



MAIN STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS OF ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN ROMANIA

Doru Marian TUDORACHE¹, Victor TIMOTIN², Alina Camelia CÂRLOGEA³, Marioara MUSTEAȚĂ-PAVEL⁴

¹ National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism – INCDT, Bucharest, Romania, E-mail: tudoru@incdt.ro

² National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism – INCDT, Bucharest, Romania, E-mail: victor@incdt.ro

³ National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism – INCDT, Bucharest, Romania, E-mail: alinacarlogea@incdt.ro

⁴ National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism – INCDT, Bucharest, Romania, E-mail: pmioara@incdt.ro

Abstract *Ecotourism implies a great opportunity to develop areas that have the necessary resources and conditions, a safe alternative for integrating natural landscapes and biodiversity in tourism activity. Romania has an important ecotourism heritage, with great potential for capitalization. However, this domain faces many problems related to poor cooperation at the local level, poor development of ecotourism infrastructure, lack of qualified workforce, insufficient promotion. The main priorities for the development of ecotourism in Romania aim to improve the institutional and associative framework, development of visitor infrastructure, education and awareness of the visitors and the local communities, human resource development, local business development, nature protection and conservation, marketing and promotion of ecotourism product.*

Key words:

sustainable development, ecotourism, protected areas, strategy, destination management organisation

Introduction

Current principles of sustainable tourism development in protected areas and surrounding areas has led to the emergence of ecotourism, as a distinct form of tourism, designed to respect the integrity of landscapes, ecological biodiversity, according with the requirements of certain segments of tourists who wish to spend their holidays in nature, and also to create opportunities to develop local communities.

Since these resources are more varied and complex, but mostly unspoiled by human activities, the tourist interest for them is higher and tourism activities it generates are more valuable and more attractive, answering to several tourist motivations.

Despite the fact that our country has a distinct ecotourism heritage, with high potential for capitalization, the ecotourism is still a segment faced many problems such as: low cooperation at the local level, modest promotion at national and international levels, poor development of ecotourism infrastructure, labor migration, a legal framework that does not answer in the proper manner to the needs of the local services etc.

1. The contribution of ecotourism to the development of local communities from the protected areas

Protected areas have important advantages for the development of recreational activities that can bring significant benefits to their managers and for the local communities. Although it is quite difficult to measure, and often the results are hardly noticeable in the short term, tourism is one of the few economic sectors through which can achieve the sustainable development of these areas.

The contribution that this form of tourism can have at the local communities level is widely accepted worldwide. Through the United Nations resolution dated 21 December 2002, "Promoting Ecotourism for Poverty Eradication and Environmental Protection", members are required to adopt policies that promote ecotourism, highlighting the "positive impact on income generation, job creation and education, and thus, on the fight against poverty". The resolution recognizes that "ecotourism creates significant opportunities for conservation, protection and sustainable use of

biodiversity and of natural areas by encouraging both the host communities and tourists to preserve and respect the natural and cultural heritage".¹

The development of ecotourism activities in local communities and in the protected areas involves a number of *socio-economic benefits*², including:

- *stimulates local job creation* (directly in the tourism sector or related areas). By increasing incomes and living standards for the local people, younger generations are encouraged to remain in the community;
- *stimulates the local economy through infrastructure development and tourism services* (accommodation, catering, transport, recreational facilities, souvenirs, guide services);
- *stimulates the rural economy by creating or increasing demand for agricultural products* necessary to ensure tourist services;
- *boosting infrastructure development*, with equal benefits for the local population;
- *stimulates the development of peripheral regions*, through capital insertion;
- *stimulates improving intercultural relations* in a region. Tourists often seek to know the traditions and specific customs of an ethnographic region and the host community is thus motivated to revive popular traditions;
- in the conditions of a natural development, tourism can lead to *self-financing mechanisms* for administrators of protected areas as a tool for their conservation;
- *supports the conservation activities*, by persuading governments and the public on the importance of natural areas.

In Romania, according to the Association of Ecotourism in Romania (AER), *the economic impact of ecotourism programs run by tour operators AER members, have obviously increased from about 1.6 million in 2008 to about 3 million in 2014*. This growth is generated by increasing number of AER members that run ecotourism programs, and by increasing volumes of tourists that require ecotourism programs. But what is remarkable is that the economic impact at local level is significantly higher than the average of the classic tourism. Regarding AER members, *over 50% of the tourist expenditures remain in the deployment area of the tourism program*, mainly in the rural areas.

