

Developing ecotourism destinations in Romania. A case study approach

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Abstract: *Romania has an outstanding natural and cultural heritage which is not yet valorised to its full potential through ecotourism. In order to do so, the existence of green tourism businesses is not enough to assure authentic ecotourism experiences. Ecotourism principles and guidelines need to be applied and reinforced by all stakeholders: businesses, governmental authorities and NGOs, with the aim of developing ecotourism destinations. In this context, the present paper uses a case study approach to outline the challenges of developing these ecotourism destinations in Romania. Several initiatives and projects are outlined as well as their work in progress.*

Key-words: *ecotourism, destinations, Romania, destination management organisation, stakeholders*

1. Introduction

As the global tourism industry continues to grow, people travelling and generating more domestic and foreign revenues is often done at the expense of the social and ecological integrity of destination regions. Consequently, tourism policy makers need to consider a variety of new approaches to make sure that the environment, local communities, visitors and business are not affected in a negative way by the impact of the industry (Fennell and Dowling 2003, 10). Despite the increasing concern over these impacts, little has been done, especially by governments, to stimulate policy development (Lickorish, 1991) or to change weak policies that are currently being used.

Given the growth in interest internationally in special interest tourism, notably ecotourism, based on natural and cultural resources, it is within these special areas that the challenges of sustainable development are the greatest. Increasing the conservation of their specific ecological assets is needed, although these very qualities attract increasing numbers of visitors (Howie 2003, 293-294).

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Romania has a unique natural heritage which offers an excellent chance of transforming the country into a special attraction for the international tourist market, considering the current international trend regarding the growing appeal of nature-related destinations. It has some of the largest areas with virgin forests still remaining in Europe, the large majority of European brown bears, wolves and globally outstanding flora and fauna. However, biodiversity in Romania is under serious threat from unsustainable exploitation, pollution and land-use changes. Sustainably-managed ecotourism could bring sources of income which could be channelled towards conservation measures, benefit sharing and service-based industries. The plight faced by the Romanian tourism requires the urgent adoption of measures designed to build dynamic efficient capitalization, but in a sustainable position (Minciu and Stanciu, 2010). In addition to encouraging and developing ecotourism businesses (e.g. accommodation, tour operators), a wider framework is needed for a systematic development of ecotourism in Romania. Thus, all relevant stakeholders (businesses, local authorities, NGOs, community members) need to be involved in the management and planning of ecotourism development in each destination.

Considering these issues, the present paper aims to outline the opportunity and the main challenges of developing ecotourism destinations in Romania, using a case study approach. In this sense, several initiatives and projects which aim to stimulate the process of designating ecotourism destinations are presented.

2. Literature review

Destinations are amalgams of tourism products, offering an integrated experience to consumers and although they were traditionally regarded as well-defined geographical areas, such as a country, an island or a town, it is increasingly recognised that a destination can also a perceptual concept, which can be interpreted subjectively by consumers, depending on their travel itinerary, cultural background, purpose of visit, educational level and past experience (Buhalis 2000, 97). Leiper (1995, 87) explains that destinations are places towards which people travel and where they choose to stay for a while in order to experience certain features or characteristics-a perceived attraction of some sort.

In Romania, the National Tourism Authority et al. (2013) define the tourism destination as a geographical area with the following characteristics:

- A coherent, unitary marketing image;
- A variety of touristic products that blend with the general image of the destination marketed to tourists;
- A network of general and specific services that contribute to the creation of touristic products, in correlation to the marketed image;

- The existence of a destination administrator/coordinator, coordinating the destination by means of a clear policy and a series of implementation levers.

Tourism is an activity which is developed in different ways in each region mainly because of the diversity of characteristics of each place (Coccosis and Constantoglou, 2006). This diversification requires a different way of tourism management in tourism destinations as each place attracts different type of tourists because of the differences recognised between the motives and the characteristics of the journey (Mansfeld, 1992). Considering these issues, the present paper outlines the specificity of implementing ecotourism from the perspective tourism destinations, with a special focus on the Romanian context.

