

An overview of environmental education initiatives in the international and Romanian tourism

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Abstract: *Environmental education in the tourism field has benefited in recent years from the attention of various specialists, due to its potential influence on raising individual awareness about environmental issues, as well as on their environmentally friendly attitudes and behaviors, both at home and in a holiday setting. Given these issues, this paper aims to achieve an overview of some of the existing environmental education initiatives in tourism, both internationally and in Romania.*

Key-words: *environmental education, tourism, initiatives.*

1. Introduction

Education is an essential tool for achieving sustainable development and solving environmental problems (Jickling and Spork 1998; McKeown 2002; Thathong 2010). Environmental education is a process that recognizes the value and clarifies many concepts in order to develop skills and attitudes necessary to understand and appreciate the relationships between man, culture and the environment. Environmental education includes decision-making practice and the formulation of a code of conduct on environmental quality (Bălăceanu 2013).

The concept of "Education for Sustainable Development" (ESD) was first defined as "education that allows people to acquire the values, knowledge and skills to participate in decisions about how individual and collective actions, both locally and globally, will improve quality of life without damaging the environment "(Aziz et al. 2012). ESD goal is to make individuals and communities understand the complex nature of the natural and built environment resulting from the interaction of biological, physical, social, economic and cultural issues (UNESCO-UNEP 1978).

In the tourism field, sustainable education is of particular importance as it helps to inform individuals, but also to increase their awareness on environmental issues, while exerting a significant influence on their environmentally-friendly

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attitudes and behaviors. Based on these considerations, the aim of this study is to investigate some of the environmental education initiatives in tourism, internationally and in Romania.

2. Literature review

Sustainable development is defined as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (WCED 1987, 43; Abu-Goukh et al. 2013; Al-Rawahy 2013). A more comprehensive definition of sustainable development includes the environment, people and economy, and the interactions between them (Abu-Goukh et al. 2013; Benkari 2013).

The main cause of existing environmental problems in the world is the lack of information regarding ecosystems. For example, in the case of Turkey (a developing country, like Romania), one of the reasons underlying the emergence of environmental problems is the lack of public awareness about the environment and people's participation in actions to support it. Hence, the importance of understanding the purpose of environmental education (Hamalosmanoglua 2012).

The purpose determined by the United Nations for sustainable development is to integrate education into all curricula of values such as "sustainable development", but also to stimulate the development of changes in people's behavior. Various specialists (Miller and Kato 2006; Davis 2009; McGregor 2009) have tried to achieve this goal through the importance they have given to the integration of sustainable development issues in education today. McGregor (2007) outlines the imperative need for the reconceptualization of individuals' environmental education. In this sense, four elements were considered, namely society, economy, culture and environment (Clugston 2004; McGregor 2010).

According to the Tbilisi Declaration (UNESCO 1977), ESD includes five components, namely: awareness, knowledge, attitudes, skills and participation. Based on these components, the education of the teacher is a very important requirement since they will be the ones that provide ecological education of pupils/students (Hamalosmanoglua 2012).

In the current context of globalization and the global economic crisis, the greatest challenges of education institutions are linked to their capacity to promote social values and offer pupils/students a sustainable education (Teodoreanu 2014). School, as a provider of education, is the ideal place to provide pupils/students knowledge and skills, but also to develop their positive attitudes towards sustainable development (Alwi et al. 2012; Aziz et al. 2012; Teodoreanu 2014).

In the education system, education is dominated by a mechanical paradigm. If you attach importance to education for sustainability content, education attaches importance to sustainable values and skills acquired, promoting learning for change. In most schools in Romania, the main difficulty is the transition from education to

the multidisciplinary cross-disciplinary education for sustainability or sustainable education (Szitar 2014). Therefore, the main problem to be solved is to integrate all these components into school curricula, overcoming the barriers that may arise at different levels (individual, social, institutional).

Environmental education is an ongoing process. Despite its objectives, the means of implementing it are still unsatisfactory, as the impact of education is not sustainable (Urker et al. 2012). An example of good practice on environmental education is the University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), which is committed to sustainable development since 1994 by establishing the Institute for Environment and Development which conducts research on the environment (Derahim et al. 2012).

In order to achieve sustainable development in the future it is necessary to include in the school curricula certain disciplines which are based on interdisciplinary sustainable development. However, there are many obstacles in achieving this. Many European universities promote sustainable development in their teaching processes, allowing the introduction of compulsory courses, multidisciplinary courses and cross-disciplinary ones. Curricular reform should be a priority for higher education institutions wishing to integrate the concept of sustainability into their programs (Szitar 2014).

