

ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN ROMANIA - A POSSIBLE CONTRIBUTION TO THE FULFILMENT OF THE REAL CONVERGENCE CRITERIA FOR EURO ADOPTION

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Abstract: *Ecotourism is a chance to diversify the Romanian tourism industry while protecting the environment and benefiting local communities. The present paper focuses on ecotourism as a possible contribution the fulfilment of the real convergence criteria for euro adoption in Romania by stimulating the economic growth of rural communities. The main benefits that ecotourism brings to rural communities are highlighted as well as the main initiatives of national organisations aimed at stimulating the local economy in different ecotourism destinations.*

Key words: *ecotourism, local communities, euro adoption, real convergence.*

1. Introduction

Travel & Tourism has the potential to become an important export sector in Romania and to provide jobs and economic growth for the country's vast rural population. It possesses the inherent ability to diversify Romania's economy, to stimulate entrepreneurship – particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) – catalyze investment, create large numbers of sustainable jobs, and help social development in local communities (WTTC, 2006). In addition, if managed effectively, Travel & Tourism can be an important catalyst for the development of other economic sectors within Romania, such as manufacturing, construction and the service industries. It can also help to conserve the country's primary assets,

namely its natural and cultural environments, which have in the past been largely unrecognized and unprotected.

However, in order to assure a balanced tourism development focused on the conservation of the natural and cultural tourism potential, there should be a national focus on sustainable types of tourism. Ecotourism is considered such a sustainable type of tourism as it is based on the appreciation of the natural tourism assets, while stimulating nature conservation and benefiting local communities.

Ecotourism has been defined as environmentally responsible, enlightening travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any

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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.

As ecotourism is mainly developed in the proximity of natural protected areas, it could be a possible solution for several problems of Romanian rural communities: the lack of competitiveness of agricultural products on the European market, unemployment, the migration of the young population to urban areas or even abroad, unsustainable exploitation of natural assets (e.g. illegal logging, hunting). Consequently, ecotourism development in Romania could stimulate employment, GDP per capita, the growth of agriculture share in GDP, thus contributing to the fulfilment of the real convergence criteria for euro adoption.

2. Romanian tourism and the fulfilment of the real convergence criteria for euro adoption

Maastricht convergence criteria are measures of readiness of countries for joining EMU (European monetary union) and thus for the adoption of the single currency, the euro and they were defined in the Treaty on European Union of 1992, known as the Maastricht Treaty.

Apart from nominal convergence there is also real convergence, defined as a catching-up in economic development, measured by the level of GDP per capita, or sometimes as economic reforms, institutional and structural changes needed for the catching-up process (Lavrac, 2004). Real convergence is not a formal precondition for joining the euro area,

although certain level of achieved real convergence is welcome or expected. Although the Maastricht criteria are nominal convergence criteria, the Community institutions have repeatedly expressed their firm determination not to accept the euro area countries which have achieved a degree of real convergence.

For Romania, the goal of monetary policy in the last few years has been focused on preserving macroeconomic stability combined with reform measures that should bring the country in line with convergence to the euro area (Szeles and Marinescu, 2010).

Despite a slight recovery after the economic crisis over recent years, Romania's population is still one of the poorest in Europe. Travel & Tourism can be a catalyst for improving livelihoods throughout the country and has been identified as such by Romania's leaders as a focal point of the country's National Development Plan. This recognition of the industry's potential contribution is a step in the right direction, although there is still a widespread lack of awareness of Travel & Tourism's economic value and potential within all levels of government and the population at large (WTTC, 2006).

Past efforts, including the identification of Travel & Tourism as a national priority have helped put the industry on Romania's political and development agenda. However, general awareness of the industry's potential is still low and in the current climate of preparation for euro adoption Travel & Tourism is not a priority. However these policy areas have a significant impact upon tourism and, indeed, tourism could be a catalyst for change and improvement in this regard. There is an urgent need, therefore, for Travel & Tourism to be integrated into future development plans and EU programmes (WTTC, 2006).

The tourism activity can stimulate the

internal development of a region, reduce the regional imbalances and geographically redistribute the welfare from the metropolitan areas towards the poor, peripheral ones (Scutariu, 2012). The development of tourism can also stimulate other related economic sectors, contribution which is known as multiplier effect of tourism. The positive results will reflect on people's income and on the other sectors of activity that are not directly related to tourism. Thus, the respective sector contributes, directly or indirectly, to the economic growth.

Through a more intense development of tourism, this sector could become an essential component of economy in some areas (especially in the places where there is potential but limited possibilities of economic development). Therefore, tourism could contribute to the improvement of the social-economic development standards in the areas with a low GDP (Scutariu, 2012).