Considering that the above data refers to a small number of economic operators, AER members (14 tour operators and 10 guesthouses in 2014), quite concentrated in terms of territory, *it can be deduce the huge potential that Romania plays in the development of ecotourism*.

2. Ecotourism recognition at government level in Romania

In Romania, the ecotourism is widely recognized - from government level to private level. The ecotourism is known as a form of tourism specific to the rural areas, from the communities with agricultural tradition, where flora, fauna, social customs and lifestyle of people from the visited areas are the primary attractions³.

A nationally recognized definition⁴, adopted after the UNWTO definition is: *"the ecotourism is a form of tourism based on the observation and awareness of the nature value and local traditions and which must meet the following conditions:*

- a) to contribute to the conservation and protection of nature;*
- b) to use local human resources;*
- c) to have educational character, respect for nature - awareness of tourists and local communities;*
- d) to have minimal negative impact on the natural and socio-cultural environment".*

In recent years, the government has acknowledged this opportunity and has made important steps in the recognition of this form of tourism and in a coherent development of this area:

- the Government Decision no. 230/2003 regarding the delimitation of biosphere reserves, national parks and natural parks and the establishment of their administrations, established the need for a strategy for development of ecotourism in protected areas, according with the principles of biodiversity conservation and sustainable use of natural resources;
- in 2004, the Ministry of Transport, Construction and Tourism has developed the guide "Ecotourism Strategy of Romania", a first step for the achievement of the future strategy;
- in 2005, at the initiative of the Ministry of Transport, Construction and Tourism, an UNWTO consultant (Ghislain Dubois) has conducted a technical assistance report for the elaboration of the ecotourism strategy of Romania;
- in the Strategy of Tourism Development in Romania - period 2007-2013, conducted by the National Authority for Tourism (2006), the ecotourism was analyzed separately, along with other forms of tourism such as mountain tourism, spa tourism, coastal tourism, cultural tourism, business tourism, rural tourism and religious tourism;

- one of the objectives of the Master Plan for National Tourism Development 2007-2026 is to support the development of ecotourism in the Danube Delta, national parks, reserves and rural areas;
- in the Government Decision no. 120/2008 and Government Decision no. 314/2009 on the approval of "The annual marketing and promotion program" and "The annual program for tourism products development" are summarized several actions of sustainable tourism development, including: preparation and finalization of the ecotourism strategy in protected areas, awareness activities of the importance of sustainable tourism development, updating the tourist classification system in Romania, reducing pollution in the tourism industry etc.;
- in 2009, the National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism (INCDT) has conducted for the Ministry of Tourism (now the National Authority for Tourism - ANT) the first "National Strategy for Ecotourism Development in Romania", strategy which was updated in 2015.

3. Priorities for the ecotourism development in Romania

The National Strategy for Ecotourism Development was carried out based on a rich bibliographic documentation, the latest information in the field of protected areas in Romania and abroad, in conjunction with data obtained from the stakeholders. Throughout the realization of this work, the staff has collaborated with representatives of the National Authority for Tourism, the Association of Ecotourism in Romania, the Ministry of Environment, Water and Forests, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Academy of Economic Studies (Department of Tourism and Services), the RNP ROMSILVA (Protected Areas Service), the National Association of Rural, Ecological and Cultural Tourism (ANTREC), the National Association of Travel Agencies in Romania (ANAT), with representatives of national and natural parks from the country, etc.

Following this process, it was concluded that in the future it should develop and recognize at national level certain ecotourism destinations. These zones should have a unitary, coherent and nature-based image, provide a variety of tourism products falling within the destination image and which promote a sustainable management. In addition, at the destination level it should be a real support for local communities, awareness and information activities of the tourists and locals regarding the natural character of the area and

concrete measures will be implemented for nature conservation.

Therefore, the **vision** of the ecotourism strategy is the affirmation of natural and cultural values of Romania, by the creation and promotion of a network of ecotourism destinations, with nationally and internationally notoriety, which will help to improve the quality of life in local communities and the conservation of natural and cultural resources.