Ecotourism was defined as environmentally responsible, enlightening travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socioeconomic involvement of local populations (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). According to this definition, ecotourism can involve both cultural and environmental tourism and, in addition, benefits to the local population should be an integral part of the activity. Ecotourists typically look for experiences that provide a sense of closeness to the natural attractions and local communities that first brought them to a destination. Any destination that seeks to attract these tourists must protect its resources while facilitating a sense of integration with the local community (Epler Wood, 2002, 23).

Although there is an extensive scientific literature dedicated to ecotourism, it is quite scarce in studies which are focused on the definition of ecotourism destinations and their characteristics. Most information on this topic comes from environmental, ecotourism or national organisations.

The participants at the second Ecotourism Conference, which was organised in Romania, in 2013, agreed that ecotourism destinations in Europe should have:

- A protected area associated with the destination;
- A critical mass of local ecotourism businesses;
- A sustainability plan under implementation, in developing ecotourism;
- Nature and local culture as the main ingredients in product development and marketing;
- Active participation of local communities, empowered through education and awareness rising, based on shared values.

These participants were mainly ecotourism and sustainable tourism associations and networks, ecotourism businesses, education institutions, experts and consultants on ecotourism, who endorsed the declaration and committed to use it as guidance for future actions.

The Romanian National Tourism Authority et al. (2013) define the ecotourism destination as a tourism destination that also observes the following principles:

- Projects a responsible marketing image

- The destination is mostly populated by sustainably managed businesses;
- There is a real support for local communities within the destination;
- Tourists and locals are informed on the natural characteristics of the destination;
- Clear nature preservation measures are implemented within the destination.

According to Epler Wood (2002, 25), the characteristics of ecotourism destinations include:

- Natural features conserved within a protected landscape.
- Low density development, where natural areas are abundant and the built landscape does not dominate.
- Evidence that tourism is not harming natural systems such as waterways, coastal areas, wetlands and wildlife areas.
- Thriving small community businesses, including food stands and other types of craft enterprises owned by local people.
- Plenty of designated outdoor recreation zones that are designed to protect fragile resources, including bike paths, trails or boardwalks that are shared by locals and visitors alike.
- Thriving, locally owned lodges, hotels, restaurants and businesses that provide genuine hospitality with friendly, motivated staff.
- A variety of local festivals and events that demonstrate an on-going sense of pride in the local community's natural environment and cultural heritage.
- Clean and basic public facilities for tourists and locals to share, such as public showers and toilets.
- Friendly interaction between local people and visitors in natural meeting places, such as local shops or benches.

The planning and management of a destination will determine how well ecotourism can thrive there (Epler Wood 2002, 25-26). Thus, the planning of an ecotourism destination depends on baseline data of social and environmental factors, zoning strategies, regulations that can prevent deliberate abuse of fragile ecosystems, local participation in developing a set of standards for limits of acceptable change, and long-term monitoring. Management is absolutely required at the destination to ensure the long-term harmony of tours and lodges with the people and environment of the region.

3. Methodology

The present study used a case study approach to analyze the opportunity of developing ecotourism destinations in Romania and the main challenges which this complex ongoing process is facing.

Researchers have used the case study research method for many years across a variety of disciplines, aiming to examine contemporary real-life situations and provide the basis for the application of ideas and extension of methods (Soy, 1997). According to Bromley (1990, 302), a case study is a “systematic inquiry into an event or a set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest”. Yin (1984, 23) defines the case study research method as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used”. By emphasizing the study of a phenomenon within its real-world context, the case study method favors the collection of data in natural settings, compared with relying on “derived” data (Bromley 1986, 23). Relevant data for case studies may come largely from documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation and physical artefacts (Yin, 1994).

In the framework of the present study, relevant information for the present case study was collected using secondary data provided by different organisations which are running projects aimed at developing ecotourism in Romania, with a special focus on ecotourism destinations. A special insight was provided by the Association of Ecotourism in Romania, which has a key role in the development of ecotourism destinations at a national level. In addition to secondary data analysis, a series of interviews were conducted with key persons from Romanian ecotourism NGOs, with the main purpose to identify the state of art in the ongoing projects.