The important role tourism has to play in Romania's future economic and social development is indisputable. According to the WTTC 2012 country report the direct contribution of Romanian Travel & Tourism to GDP was RON7.7bn (1.4% of total GDP) in 2011, and was forecast to rise by 14.8% in 2012, and to rise by 6.9% pa from 2012- 2022, to RON17.2bn in 2022 (in constant 2011 prices). In 2011 Travel & Tourism directly supported 184,500 jobs (2.2% of total employment) and was expected to rise by 7.5% in 2012 and rise by 1.6% pa to 233,000 jobs (2.8% of total employment) in 2022. Visitor exports generated RON6.1bn (2.9% of total exports) in 2011 and was forecast to grow by 21.0% in 2012, and grow by 8.5% pa, from 2012-2022, to RON16.7bn in 2022 (3.7% of total). Travel & Tourism investment in 2011 was RON9.4bn, or 7.3% of total investment and it was estimated to a growth by 5.1% in 2012,

and rise by 6.9% pa over the next ten years to RON19.3bn in 2022 (7.6% of total).

However, much work still needs to be done to ensure that the industry's potential is sustainably developed. Both government and industry will have to overcome a number of challenges to guarantee that maximum benefits to the economy and society are achieved in a way that is sustainable in the long term (WTTC, 2006).

The successful growth of tourism in Romania will be highly dependent on the natural, social and cultural environments that surround it. In many instances, the natural environment and cultural heritage are central features of the country's tourism product. Considerable steps have been taken to clean up and protect the natural environment in Romania. Now, it is vital that tourism development plans be integrated into environmental management systems and vice-versa. In the same way, preservation of cultural heritage should go hand in hand with tourism development. In both cases, careful monitoring is needed to ensure that high standards of preservation are maintained (WTTC, 2006).

The Central Carpathian Mountains boast the highest concentration of large carnivores in Europe – including half of the continent's bear population, a third of its wolves and a third of its lynx population. To the west lie the plateaus where bucolic villages and towns are dotted amongst the hills and valleys. And to the east, the low lying plains which are the country's agricultural heartland see the Danube river empty into the Black Sea by means of its ecologically unique delta. In all the country is home to some 33,792 species of animals and 3,700 species of plants and the Danube Delta is home to 60 per cent of the world's small pygmy cormorant population (WTTC, 2006). From cycling and walking in the mountains and nature-based tourism in the

Danube Delta, Romania's natural heritage offers endless opportunities for ecotourism development.

Romania's tourism product relies very heavily on the natural environment and it is imperative that measures are taken to clean and safeguard the environment, not only for a sustainable tourism development, but for the sustainable future of the country. All tourism development plans need to be integrated into environmental management systems and vice-versa. A legal framework for environmental protection is already in place in Romania and all tourism stakeholders, including government authorities, should support and encourage its enforcement. Although, in the short-term, adhering to strict environmental regulations, particularly those imposed by the EU, may affect competitiveness in the country's tourism industry, for the long-term sustainability of the industry it is absolutely vital (WTTC, 2006).

This sustainable tourism approach is important because tourists to new and emerging destinations such as Romania increasingly expect a mix of unspoiled natural scenery, attractive and traditional accommodation, educational ecotourism products, quality arts and crafts and low impact tourism experiences based on responsible operations (USAID, 2006).

International interest in environmental issues and the search for cultural "authenticity" means that Romania tourism is well positioned to compete aggressively in the expanding international ecotourism market. Global awareness of the rural poverty, deteriorating environment and loss of cultural values of many nations has accelerated the need for sound sustainable tourism planning and product development, particularly in unique and diverse destinations such as Romania (USAID, 2006). This approach can assist Romania to differentiate its product in the

international marketplace.

3. Ecotourism development in Romania and its support for local communities

Ecotourism is one of the few potential sources of income that can be channelled towards conservation measures and benefit sharing, including diversification of local incomes, transfers of jobs into the environmental and environmental-friendly sector, cultural heritage, and payments for environmental services. It is also a unique sector in terms of its influence and dependence on other economic sectors (transport, energy, food, culture, biodiversity, energy) – a chain reaction with positive multiplier effects can be achieved throughout the economy. This is a vital consideration in Romania where the economy is mainly based on heavy and often inefficient, polluting and natural-resource based industries. Ecotourism will help with a successful transition towards increased service-based industries, critical for the sustainable use of biodiversity.

Some of the economic benefits which local communities can derive from ecotourism are employment opportunities, development associated with infrastructure (e.g. better road network and water) and ecotourism businesses (Hall, 2006; Marsh, 2000; Weiler and Scidl, 2004). There are several ways in which community members can be involved in ecotourism activities (Drumm and Moore, 2002):

- renting land to an operator to develop while simply monitoring impacts;
- working as occasional, part-time or full-time staff for private tour operators;
- providing services to private operators such as food preparation, guiding, transport or accommodation, or a combination of the above;
- forming joint ventures with private tour operators where the community provides most services while the private sector partner manages marketing,

- logistics and possibly bilingual guides;
- operating as independent community-based programs.

When Romanian rural communities engage in ecotourism, new sources of income can be generated for the community as a whole as well as through individual employment. Local residents can embrace both agricultural and ecotourism activities and try to include their agricultural as well as other types of products (e.g. souvenirs, cultural activities, traditional crafts) in the ecotourism products. The economic benefits of ecotourism provide strong anti-poaching or anti-logging incentive for local communities, which can maintain wildlife diversity. Ecotourism development might also convince rural residents that instead of destroying the natural assets they can offer sustainable tourism products which highlight the diversity and beauty of the Romanian countryside. Ecotourists visiting nature sites boost economies at the local, regional and national levels. If ecotourism brings jobs to residents at the local level, they then have more money to spend locally, and economic activity within the area increases.