The main priorities on the future development of the ecotourism in Romania can be summarized in seven areas:

a. The institutional and associative framework

Within this domain, the main priorities are: national and international recognition of the criteria for designation of ecotourism destinations; identifying and counselling other zones wishing to implement this concept and evaluation of those destinations that have already started this process; creating destination management organizations (DMO), integrating these DMOs into a network, with the aim of better representation of their interests at national level; creating a package of measures to support the management of these structures. It also envisages the strengthening of the role that the protected area plays locally and of the role that the ecotourism plays in national, regional and local tourism policy. In addition, it is necessary to create some associations of small local producers, with the aim of better representation of their interests.

b. Ecotourism infrastructure and spatial planning

Protected areas will obtain a real value in tourism only if they are organized for visitors, contributing thereby to the creation of a competitive ecotourism offer. It turned out that a deficient organization (or lack thereof) of these sensitive areas exposes them to degradation, caused by tourism pressure (continuous and oversized flows of tourists), bringing irreversible damage for nature.

There are big differences between destinations and although in many of these have been done some visiting infrastructure investments, in some cases there is still a precarious level in terms of infrastructure for ecotourism. The main priorities identified are: development of "light" visiting infrastructure (installation of information panels, tourism indicators, arrangement of thematic trails, redevelopment of tourist trails, development of equestrian, cyclo-tourist or water trails, building animal observatories, resting areas).

Also, where necessary, will be developed: visitor centers for major protected areas (at the most frequented gateways), tourist information point(s),

tourist destinations (enhancement of tourist attractions), recreational / sport facilities (at the border of protected area or in its sustainable development area).

In the destinations, certain measures are required in order to maintain the traditional architecture and to limit the urbanization process (ie. creation of architectural guides specific to the destinations, creation of best practices guides, development of local urban planning regulations, through which will be detailed some rules concerning the type of materials, construction techniques and general appearance of buildings, as well as revision of General Urban Plans for localities within ecotourism destinations).

c. Education and awareness

Public awareness and education are important components in the management process of the protected areas and ecotourism destinations. The education facilitates an awareness of that behavioural changes towards responsibility, participation, involvement in specific ecotourism activities are possible and that there are other ways of organizing specific activities in this field. Education and awareness activities regarding the importance of nature conservation, as well as understanding and respecting of ecotourism principles, should start from local communities and visitors, but they have to continue at central and local government level and economic agents' level. These actions will be initiated in the short term and will be continued in the medium and long term.

d. Human resources development

Human resources are essential for tourism development, in general, and for ecotourism, in particular. Furthermore, in order to create and develop ecotourism destinations is needed well-trained human resources, able to face with the problems that may occur over time, to anticipate the future development directions and minimize the negative effects induced by economic, social and political environment. Human resources development aims to improve the capacities, skills and performances of human resources directly or indirectly involved in ecotourism activities, through learning and career development. The actions developed at this level aim the training of the staff from DMOs, protected areas administrations, tourism and travel-related services (accommodation, catering, travel agencies) and other people engaged in ecotourism or related activities to improve their knowledge, attitude, the overall quality of their work.

e. Business development and local development

One of the main requirements of ecotourism is boosting local communities and encouraging them in creating comprehensive and complex ecotourism

product offers. Therefore, it aims stimulating the local population and small business to develop ecotourism quality products. Among them, the utmost importance should be given to traditional customs, as a form of preservation and perpetuation of cultural and local identity. In addition, local communities and small private entrepreneurs should be stimulated and encouraged to develop recreational, accommodation and catering activities. All of these will contribute in creating unique ecotourism products, nationally and internationally recognized.

Revision and transparency of legislation for small businesses in rural areas are priorities identified for encouraging their entry into legality.

f. Nature conservation and protection

The ecotourism is heavily dependent on its environmental and from this perspective, it is essential to preserve unspoiled natural elements. In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to establish some mechanisms for financing the management of protected areas and ecotourism destinations, and also to create additional financial funds to support conservation activities (Vincent & Thompson, 2002), funds created through active participation of tourists and economic entities of the destinations. It is also necessary to implement environmental policies at the destination level to encourage green practices and achieve tighter control over those activities with a negative effect on destinations and protected areas. At the same time is necessary development of regulations on the tourist transport in the destinations, promoting public transport and alternative means of transport, and extension of the forms of protection and security.