4. The case study

In the last decade, ecotourism in Romania has evolved from the existence of isolated ecotourism programs proposed by local/national tour operators to integrated ecotourism destinations, which are developed through strategic partnerships (between governmental authorities, local communities, private investors) and promoted through the efforts of local or national (eco) tourism associations (Nistoreanu et al. 2011, 36).

4.1. The Romanian ecotourism framework

There are several NGOs which are aiming to stimulate the development of ecotourism in Romania (e.g. Țara Dornelor Ecotourism Association, Ecologic Association, Bihor Protected Areas and Sustainable Development Centre). However, most of them are locally based and focus on a specific area/destination. The only national ecotourism organization that has a national interest is the Association of Ecotourism in Romania (AER). This NGO has achieved a partnership for nature conservation and tourism development among tourism associations, non-

governmental associations acting in local development and nature conservation, ecology projects and travel agencies. Therefore, the innovative idea promoted by AER is to bring together the public and the private sector in a partnership for nature conservation and sustainable tourism development (AER, 2015).

AER has taken part to most initiatives which aimed to develop ecotourism destinations in Romania. Initially, the concept of ecotourism destinations was promoted into the National Ecotourism Strategy (2009) developed by the National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism (INCDT) and endorsed by the National Tourism Authority (ANT). The next phase, between 2011 and 2013, was to develop the certification system for ecotourism destinations under the coordination of ANT within the Inter-Ministry working group. In 2012 the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism of Romania, in partnerships with the INCDT and the AER, has developed a new framework for identifying and certifying ecotourism destinations in Romania. By adopting this framework, destinations that meet certain criteria may obtain the status of "ecotourism destinations" and they will be included in the national tourism promotion campaigns and thus lead to increased visibility on the domestic and foreign markets. At the same time, building and promoting a network of quality ecotourism destinations can help increasing Romania's image as an attractive destination (AER, 2015).

The certification process is made up of a set of criteria and a set of indicators to assess each of the criteria. The first condition for obtaining such a status is for the destination to include natural resources under a recognized protection scheme (national or nature park, Natura 2000 site, nature reserves or any other category of protected areas), in which socio-cultural resources may be included. Other criteria refer to the attractiveness of the destination, accessibility, cultural heritage protection and respect for cultural traditions, preservation of biodiversity and a waste management plan. The criteria were established, on the recommendation of the World Tourism Organization, starting from the European Ecotourism Labeling Standard, drawn up by the European Ecotourism Network (AER, 2015).

Romania is among the first countries to apply the European Ecotourism Labeling Standard. Romania already has destinations that can be certified as ecotourism and for those which, at present, do not meet the minimum score for certification; the system of criteria and indicators represents an excellent guide, helping them to meet this goal (AER, 2015). Currently, there are two destinations which were eco-certified: Zărnești-Piatra Craiului and Creasta Cocoșului-Mara-Cosău, while Pădurea Craiului was not certified at this stage. At this point the evaluation and certification process are suspended until a ministry order regarding the criteria for the destinations will be emitted.

Being a voluntary certification system, the initiative to participate in the project belongs to the local or regional partnerships established with the aim of managing tourism, for example, through tourism development and promotion associations. The first step of the certification program is for applying destinations

to conduct a self-assessment based on the criteria and indicators provided by the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration. Following this, a team of evaluators coordinated by the Ministry conducts a field evaluation. Depending on the results of these evaluations, the status of Ecotourism Destination is granted for a period of three years.

4.2. Romanian initiatives for the development of ecotourism destinations

In 2013, the National Tourism Authority, the National Tourism Research and Development Institute and the Romanian Ecotourism Association outlined a set of criteria for the designation of ecotourism destinations in Romania, in line with the priorities defined by the National Strategy for the Development of Ecotourism in Romania, in 2009. This initiative is based on the recommendation of the World Tourism Organization to use the European Ecotourism Labelling Standards – EETLS, developed by the Eco-Destinet Network, within a project financed by the European Commission.

