cultural tourism, mountain, seaside, spa, business, rural tourism, etc. These activities are based on the principles of sustainable tourism: (1) tourism activity should be initiated through the local community's own means, and the community must maintain the control over tourism development; (2) tourism should provide jobs to the residents, that would improve the local communities' quality of life and a balance between the already existing economic activities in the area and tourist activity must be achieved; (3) a code of practice for tourism at all levels (national, regional and local level) has to be established, based on already accepted international standards. Also, guidelines for tour operators, for monitoring the impact of various tourism activities and for the limits of acceptability for different areas, may be set; and (4) educational and training programs to improve the management in the area of protecting natural and cultural resources must be accomplished (Jamieson and Noble 2000).

**Ecotourism - the main type of sustainable tourism**

Recently, tourism industry development has focused on the natural and authentic cultural values (Bran, Simion and Nistoreanu 2000). According to the National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism (NIRDT 2009: 10), ecotourism actually represents the most valuable form of manifestation of sustainable tourism. The ecotourism focuses on environmental conservation and the education of tourists regarding environmental protection and conservation.

According to the Association of Ecotourism in Romania (AER, 2003), ecotourism is a form of tourism in which the main motivation for the tourist is the observation and appreciation of nature and local tradition in natural areas, and which must fulfil the following conditions: (1) contributes to nature conservation and protection; (2) supports the well-being of local people, stressing local ownership, as well as business opportunities for local people (especially in rural areas); (3) has an educational component that creates awareness about nature conservation, both for tourists and local communities; and (4) requires the lowest possible negative impact on the environment and on the socio-cultural component.

The following principles have been adopted and promoted by the Association of Ecotourism in Romania (AER, 2003), based on two international models: Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program, developed by the Ecotourism Association of Australia, and Nature's Best, the certification system of the Swedish Ecotourism Association. AER's approach is that these principles should be put into practice by those who offer ecotourism products as well as by those who plan the ecotourism-based development of an area.

Ecotourism takes place in natural areas and is based on tourists' direct and personal experience in nature.

Ecotourism contributes to a better understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of discovering and protecting nature and traditional local culture, for both visitors and the local community.

Ecotourism offers the best tourism practices from the point of view of nature protection and sustainable development. The ecotourism product is developed in such a way as to protect and highlight the natural environment in which it takes place.

Ecotourism actively contributes to the protection of natural areas. Ecotourism offers practical means of protection of natural areas (for example, financial help for the rehabilitation of natural areas, litter collection or financial contribution to nature conservation organizations).

Ecotourism contributes to the development of local communities in natural areas. Local benefits can be obtained by using local guides, staying in local guesthouses, buying local products or using local services.
Ecotourism must ensure the reduction of the negative impact on the local community visited and contribute to the conservation of local culture and traditions. Ecotourism activities offer at the same time a practical long-term contribution to these communities.

Ecotourism must respond to the tourists’ expectations. Potential eco-tourists have a high level of education and expectations, so the degree of satisfaction in terms of the ecotourism product is essential.

Ecotourism marketing offers visitors complete and responsible information which leads to an increase in their respect for the natural and cultural environment of the areas visited and to a higher degree of satisfaction of the tourists.

Ecotourism may be regarded from different perspectives related to different geographical areas. Thus, if in North America ecotourism is developing in virgin natural areas, in which human intervention is minimized, in Europe, where the landscape is generally related to human presence and the local community, there are quite close connections between ecotourism and rural tourism, the two forms of tourism being hardly separable from each other. In the last decade, a greater importance to natural landscapes, as support for biodiversity and ecotourism, has started to be given at the European level (NIRDT 2009: 11).

Figure 1 reveals the position of ecotourism within the tourism market. Ecotourism appears as a tourism submarket in natural areas, while having strong links with cultural and rural tourism.

**Figure 1:** Ecotourism as a market segment

![Ecotourism Market Segment Diagram](source: Wood, 2002)

Ecotourism is a type of tourism based on the experience of nature, which involves visiting natural areas in order to learn, to study, or to carry out activities environmentally friendly, enabling the economic and social development of local communities (Niculescu 2008). Ecotourism may include the following activities: (1) adventure activities (e.g. rafting, canoeing, equestrian tourism on predetermined routes, ski touring, bike trips on arranged routes, etc.); (2) hiking/organized walks, with guide; (3) tours for observing nature (flora, fauna); (4) trips for the experience of nature conservation activities; and (5) trips to local communities (visiting cultural sites, traditional farm visits, watching traditional cultural events, consumption of traditional food, purchase of traditional non-food products, etc.) (NIRDT 2009: 11).

For such ways of leisure activities there is a need for local trained guides, low traffic areas and gourmet cuisine recipes for each destination. The World Tourism Organization's sociological profile of a "typical" ecotourist includes people between 30 and 60 years of age, with high education and above-average income, most commonly from Western Europe and...
even more specifically from countries such as Sweden, Germany, UK and France (Niculescu 2008).

