

INTERNATIONAL LANDMARKS REGARDING THE ORGANIZATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ECOTOURISM

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, ecotourism represents the main factor of sustainable development of local communities. Regarding this domain, the environment is considered to be the main actor in the sustainable development of tourism activities and we consider the avoidance of exaggerated, irrational exploration and the degradation of the main source of attraction for tourists is desired. Furthermore, there is a bi-univocal relation between tourism and environment, based on the fact that the natural environment, through its components: water, air, flora, fauna, soil, etc, represents the primordial resources of tourism, and, on the other hand, the tourism activities act upon the environment, modifying its components.

Ecotourism can be an important source of sustainable growth in many developing countries with significant natural resources and this fact can create many export opportunities in distant locations. Ecotourism is often built on tourism activities led by the community which preserves ecosystems, generating, at the same time, jobs for unqualified labour force from rural communities.

Our study approaches the ecotourism issues and, also, the minimization of negative effects of the hospitality industry. The analyzed international case-studies in the development of ecotourism present examples of good practices in the field which could allow the interested factors to find solutions of minimizing the negative impact of tourism, including proposals for the development of ecotourism in areas or regions where improvement is needed.

KEYWORDS

Ecotourism, sustainable development, good practice.

I. CONCEPT AND EVOLUTION OF ECOTOURISM

Ecotourism surged in the world of tourism and environment conservation as a tsunami, still its origins being categorically more evolutionary than revolutionary. The roots of ecotourism are in the ecological and out-of-doors tourism. The visitors who went in groups to Yellowstone and Yosemite a century ago were the first ecotourists. The first travellers who adventured in Serengeti half a century ago, and the more adventurous mountain climbers of Himalaya, who camped on Annapurna 25 years later, were as ecotourists as the thousands today who take photos of penguins from Antarctica, watch the fish migration offshore of Belize or sleep in the long houses from Borneo.

The 20th century was the witness of a dramatic and continuous change of a travel in nature. Africa is a good example. It must be mentioned the hunting safari from 1909 of Theodore Roosevelt, a classic of those times, in which he hunted the biggest heads and horns that he could find. In the middle of the century, the photo safaris were categorically more popular than the hunting trips, though, they had their roots in the Big Five (mammals that are loved by the animal lovers from the wildlife preserves). In the 1970s, mass tourism and discriminated tourists, preoccupied with big mammals, destroyed the habitat, harassed the animals and destroyed the wild areas. Today, such behaviour is changing. More visitors are aware of the evil they can do from an ecological point of view, of the value of the wild areas and the concern of the locals (Candrea, Ispas, 2009).

We must also present the social responsibility. Ecologists, economists and tourists woke up realizing that nature cannot be preserved on the expense of the locals. As people who look after the land, and those who, most probably lose from the environment conservation, a fair price must be offered to the locals. A healthy policy and a correct economy would make locals partners and beneficiaries of conservation, as opposed to its implacable enemies.

In other words, ecotourism incorporates both an engagement towards nature and the sense of a social responsibility. This responsibility extends towards the sensitivity of travellers. The term "responsible travel", another aphorism for ecotourism, embodies its objective.

The growing interest regarding ecotourism within the governments of the developing countries, the trading operators, help organizations and ecologists is manifested to the enormous economic and conservation potential of the environment. Ecotourists spend billions of dollars each year. However, the importance of ecotourism is beyond these figures. Ecotourists like using the local resources and the local expertise. This means import economies, precise plans from the environmental point of view and local participation in tourism industry.

Ecotourism means satisfying nature hunger, exploring the tourism potential for conservation and development and avoiding its negative impact on ecology, culture and aesthetics. The conservation of nature isn't something new, nor are the risks that such an initiative implies. Most local communities consider that practising ecotourism leads to solving the problems regarding the degradation of environment and, at the same time, the problem of underdevelopment. Under these conditions it is considered that ecotourism may lead to preserving the wild habitats and ecosystems, to a better knowledge both of the local culture, and of traditions, to monitoring the tourists' behaviour according to the principles of sustainable tourism, to the support of a sustainable way of life for the local population, etc.

From the 1980s when the concept of *ecotourism* appeared, specialists in the field manifested a special interest, using terms like: green tourism, alternative tourism, endemic tourism, geotourism, responsible tourism, sustainable tourism, etc.

For example, green tourism is an old term, synonym with ecotourism, but never very well defined, while sustainable tourism is used very often. The term alternative tourism is used in the academic tourism literature in order to emphasize the difference from mass tourism and represents a type of tourism that addresses to a small group or a specialized market, or a product that cannot be booked through a travel agency specialized in mass tourism. The endemic tourism is a term rarely used, which derived from a term used in biology that indicates a tourism product whose main attraction is found only in a certain region. Unlike the previous term, that of responsible tourism is, also, rarely used, but this time the term derives from the analogy with „Responsible care”, an initiative from the chemical industry and focuses on considerations of social type.