First, these organisations established a series of preconditions which must be attained by an ecotourism destination (The National Tourism Authority et al., 2013). The first criterion refers to the attraction factor. The destination must include protected natural resources (biosphere reservation, national or natural park, Natura 2000 site, natural reservations or any other category of protected area), and there may also be man-made touristic resources. The second criterion refers to accessibility, as any destination must be accessible by public and private means of transport. The last criteria refer to the existence of a minimum level of tourism services (e.g. accommodation and catering facilities, tourist rescue services) and public services (e.g. ATMs, medical and educational facilities, waste collection system).

Second, four groups of criteria were established, each one including specific regulations (The National Tourism Authority et al., 2013). Criteria Group A refers to the sustainable management of an ecotourism destination and requires the enforcement of a viable long-term plan, observing all the relevant national and local regulations and legislation. The need for constant staff training is also mentioned as well as the importance of tourist satisfaction and comprises specific measures leading to corrective management actions, ensuring the provision of quality services. Special care is given to responsible marketing, natural and cultural heritage interpretation. Done well, interpretation can enhance the visitor experience and it may also strengthen the relationship between the site and those who live around it (Nechita et al., 2014, 20). The criteria included in group B involve maximizing the social and economic benefits for local communities and minimizing the negative effects generated by the development of the destination. Criteria included in group C address the cultural patrimony present in a certain destination, and refer to measures whose aim is to maximize the positive effects of ecotourism and minimize the

negative ones (e.g. harnessing and preserving the cultural heritage, stimulating residents' traditions and customs, respecting the values and traditions of local communities). Criteria included in group D refer to the maximization of benefits and the reduction of the negative impact of tourism activities on the environment (e.g. the application of a green purchasing plan, the implementation of a waste management plan).

Taking into consideration these criteria, there are several projects which are currently implemented in Romania with the purpose of facilitating the development of ecotourism destinations, such as: *“The National Ecotourism Destination Network - a Tool for Sustainable Development”*, *“Green jobs in green destinations – increasing the quality of ecotourism products and destinations for higher performance in sustainable development in Romania”*, *“The destination management unit (UMD), a key factor in sustainable local development through ecotourism”*. Because we considered these projects to be key initiatives in the development of Romanian ecotourism destinations, we analysed each of them in order to draw some conclusions regarding the current progress in this field.

“The National Ecotourism Destination Network - a Tool for Sustainable Development” project is financed through the SEE 2009-2014 grants, within the NGO Fund in Romania, and is implemented by AER in partnership with the National Tourism Authority. The project aims to solve the problems of rural communities from micro-regions with protected areas and local communities that can develop their product offer and their services in ecotourism in order to reduce the non-sustainable use of natural resources in the community and the protected area will play a central role in the socioeconomic development of the micro-region on the principles of sustainable development through ecotourism.

The general objective of the project is to increase the operating capacity of the national ecotourism destination network that contributes to: (1) local sustainable development through the implementation of development measures in destinations, (2) to the increase of their visibility on the Romanian and European market and (3) to nature conservation by integrating protected areas in regional development. The specific objectives of the project are: (1) to create the national ecotourism destination network that meets the specific requirements of NTA and contributes to promote ecotourism as a strategic tool in the development of sustainable tourism in Romania (by the end of the project the network will have ten ecotourism destinations) and (2) to create an optimal capacity in each destination to stimulate concrete measures in order to achieve sustainable development through ecotourism. The beneficiaries and target groups are local communities, mostly from rural areas, in the vicinity or within the protected areas (over 25 communities are included in the project), at least 10 administrations of protected areas in the 9 micro-regions, the visitors of these possible destinations, local governments and local NGOs, local tourism businesses and specialists within the National Tourism Authority (Blumer and Papuc, 2014). The destinations included in this project were chosen through a

public announcement after a selection of the applications. The ten destinations that resulted are the following: Mara Cosău – Creasta Cocoşului, Zărneşti-Piatra Craiului, Pădurea Craiului from Apuseni Mountains, Mărginimea Sibiului, Transylvanian Highlands, Danube Delta, Vânători Neamţ Natural Park – Bison Land, Țara Dornelor (Dorna Land), Țara Hațegului (Hațeg Land) – Retezat and Băile Tuşnad area. A series of trainings and meetings were organized with the purpose to get information on the development of each destination and to provide stakeholders with relevant information on the management of an ecotourism destination.