Furthermore, the implementation of a visitor management technique and its introduction in the management plan of the protected area will lead to a more efficient planning of visits and nature protection.

g. Marketing and promotion

For the development of ecotourism products it should be considered that in general, the ecotourists have a high level of education and therefore, their expectations are much higher. So, the development of an ecotourism product to satisfy these expectations is essential.

The ecotourism products must have a proper marketing, which should lead to realistic expectations from visitors. This involves providing complete and responsible information to customers, conducive to the enhancement of the natural and cultural environment of the visited areas and the degree of satisfaction of tourists.

Among the identified priorities that should be taken we mention: monitoring of tourist traffic and tourists

satisfaction in destinations; developing of some research activities of the national and international market, achieving a database containing all researches results, which offer access to all the organizations involved in this area; creating integrated ecotourism products/programs offers, in order to improve the ecotourism experience and a slower consumption of resources; implementing of a marketing strategies, creation of tourism brands and development of tourism promotion campaigns in each destination; creation of a national ecotourism brand and promotion of the country as ecotourism destination.

Conclusions

Romania has to make the transition from promoting isolated ecotourism products carried out by parks administrations or specialized tour operators, to the development of ecotourism destinations, which will offer an integrated ecotourism product, created by partnerships made by local stakeholders (park administration, local government, local communities, private investors) and promoted through the effort of the DMOs (that will be created locally) and central public authorities.

In principle, these destinations could be developed on the structure of national and natural parks or biosphere reservations, but ecotourism destinations can also be created in other natural areas where the traditional way of life was preserved unaltered (eg. Natura 2000 sites).

Bibliography

1. Higgins-Desbiolles F., 2009, *Indigenous ecotourism's role in transforming ecological consciousness*, Journal of Ecotourism, vol. 8 (2), pp. 144 – 160;
2. Jim C.Y., 2000, *Environmental changes associated with mass urban tourism and nature tourism development in Hong Kong*, The Environmentalist, vol. 20 (3), pp. 233-247;
3. Manea G., 2000, *Zone și arii protejate și valorificarea lor în turism*, Bucharest, CREDIS Publishing House;
4. Vincent V., Thompson W., 2002, *Assessing Community Support and Sustainability for Ecotourism Development*, Journal of Travel Research, vol 41 (2), pp 153-160;

5. Ministerul Transporturilor, Construcțiilor și Turismului, Autoritatea Națională pentru Turism (2004), *Strategia de Ecoturism a României – Cadru teoretic de dezvoltare*, București;
7. INCDT, *National Strategy for Ecotourism Development in Romania*, Bucharest, 2009;
8. INCDT, *National Strategy for Ecotourism Development in Romania 2016-2020*, Bucharest, 2015;
9. UNWTO, *Master Plan for National Tourism Development 2007 – 2026*, Bucharest, 2007;
10. UNWTO, *Technical assistance for the elaboration of the ecotourism strategy of Romania* (Final report), 2005;
11. UNEP, *Green Economy and Trade. Trends, Challenges and Opportunities*, 2013, (<http://www.unep.org/greeneconomy/Portals/88/GETReport/pdf/FullReport.pdf>);
12. *** G.D. no. 230/2003 concerning the delimitation of biosphere reservations, national parks, natural parks and of their administration structure;
13. *** G.D. no. 120/2008 and G.D. no. 314/2009 on the approval of the annual marketing and promotion program and annual tourism product development program
14. *** Emergency Ordinance no. 195/2005 on environmental protection;
15. *** data provided by the Association of Ecotourism in Romania.

¹ UNEP, *Green Economy and Trade. Trends, Challenges and Opportunities*, 2013, pag 275 (<http://www.unep.org/greeneconomy/Portals/88/GETReport/pdf/FullReport.pdf>)

² G. Manea, *Zone și arii protejate și valorificarea lor în turism*, University of Bucharest, 2000

³ Master Plan for National Tourism Development 2007 – 2026, p. 314

⁴ definition recognized by the Association of Ecotourism in Romania and adopted by the Emergency Government Ordinance no. 195/2005 on environmental protection.