Hector Ceballos-Lascurain is credited as being the one who introduced, in 1987, the term of *ecotourism* and defined it as “the tourism that involves travelling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specific object of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural aspects found in these areas”.

International Ecotourism Society characterizes ecotourism as being a responsible travel in natural areas, which preserves unaltered the environment and contributes to the improvement of the wellbeing of local population.

Specialists, after long debates, concluded that in the less developed countries, ecotourism may contribute to the growth of the wellbeing of the population and the whole community. In the countries in which mountains cover big surfaces, the governments considered ecotourism, a way of reducing or even eliminating the existing problems regarding marginalization, underdevelopment and fragility of these ecosystems. As an example, the year 2002 was declared both The International Year of Mountains, and The Year of Ecotourism.

In our opinion, ecotourism represents travelling to natural areas with the objective of getting to know the local nature and culture, travel which supports, at the same time, the protection of the environment and the social- economic development of the local communities.

II. CHARACTERISTICS OF ECOTOURISM

According to some authors (Lindberg and Hawkins, 1993), we must take into account several aspects when focusing on the characteristics of ecotourism. These refer to:

Ecology. The impact of the industry of tourism which is in full development surpasses our capacity to assess the damages.

Aesthetics. The impact is measured by how much the visitors will tolerate the ecological damage. The crowd destroys the aesthetic charm and diminishes the desire of the visitor to pay. Ecotourism reflects an increasing set of expectations.

Economy. It is not sufficient anymore to measure the benefits of tourism in terms of gross or net income.

Social. Tourism may destroy antique cultures and indigenous economies, a few unsatisfied people being enough to disturb tourism.

The enormous opportunities and the impressive risks of ecological tourism are in the centre of the mission of ecotourism. Thus, the following questions appear:

- Can ecotourism really make the difference between conservation and development globally?
- Can tourism bring real benefits to local communities, use the local labour and expertise, build sustainable markets locally and bring improvements to the health system and education?

The answers reside in the way in which we define the mission of ecotourism and the scale on which we treat this trial. The dilemma consists of it. Only responsible tourism, from an environmental point of view, is the proper ecotourism, according to many specialists.

If we accept that ecotourism means the principles of balancing tourism, conservation and culture, its role is unlimited. Still, ecotourism risks to struggle before the impossible, if we extend its objective to the entire ecological tourism. One meaning around the dilemma is to begin with small steps and to aim high to focus, firstly, on the ecological market and on the most important problems. The perceptions and the abilities gained can be then applied to tourism, generally.

Analyzing different aspects of ecotourism, discussed so far, we can identify a series of principles and characteristics of it (Arionesei, 2015):

- minimum impact on the natural environment;
- education of tourist regarding the importance of conservation;
- reduced groups of visitors;
- natural environment;
- activities of tourism eco-marketing;
- high prices in order to select tourists;
- management based on the principles of the economy of local communities;
- personalized relationships between visitors and the host-community;
- objectives of local development;
- loyalty in the process of instruction and education for a proper behaviour towards the natural environment;
- reduced development of tourism facilities.

All these particularities emphasize that ecotourism is a distinct form of tourism, but which extends rapidly, having more and more supporters and real opportunities of development. Also, taking into consideration the positive aspect on the local communities, ecotourism is encouraged and promoted by decisive factors and by the local administration.

III. GOOD PRACTICES IN THE ORGANIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF ECOTOURISM

Ecotourism can be an important source of sustainable growth from many developing countries with significant natural resources. This can also create many export opportunities in distant locations. Ecotourism is often built on tourism activities led by the community which preserves ecosystems, generating at the same time jobs for unqualified labour from rural communities. These activities do not need, normally, very big expenses and capital investments. Thus, ecotourism is an ideal industry for the stimulation of economic growth in the developing countries with an abundance of natural resources and lack of capital (Viljoen, W., 2011).

On December 21st, 2012, The United Nations adopted a decision entitled *Promotion of ecotourism for poverty eradication and environment protection*. This appealed to the members of the United Nations to adopt policies that promote ecotourism, emphasizing "that it can have a positive impact on income generation, job creation and education, and thus on the fight against poverty and hunger". The resolution recognizes that "ecotourism creates significant opportunities for the conservation, protection and sustainable use of biodiversity and of natural areas by encouraging local and indigenous communities in host countries and tourists alike to preserve and respect the natural and cultural heritage" (UNWTO, 2013).