Developing the ability to identify environmental problems, to make decisions, to implement solutions to prevent and resolve the issues identified cannot be achieved only through education for sustainable development. The introduction and use of the concept of sustainable development/sustainable in the school curricula of educational institutions in Romania is a sine qua non requirement for ensuring economic growth and social development. In Romania, relatively few studies have focused on the environmental education of young people. Some of these studies consider implementing education for sustainable development among primary school children (Marcus 2011). Other studies have focused on topics related to the environmental opinions and attitudes on a healthy natural environment of pupils, students or employees from different companies (Olteanu 2012). But most of the studies identified are methodological guides for teachers in primary education (James 2007), which examine environmental education in the context of voluntary environmental protection (Nedelcu et al. 2003) or consist of contests in elementary schools or kindergartens (Stoian et al. 2010).

Education and training are vital to the tourism industry in terms of providing a foundation of knowledge and study for those young people who wish to enter the tourism industry as a career; continuing professional development is also vital for those already employed in the tourism sector (Horner and Swarbrooke 2004, 261).

Tourism education is an important link to the national education. Also, studies show that practicing various forms of tourism determines the development of positive behaviours, creative and innovative, which contributes to society development, in general. In this respect, a new form of tourism occurs and develops:

the educational tourism. In Romania, the supply of tourism courses has grown considerably over the past two decades. Such growth has been fuelled by the rapid expansion of the industry and the recognition by governments that tourism significantly contributes to local and national economies, fact proven by the record revenues obtained worldwide in 2012 (Arionesei et al. 2014).

3. An overview of international and Romanian environmental education initiatives

Investigations conducted on organizations involved in educating the public on measures to be taken to protect the environment in the context of consumption of tourist products and services from different destinations reveal an increase in their concerns in this area. This is demonstrated by the large number of associations, projects, guides, etc. existing both internationally and in Romania which have been created in order to increase people's awareness of the importance of protecting the environment, and to encourage greater involvement of their environmentally friendly activities in different tourist destinations. Some of these organizations, projects and guidelines which we identified are presented below.

Mountain Riders is a French non-profit organization and it works to inform and to raise awareness of all the actors of the mountain on environmental issues and for the promotion of sustainable development in the mountains. Also, it informs the general public on attitudes to adopt, at home and on the mountain; concerning waste, transport, water usage, energy and sports, raising children's awareness, raising professionals' awareness on climate change, ecological footprint and sustainable development. The main events this organisation has realised so far are: annual slope cleanings by picking up waste under the lifts; an eco festival, an eco guide to mountain resorts to evaluate resorts actions in favour of sustainable development in France and all over the world for customers to choose their resort on sustainable criteria; an eco guide to mountain gear, an eco guide to events, national charter in favour of sustainable development in mountain resorts; a concrete agenda for the 21th century, to put resorts on the road to sustainable development and pedagogical campaigns.

The Eco Guide consists of a summary of knowledge accumulated by Mountain Riders. This eco guide highlights how manufacturers and brands find new ways to reduce environmental impact while being socially responsible from the time a product is manufactured to the end of its usefulness. Since 2001, Mountain Riders has worked to promote sustainability in the French mountains. It aims to support public and private organizations and the 20 million regular skiers towards concrete and long lasting actions. Its actions were: spring cleaning campaigns to clean up and raise awareness regarding the issue of rubbish and waste in the mountains; educational activities for schools programs: waste, climate change, ecological

footprint, project support; conferences/training sessions on sustainable development in Mountain regions, climate change, eco design, eco events or governance; raising awareness to inform and guide people and riders to change and round-table conferences.

Sustainable Travel International is an organisation which aims to support communities, hotels, airlines, cruise lines and governments to plan responsibly — to chart their road maps for responsible growth so that they can continue to protect their most vital and vibrant aspects while contributing to the economic and social well-being of the many people whose lives and livelihoods depend on the world's wanderlust. Sustainable Travel International offers extensive education and training programs around the world. Their curriculum and courses give tourism professionals, destinations, and educational institutions of all experience levels an overview of sustainable tourism, and an understanding of how to apply it to their roles on a daily basis.

Planeta.com was created in 1994 by Ron Mader and is a handcrafted website maintained in old school code with a smattering of social web niceties. It invites locals and visitors to share practices of eco-friendly, people-friendly and place-friendly travel.