Romania has a unique natural heritage that has an excellent chance of becoming a special attraction for the international tourist market, considering the current international trend of the increasing appeal of nature-related destinations. Today, socio-economic changes in Romania, due to transition to the market economy, and to some extent EU Enlargement, pose numerous threats to nature conservation in the Carpathians and Danube Delta, but also offer many new opportunities: ecotourism is one of them. Ecotourism development can add socio-economic value to the natural heritage and can be used as a sustainable tool for long term conservation and local development.

Since 2009 the National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism has formulated in collaboration with national ecotourism stakeholders the National Strategy for Ecotourism Development in Romania. This strategic framework includes in the first stage an assessment of the main ecotourism assets, infrastructure, tourism indicators, stakeholders and possible funding opportunities as well as a SWOT analysis. In the second phase a strategic plan has been created as well as the corresponding implementation and monitoring activities. Seven objectives have been formulated for the development of ecotourism in Romania, concerning the following fields: the institutional and cooperative framework, tourism planning and infrastructure, education and public awareness, human resources, local business stimulation, nature conservation and protection, marketing and promotion (NIRDT, 2009).

One of the objectives from the local business stimulation field is aimed at developing ecotourism products organised and put in place by local communities. The first activity planned for the completion of this objective includes the conservation and promotion of traditional customs specific to ecotourism destinations from rural areas (NIRDT, 2009). As Romanian ecotourism destinations mostly include rural communities situated in the proximity of protected areas, local traditional customs are considered a key element which brings an added value to ecotourism products. Thus, two steps have been identified: firstly, a selection of traditional customs, artisans and craftsmen from ecotourism destinations is needed, followed by appropriate assistance and funding in order to connect them to ecotourism products. These actions are in line with the objectives of the National Strategy of Cultural Heritage, elaborated by the Ministry of Culture in 2008.

The second activity is aimed at creating different locations where local products can be sold to ecotourists. It is suggested that Romanian ecotourism destinations should develop local centres for the valorization of traditional products (the artwork of local artisans or herbal infusions, syrups, jams, honey or derived products) which provide the premises for an uniform development of rural areas and the creation of a complete, authentic ecotourism experience.

Different Romanian organisations have successfully implicated local residents in ecotourism activities from certain rural areas in Romania. The most active NGO which is dedicated to ecotourism promotion and development 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, nature conservation 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 has put in place a mechanism of certification of three types of tourist products:

- ecotourism programmes/tours provided by tour-operators or guides (eco-tours of maximum 15 participants),
- small-scale accommodation structures in rural and natural areas (eco-lodges and guesthouses of maximum 25 rooms),
- eco-destinations (one or several communities within natural areas).

Among 29 certified products there are currently 14 rural guesthouses owned and managed by local residents in different tourism destinations where ecotourism is

developed. Several other members of the association are represented by rural entrepreneurs which are successfully managing ecotourism activities in their community.

At the same time, AER has stimulated local community development in rural areas through several projects which promote ecotourism as a business integrated in the local economy with positive results for the local community: „Danube Delta, a natural gateway to Europe. Ecology and economy in harmony” (2008-2009), „Building a partnership for nature conservation and tourism in Romania” (2005-2007), „Ecotourism in Tara Dornelor – An instrument for sustainable development” (2009-2011), „Pedalling and Rowing - Ecotourism in Retezat-Ţara Haţegului and the Danube Delta for local community development and biodiversity conservation” (2012), „Rowmania Ecotourism Centre” (2012-2013), „Biking and Birding along the Romanian and the Bulgarian banks of the Danube – Ecotourism for the sustainable development of rural communities around protected areas” (2012-2013). Other tourism associations from different regions have shared this approach which aims at benefiting local communities through a sustainable tourism development: Retezat Tourism Association, Centre for Protected Areas and Sustainable Development Bihor, Adept Foundation, Ţara Dornelor Ecotourism Association.

4. Conclusions

Given the added value that community participation brings to ecotourism products and its benefits for sustainable community development, active local participation in ecotourism is good for business and good for conservation (Drumm and Moore, 2002). Partnerships and shared commitments should be forged among

communities, the government, and the private sector to strengthen ecotourism ventures, plan the sustainable use and management of resources, boost business and community marketing, and build financial and organizational skills. These partnerships must provide equitable tourism benefits to communities and the private sector to ensure their sense of responsibility to sustainable management.

The key to capitalizing on the potential benefits offered through ecotourism development is to maximize the opportunities and minimize the adverse impacts through appropriate policies and planning (Dowling and Fennell, 2003). However, ecotourism must be seen as one of several activities in a community's development portfolio. To rely solely on ecotourism as an alternative source of income is not usually a wise development strategy (Drumm and Moore, 2002). Tourism and ecotourism are subject to periods of instability due to fluctuating national and international economic trends, political events and public perception generated by the mass media. In addition, ecotourism rarely involves a significant portion of a community as relevant jobs are usually limited to the service industry and a few others.

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