“Green jobs in green destinations – increasing the quality of ecotourism products and destinations for higher performance in sustainable development in Romania” is a project financed by the Swiss Cooperation Program, in which AER is partner with the Propark Foundation for protected areas and International Commission for the Protection of the Alps in Switzerland (CIPRA Schweiz). The necessity of this project comes from the fact that Romania is among the first countries worldwide applying and adapting standards for ecotourism destinations and there is a need for a better management of these areas. Throughout the project, the emphasis is placed on the performance of ecotourism destination management, the quality enhancement of the ecotourism sectors and the increase of overall visibility and promotion of this type of tourism in Romania. The overall development objective is to enhance the sustainable development and nature conservation through ecotourism in the rural areas that include protected areas.

The expected results of this project refer to: (1) higher performance of ecotourism destination management through increased quality of local human resources for boosting sustainable development in seven regions with protected areas and small scale tourism services in Romania; and (2) increased qualification of the service providers from Romania that offer one of the core ecotourism activities and increasing the awareness of the general public concerning the high quality ecotourism offer in Romania (Blumer et al., 2014).

The third project which we analyzed refers to *„The destination management unit (UMD), a key factor in sustainable local development trough ecotourism”* and it is financed by the Romanian American Foundation in collaboration with the Partnership Foundation and the AER is partner. The main objective at a national level is connected with the first project summarized in this article, namely, creating a network of ecotourism destinations that will be coordinated in terms of ecotourism development in a unitary manner. At a local level, the objective is to support the emergence of destination management ecotourism organizations (DMU). These DMUs will be the key factor in the coordination of local stakeholders and the increase of the management performances of the area (Blumer, 2014).

5. Conclusions

Based on the analysis of these ecotourism initiatives, we identified a series of recommendations regarding the development of ecotourism destinations in Romania, which were drawn based on the implementation process of the three projects presented above.

The first and most important matter is the fact that the destination must have an effective management organization, or any other entity that will be responsible for the coordination of tourism activities. This destination management organization (DMO) should include both the private and the public sector and different types of stakeholders that are involved into the tourism sector or are adjacent to it. Currently, there are some local or regional NGOs in certain Romanian ecotourism destinations which are partially taking the responsibilities of a DMO, but they are not fulfilling all the functions of such an organization mainly due to the lack of knowledge or experience in this field, and especially because of the legislative gap and lack of budget funds, at a local, regional or national level.

The second recommendation refers to the development of an ecotourism development strategy for each destination, that must be based on a feasibility study of the area as well as a on relevant research of the target market (identifying the “clients” and attempting to position the destination). The DMO must identify the unique selling proposition in order to try to create unique experiences packed in unique tourism products. The strategy should include a management and a marketing approach of the development of the destination in an indicated period of time (usually between 2 to 5 years). Another element that should be considered in elaborating the strategy is the planning of the activities and events that will take place in the destination.

Another very important recommendation is to monitor not only visitor satisfaction, but all the visitor information that can be obtained in order to target the market and improve the offer of each ecotourism destination. In this sense, regular surveys and marketing research should be conducted in each ecotourism destination at both local and national level.

The above mentioned recommendations can be useful for Romanian ecotourism destination managers, for the National Tourism Authority of and for the associations which are aiming to develop ecotourism at national, regional or local level.

However, although it provides interesting information on the specificity of developing ecotourism destinations in Romania, the current paper has a series of limitations. First, due to its case study approach, the present study cannot provide relevant data for international ecotourism destinations, as each country has a different legal and economic framework, which may impose measures of adaptation. Second, it does not present information based on primary data, collected through qualitative or quantitative research methods. Thus, future research should be undertaken in Romanian ecotourism destinations with the aim of capturing stakeholders’ attitudes, opinions and intentions regarding the ongoing processes which are been implemented in these areas.

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