AUSTRIA

Nowadays, in Austria, there are six national parks, with a total surface that accounts for 2.8% of the total territory of the country and which covers a total of 2,356 km². Two of these parks cross the frontier of the neighbouring countries. In the North of the Lower Austria, there is the Thayatal Valley, which, now, constitutes of a national park lying both across the surface of Austria, and of the Czech Republic. This park was declared national park in 2004, under the name of National parks Austria, bringing a multinational contribution to the sustainable development.

The national parks constituted in Austria are modern places suitable for the Austrian policy of conservation of nature. At present, the Austrian national parks are internationally famous and are partially based on three principles: "volunteer agreement with land owners"; "suitable compensation for the economic deficiencies"; "to act according to the international criteria for the IUCN categories - 2nd category protected area – national park" (Terzieva et al., 2012).

Having as basis such principles, the Austrian state guarantees to comply with the quality standards, and the land owners, the inhabitants and the regional environment organizations may be involved in the management plan.

Taking into account that the interest in recreational activities in the undisturbed landscapes rich in biodiversity elements grew, the national parks recognized that nature, environment and ecosystems can be at the basis of the development of modern tourism.

Although among the citizens there is little scepticism regarding the development of sustainable tourism, in recent years a change of attitude has been produced and they have begun to accept projects carried out by national parks. This change of attitude was due to the collaboration between the management of national parks and national tourism associations, seeing this cooperation as a sustainable and participatory development.

In Austria, the great majority of groups that are interested in the services offered by the national parks or the development of sustainable tourism, recognizes that their image improved and thinks that the objective that must be reached lies in the integration in the strategy of development of regional tourism.

SWEDEN

According to the Ecotourism Association of Sweden, *ecotourism* is considered an exploration, a meeting of the local people and a pleasure to adventure. This definition differs very much of that of the European Union, according to which *ecotourism* incorporates the sustainable management, the involvement of local community, respectively the active contributions to the conservation and interpretation of the cultural and natural heritage. One of the first systems of certification in ecotourism in the world, *Nature's Best* has two main objectives, namely, to contribute to the growth of the quality of ecotourism in Sweden and to bring a significant plus to the quantity of demands of ecotourism on the market. The three important entities which are behind this certification system are the Association of Ecotourism of Sweden, Swedish Travel and the Swedish Tourism Council. The objective of this system is to create a system of certification very well known in ecotourism in order to defend, on one hand, the ethical values, and, on the other hand, the high quality experiences when visiting a destination.

Being a label, *Nature's Best* aims at directing the selection of clients of Travel Choice to the tour operators in ecotourism, determining the operators to reach a superior quality that their actions become as favourable to the environment as possible, and achieving this goal with the consent of the local community. The positive consequences of the implementation of such a system of certification are multiple. Among these, we can mention only a few, like: it contributes to the conservation of nature, the sustainable development of the destination, the preservation of cultural values, etc. and supports the local economy development and the fair trade with local services and products.

SWITZERLAND

For Switzerland, we draw attention on a little town with only 500 inhabitants situated by the Savières canal, canal that links up the Bourget lake and Rhone river. It is Chanaz, having a very rich natural and cultural heritage and reaching today a maximum of over 150,000 visitors per year. Due to a privileged geographical location, the Chanaz town is a key partner for tourism in the Bourget lake area. Another important advantage lies in the fact that it is situated on the way to the pilgrimage place Santiago de Compostela. Taking into account that the accommodation was insufficient and couldn't cover the need of accommodation for groups, and that no investor wanted to invest, the local council of Chanaz decides to build an artificial lake which increases the quality of the accommodation establishments. Thus, the surface of the harbour reaches 7200 m²; increasing the capacity of the marina with 48 rings, there are built, complying with the environment legislation, 8 holiday lodges with 50 beds that are heated

on solar energy basis, the quality of water is monitored in order to prevent pollution, and the activities are non-polluting; for example, cycling, fishing, rollerblading, canoeing.

At present, the accommodation offer is generous, both for groups and for families. Sustainable tourism in the area is an important factor on which the number of visits depends. Having a mayor that was much and productively involved, in Chanaz the principles of sustainable developments have been applied for 20 years:

- solar panels were installed behind the camping zone in 1984;
- in schools a pellet heating system is used;
- a financial help is offered to the inhabitants that use regenerable energy and the water consumption is monitored (Best Worldwide Ecotourism Practices, 2016).

Under these conditions, with a very good geographical position and a sustainable culture, Chanaz is included in many networks, experience exchanges and promotion events.