Through ecotourism, the reduction of negative effects on the local and natural environment, as well as on the human population is attempted. Ecotourism areas are considered areas of major interest, with special rules that have beneficial effects on the traditional lifestyle of local people. This type of tourism can promote an interaction between local people and tourists, as well as a real interest in protecting the natural areas, not only in receiving zones, but also in the emitting zones.

**Potential of Romania’s development regions in the field of ecotourism**

According to the National Strategy for Ecotourism Development (NIRDT 2009: 24), Romania has a highly varied natural capital. Due to physical and geographical conditions, which include mountains, plains, major river networks, wetlands and an extensive delta system (Danube Delta), Romania is the only country on the continent in whose territory 5 of the 11 bio-geographic European regions (alpine, continental, pannonian, steppic and pontic) are present. Our country has a high biological diversity, expressed both in terms of ecosystems and species level. In addition, the lack of mechanization in the forestry sector and the weak economic development led to a lower exploitation of resources than in most other areas in Europe.

The natural and semi-natural ecosystems cover 47% of the country's surface. Moreover, 783 types of habitats (13 coastal habitats, 143 specific habitats of wetlands, 196 specific pastures and hay fields habitats, 206 forest habitats, 90 specific habitats of dunes and rocky areas, and 135 farmland habitats) were identified in 261 areas analyzed throughout the country. Due to the geographical position of Romania, flora and fauna have Asian influences from the north, Mediterranean from South and continental European components from the northwest. In Romania, 3700 plant species have been identified, out of which 23 are declared natural monuments, 39 are endangered, 171 are vulnerable and 1253 are rare.

In order to preserve the biological diversity, numerous protected areas (more than 7% of the country's surface) have been established at the level of the development regions, and the future expansion of this network is taken into account.

Ecotourism has begun to develop in Romania in the past ten years, now attracting over 20,000 visitors every year, only among the customers of the AER members (Trandafir 2010). Foreign tourists who prefer ecotourism are aged between 30 and 60 years, have higher education and appreciate the nature. They often have specific interests (studying birds or some type of animal), and some of them just want to feel good in nature, away from the big crowded cities.

Most tourists come from the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria and Switzerland and they choose long routes, of at least one week. Romanian tourists interested in ecotourism represent about 20% of the total, and choose short-term programs. Most visitors come between May and October, when the weather is good for walking. Otherwise, special programs for winter are being arranged - hiking with snow rackets or ski touring, sleigh rides drawn by horses, participation in the traditions of Christmas or Easter. Tourists pay between 70 and 100 euros per day, the price including accommodation, meals, travel and guide service.

According to the AER, the economic impact of the ecotourism programs conducted by tour operators (members of the AER in Romania's development regions) is obviously increasing from 0.95 million euros in 2004 to about 1.6 million euros in 2008 (NIRDT 2009: 6). It is to mention that the impact at local level is well above the average of classical tourism. In the case of the AER members, about 80-90% of the expenditure made by tourists are in the area of the tourist program, predominant in rural areas. Given that the above data refers only
to a total of 16 operators, members of the AER, quite concentrated territorially, Romania's huge potential in developing this type of tourism can be inferred.

"ECO" projects carried out by Romanian cities

Cities, the centers for innovation, efficiency, investment and productivity, but also the main cause of climate change, nowadays must assume an important role in addressing environmental problems. Since more than half of humanity lives in cities, sustainable development and global climate change should be sought in ecological transformation of cities (Steiner 2009). Therefore, the campaigns and projects carried out by urban managers in order to reach an "eco" development of regions, cities and rural areas around are becoming extremely important these days.

The program "Green Capital of Romania"

The campaign "Green Capital of Romania" (Figure 2), one of the most extensive environmental initiatives in our country, is a competition for Romanian cities and is part of the social responsibility program "The Green Umbrella", released by Tuborg Romania in the summer of 2007, in partnership with the Ministry of Environment and Forests.

Figure 2: The logo of the program "Green Capital of Romania"


The campaign's objectives are to convince Romanian citizens of the importance and environmental programs and the active participation of people in them. The campaign wishes to encourage both local government officials and citizens to initiate or participate in environmental projects which can improve the quality of life in Romania's major cities (Popescu and Corbos 2010: 128).

This initiative rewards the municipalities that have the most efficient initiatives for the reduction of pollution (of any kind); development of green spaces or the forestation of some areas, selective collection and recycling of waste, empowerment and education of citizens on environmental protection, citizens' involvement in environmental projects, care for protected areas in the county (if they exist), use of organic products, and development of ecological tourism.