Argeş Group for Education and Ecology (G.E.E.A.) is a non-governmental organization whose primary goal is the implementation of educational, ecological, cultural and social development projects in different areas of interest both locally, nationally and internationally. G.E.E.A. presents itself as a group dedicated to protecting natural areas and promoting green spaces and ways of living balanced in nature, leaving a footprint as small as possible on the environment. Through its environmental policy, G.E.E.A. supports reduction, reuse and recycling, as well as any other method which can generate less waste. Among the projects completed to date by the organization the most important are:

- "Let's Do It, Romania!" - the largest project of social involvement in Romania which aims cleaning of waste the areas outside the cities in one day!;
- "Plant good deeds in Romania" - is a national project whose mission is to mobilize society, the public, the private sector and the media to protect and increase forest. Afforestation actions will increase the area covered by forests in Romania, and this is done in compliance with technical standards in the field. The project is addressing mainly to the informed public in the field (environmental NGOs, tourism, clubs/guiding schools) and the public which is sensitive to forest related issues (tourists, students from Forestry/Geography, media specialist readers of specific publications - exploration/discovery of the natural environment).
- "Environment Day at Dârmănești " – a project for educating and involving children in the community by organizing a seminar of environmental protection entitled "Respect nature and it will respect you!" as well as different ecological actions.

The main objective of the **Lunca Mureşului Natural Park** is to protect the landscape, habitats and specific meadow species by managing sustainable human activities so as to represent an ideal space for environmental education and ecotourism activities. One of the completed projects conducted in this natural park is "Ceala, a greener forest", aimed at reducing human pressure on this protected area by promoting ecotourism.

Țara lui Andrei (Andrew's Country) is a social responsibility project initiated by OMV Petrom. The main projects which were financed so far include:

- The project "Active for a clean environment", which aims to motivate and involve young people in the town Mereni, in order to protect the environment, improve or find solutions to environmental problems.
- The project "Brăila on two wheels" aims to increase the number of citizens who use bicycles as a means of green transport in the city of Brăila.
- The project "Eco-mountain cycling" proposes the design of three trails for mountain biking and cycling in order to promote tourism in Pořtile de Fier Natural Park.

Kogayon Association performs volunteer projects, for example, installing a billboard on a thematic route, building a gazebo for educational activities with children, transportation of materials and reconstruction of a tourist refuge, Curmătura Builei, building a small park in the courtyard of a rural church or making a promotional add for educational activities.

The environmental education program "**National Park Junior Ranger Buila-Vânturarița**" primarily aims to involve children in appreciation and conservation activities around the park. The Junior Ranger program includes presentations of the park (photos, video) made by the association volunteers in local schools, environmental education lessons conducted by volunteer specialists of the association, hiking and excursions in Buila-Vânturarița National Park and its surroundings. Other projects completed to date are: monitoring of protected species representative for the Buila-Vanturarita area, Junior Rangers - friends of Buila-Vânturarița, promoting natural areas protected by local youth etc.

The "**Center for Ecological Education and Tourism Promotion**" project aims to develop cross-border tourism on environmental issues through the exchange of experience and good practices among young people in Romania and Serbia, aged between 16 and 25 years.

The project entitled "**Creating thematic route and educational activities**" was implemented in the Țarcu Mountains protected area in order to create the first thematic route in the region which can raise awareness among visitors, support educational activities and boost eco-tourism activities.

The project entitled "**Habitats plant species and traditions of Piatra Craiului National Park presented in an alpine garden and photo exhibition**" aimed at achieving a garden-exhibition in the vicinity of the Piatra Craiului National Park Visitor Centre and a permanent photo exhibition inside the building, in order to

raise public awareness and environmental education (adults and children). The project objectives include: making a school botanical garden, an outdoor exhibition highlighting protected species characteristic to the area, as well as five interpretative panels; achieving a permanent exhibition in the Visitor Centre, composed of a series of five photo montages; involvement of students and the local community in the project area park.

4. Conclusions

Specialized studies conducted so far in environmental education, particularly in the tourism field, particularly reveal the impact that this can have on individuals. In the tourism industry, environmental education has an important place as it exerts a significant influence on increasing the awareness of individuals, but also on their attitudes and behavior towards environmental issues. The present paper overviewed the issue of environmental education, including the one related to tourism, and highlighted some of the environmental education initiatives both internationally and in Romania. Further studies might highlight the extent to which environmental education activities conducted in schools or through various associations exert a significant influence on changing individuals' tourism-related attitudes and/or behaviors. Also, future studies can make various comparisons between individuals, developing segmentation based on several criteria aiming to highlight the degree of involvement in environmentally friendly activities. Finally, other studies can analyze the impact that introducing the concept of environmental education in schools can have on individual tourist behavior.

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