IV. ASPECTS REGARDING ECOTOURISM IN STATES THAT HAVE RECENTLY JOINED THE E.U.

BULGARIA

Our neighbouring country, Bulgaria, can be proud to occupy the second place in Europe in biodiversity - nature parks, impressive caves, canyons and glacial lakes. For all these, excellent conditions for different tourism activities were created: hiking, mountain crossing, visiting parks and landscapes, bird, animal and plant watching etc. The woods cover almost 37 % of the territory of the country, the most spread being oak and beech woods. There are three national parks - PIRIN (UNESCO), protected territory, fixed in order to preserve the unique landscape of the Pirin mountain, in the park being the oldest tree in the country, which is 1300 years old; RILA; CENTRAL BALKAN and other 11 nature parks - Belasitsa, Balgarka, Vratsa Balkan, Golden Sands, Persina, Rila Monastery, Ruenski Lom, Sinite Kamani, Strandzha, Shumen Plateau (*Bulgaria Ecotourism. Multimedia Brochure*, 2016).

The Srebarna Nature Reserve (UNESCO) covers the Srebarna Lake and the territories around it and has an exceptional flora and fauna, representing one of the most interesting wetland areas in Europe.

Within the Strategy of national and regional development in ecotourism, plans of management of protected areas were approved by the national authorities, it was created and implemented a model of collaboration management of natural resources together with the ethnic minorities, local authorities and private sector; two ecotourism associations were institutionalized near the national parks Rila and Central Balkan, whose members were instructed about the abilities of hospitality, marketing and management of destination (*Bulgaria for All – website*, 2016).

Also, it was created the first Trust Fund for Protected Areas in Eastern Europe. The sensitization of public opinion was achieved through the websites, publications, media, as well as the educational materials.

HUNGARY

At present, Hungary is an important tourism destination, because it has 10 national parks, 38 protected areas and many nature reserves that expect to be explored. Also, on the territory of this country there are some natural wonders that were included in the UNESCO heritage, like Aggtelek Karst and Slovak Karst caves – a complex system of about 712 caves arranged on a surface of 55,000 ha. The same statute has Lake Fertő, region Hortóbogy and the wine-making region Tokaj-Hegyalja (*Elo Tisza – website*, 2016).

An example of good practices is represented by the village Mikóháza, which is involved in many important projects for the regional development of tourism. The local authorities from Mikóháza, Sátoraljaújhely and Kistoronya filed a project within the Cross-border Cooperation Program 2007 - 2013, between Hungary and Slovakia, entitled "Development of Wine and Cognac Tourism in the historical region Tokaj-Hegyalja". The project is focused on the sustainable development of the area (*Umweltbundesamt – website*, 2016).

CROATIA

Ecotourists have many options regarding the wonderful landscape of Croatia, because it has 8 national parks and 10 nature reserves. The guesthouses, the farmer markets, the rustic places for camping, the spa resorts and a very well organized transportation system make Croatia a viable destination for spending holidays.

The Plitvice National Park is of great importance, consisting of 16 freshwater lakes (linked to a series of watercourses and waterfalls) and surrounded by luxuriant woods. Many tourists consider it as one of the most beautiful places in Europe. The park is included in the UNESCO Heritage, and tourists can enjoy many activities in the park, from walks on the sidewalks to boating (*Mother Nature Network - website*).

Beginning with 2004, Croatia chose eolian energy in order to produce energy - in Dalmatia, especially on the Pag Island, where one can see wind turbines.

An important sector for ecotourism is represented by the agriculture in Croatia. Goods produced at the local level are exposed in the food markets throughout the country, thus contributing to the development of the local community.

Moreover, in 2006, the Ministry for the Environment Protection introduced a policy that practically eliminated 100% of the waste that contained glass and plastic from the country. In May 2009, Croatia issued a total interdiction of smoking in all public places, including coffee houses, restaurants, bars and clubs (*Frommer's – website*, 2016).

CONCLUSIONS

Our research focused on presenting ecotourism issues and, also, some examples of good practices in this field. Noticing all these aspects regarding the management of ecotourism in different countries and, if comparing with our country, we could assess the present stage of development and the steps that must be taken in order to align with the international demands, respectively to increase the competitiveness in the field. Thus, we consider that our research could be useful for the decision factors from tourism in Romania.

In conclusion, the quantification of sustainable development of tourism is necessary in every country, especially in the context in which the environment protection, the economic development and satisfying the tourist needs must be ensured. The natural and the anthropic environment offer support for the carrying out of the tourism activities, but the exaggerated use of these resources leads to their degradation. Tourism must function as a profitable activity but, in the long run, the relationship and links mutually advantageous between industry, people and environment can bring financial and sustainable benefits for all and can increase the prestige and the image of tourism, as a global phenomenon.

We conclude that, for Romania, it would be good to move from advertising isolated ecotourism products (elaborated by the administrations of the destinations or by specialized tour-operators) to develop ecotourism destinations, which can be able to offer an ecotourism product integrated and advertised both through the effort of local development associations and through the mobilization of central administrations.

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