In 2010, Brasov won the title "The Green Capital of Romania", and the city will be allowed to use it throughout the whole year 2011. The main advantages of Brasov were local development policies and programs of the past three years, leading to environmental health and protection, but also to the inhabitants' attitude towards nature. For example, Brasov had the largest number of volunteers in the project "Let's Do It Romania". The introduction of the "Local register of green spaces", the implementation of some alternative and sustainable energy policies by getting involved in the European association Energy-Cities, the selective waste collection, or the rehabilitation, protection and conservation of the biodiversity in the protected area "Tampa Mountain" have played a role in earning this award.
The next competition will take place between May 25th and December 1st of 2011, and it is open to all cities in Romania. Cities can apply for one of the three categories, depending on the number of inhabitants: first category (less than 50,000 inhabitants); second category (between 50,001 and 199,999 inhabitants); and third category (more than 200,000 inhabitants). The award ceremony "Green Capital of Romania" will take place in January 2012 in Bucharest.

The program currently enjoys the support of over 1,200 volunteers from 32 counties and over 950 blog partners. In addition, more than 120,000 stickers with the message "I do not throw garbage on the street" were distributed through various means.

ECO directions for the development of Bucharest

A. Bucharest's ecological development strategy

In April 2009, Bucharest City Hall launched the first green development strategy aiming to improve the quality of life and citizens' comfort, and to put into action projects that would ensure the city's development based on the current environmental rules and standards and according to European trends.

The local authorities have decided to launch this strategy based on a research project which has revealed that Bucharest's inhabitants are very interested in the quality of the environment in which they live. Thus, 9 out of 10 citizens are convinced that environmental problems have a major impact on the quality of life. The main environmental problem faced is pollution according to 54% of the respondents, and dirt according to 37% of the respondents.

The main "eco" measures for Bucharest are the following: (1) constraining individuals and businesses to have at least 30% green space of the total terrain when constructing a new building; (2) creating eight underground parking lots; (3) setting up bicycle paths in two of the most important parks in Bucharest (Tineretului Park and Herastrau Park); (4) financing and launching the second construction phase for the Wastewater Treatment Plant in Glina; and (5) establishing the Green Patent (document that sets the minimum environmental standards of compliance with throughout Bucharest).

B. The project "ECO Bucharest 2015"

In October 2009, the project "ECO Bucharest 2015" was launched, as an initiative of a team of architects named Space Syntax (company specialized in urban development strategies), in partnership with the Cultural Foundation Art Promo (NGO acting as a cultural interface between Romania and the West, by organizing events and exhibitions) and The Ark - Stock Exchange for Creative Goods. The objective of the project is to establish a "backbone" of ECO development of the city, through innovative rehabilitation of an area of 1,000 hectares along Dambovita's axis, encompassing Izvor Park and Morii Lake (Figure 3).

The project "Eco Bucharest 2015" is based on three components: (1) the first one aims at the regeneration of Morii Lake (Figure 4), Dambovita River and the residual space around the Parliament; (2) the second component is focused on the economic and social revitalization by capitalizing on the potential of a polytechnic platform, research institutes, Botanical Garden, and the Palace of Parliament; and (3) the last component is a comprehensive approach of cultural promotion through the Liveland Project and Liveland Festival, that aim at building a brand with an international value. According to the promoters, Liveland is a cultural platform supporting urban revitalization in an ecological sense.
Bucharest needs this concept to complete or correct its image, mainly turning it into ECO or, more explicitly, to encourage the adoption of the ecological design and engineering. Thus, a new public space will be developed on the Dambovita River, where (public or private) investments will be based on principles sustainable development. Dambovita River will be framed between two poles: Morii Lake, focused on eco technology, which will have a role in research and public education, and the other, Palace of Parliament, with a role in reinventing a strong brand that is still linked to the past, and not to the future.

The proponents of this project want to draw attention to the fact that there is no vision of the city. Even if the project is never realized, it still remains an example of what could be done if we had an adequate legal framework and political will (Ivanov 2009).

**Conclusions**

This paper has revealed that there is a need for sustainable development in tourism, and the connection between tourism and environment is much stronger than in other sectors. Tourism has often created negative economic, social and ecological effects, and they may be diminished through professional urban management. Recreational activities may be developed within natural areas and may bring significant revenues both to those who manage them, and to the local communities. Tourism is one of the few economic sectors through which sustainable development of these areas can be achieved, and ecotourism is the most accepted form of sustainable tourism for any country or region of the world.
Romania has a significant potential for developing ecotourism, due to its physical and geographical conditions, its biological diversity, as well as due to the lack of mechanization in the forestry sector. The campaigns and projects carried out by urban managers in order to reach an "eco" development of regions, cities and rural areas around are becoming extremely important these days. Programs such as "The Green Capital of Romania" or "ECO Bucharest 2015" are only examples of projects necessary for developing sustainable tourism of cities and regions. Ecotourism has a strategic role for Romania's regional development and is a leading point on the political agenda because it may enable economic and social development of the local communities.

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References


