

RESEARCHES ON ECONOMIC POTENTIAL OF AGRICULTURAL TOURISM IN WESTERN ROMANIA

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Abstract

Agricultural tourism, any other sphere of the science of tourism activity is subordinated both to the environment and food reserves, being its “raw material”, its scope and activity. This study seeks to identify and assess the potential of bio-resources and of bio-productivity in order to develop rural tourism; for the completion of modern indicators of territorial capital; development of eco-bio tourism packages in Western Romania. Our research has focused on identifying the traditional bio-resources and developing a strategy for promoting and implementing in rural tourism, on the identification and evaluation of bio-productivity in order to develop rural tourism in Western Romania. Through this study, we were able to capture current and future main sides of the agricultural tourism in a territorial system.

Key words: eco-bio tourist packages, bio-resources, bio-productivity, agricultural tourism, tourism

INTRODUCTION

Agricultural tourism has some features that differentiates it from the traditional, standard tourism, namely: tourist consumption is happening in rural areas (essential are: the quality of the rural tourism pension and customization and adaptability of reception services from farmers, knowledge of the natural, human and cultural environment and tourism products originality); the touristic offer is genuine, original, diverse and personalized, organized and led by farmers (by the village people with the characteristic sizing for the ethnicity represented); is an authentic activity, complementary to farm activity and not an alternative or substitute for it; it offers to the population with lower-income the opportunity for rest and comfort, for leisure (of holidays or weekend in the picturesque landscape of the rural environment, with cultural and educational values and a specific hospitality); does not require large investments for general infrastructure facilities and tourist facilities; it is a diffuse tourism (by its specific diversified offer and high spread in space); through good

management the farmer can create the perfect environment for trips in time for the unforgettable moments of childhood for its guests; it is not compatible with mass tourism (developed in resorts and tourist centers in peri-urban areas).

Agricultural tourism is placed on an intermediate level between the health of the individual and the influencing factors. This level allows to work both ways, awarding it an important role in the structure of the quality of life and hence of economic growth. The topic of agricultural tourism in Western Romania, as an agricultural tourism research tool, was insufficiently addressed by Romanian scientific literature, most studies undertaken so far being mainly focused on rural tourism.

The research methodology of the agricultural tourism phenomenon is a challenge in a continuously development that requires argumentation and implementation discussions of a research methodology both in Western Romania and nationally. For this research, we have deepened specialized bibliographic resources realizing that it was the starting point for the done research to

which we have added information from locals, keepers of traditions and crafts. The information provider that determines the type of tourism management suitable for the area is given by tourism indicators. The evolution of rural tourism is analyzed considering the existing tourism resources recovered and recoverable, including those who up to now have not been exploited to their real capacities.

In this context, it was done a statistic of all attractive resources in the county, in terms of their quality, of the existing tourism infrastructure, of the tourism services, with classification of all the resources, but also highlighting the link that is established between collaborators in terms of supply and demand for some of the sights of the area. Using direct and indirect observation method we sought to highlight the potential of agricultural tourism in Western Romania, of the characteristics of the offer, the economic, social and environmental effects on local communities. Alongside this method, we have also accessed sources with databases about the studied region and noticed that there are deviations to the presents reality, thus furthering the research through the methods of field survey and interview.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Tourism activity in rural areas

"Tourism provides a production and consumption of heterogeneous goods or services that contributes to the satisfaction of the needs of tourists, of non-residents" (Petcu, 2005) [3].

It has evolved in a relatively short period of time, becoming from a "freak of townspeople" in a well-defined socioeconomic activity. For those working in this area, rural tourism represents the sphere in which they manifest especially as entrepreneurs and the chance of attaining a profit enabling them to raise the standard of living in the condition of drastic reduction of their chances to survive in acceptable conditions in rural areas. In the situation where the only occupation seems to be subsistence agriculture agricultural tourism provides the opportunity to increase income

of rural inhabitants and retention of young people. At the same time, it allows capitalization of local resources, creating a market for certain goods and services, resulting from the activities otherwise doomed to extinction. Agricultural tourism is also a source of income to support host communities or areas, because it has the power to bring money, which used as an investment in the field can generate more revenue in the future. However, development of rural tourism as a business should not be done at the expense of the natural, social environment or relinquishment of authenticity.

Potential of agricultural tourism in Western Romania

"Depending on capacity, the tourism market is classified into theoretical tourism market, potential tourism market and effective tourism market " (Witt, Brooke M. and Buckley P, 1995) [5]. Attractiveness and functionality of the tourism area rural is given by landscape appreciation that concomitantly constitute a heritage of the community in a particular region with identity value. The criteria for quantitative assessing (statistical and mathematical, cartographic, technical-instrumental), qualitative (relations between landscape and benchmarking), establishing the degree of artificiality and degradation of landscapes, capturing the degree of stability, determination of territorial homogeneous landscape, etc., can determine the attractiveness of rural tourism area of Western Romania.

"The infrastructure for the transportation services, telecommunication, electricity, water, gas and waste management are very important for the initiation and development of businesses". (Milin, Merce and Pet 2009) [2].

The research methodology of the agricultural tourism phenomenon is a challenge in a continuously development that requires argumentation and implementation discussions of a research methodology both in Western Romania and nationally.

Agricultural tourism has several features that distinguish it from classic tourism:

- the space where this activity takes place is the rural space.

The touristic environment is thus quite different from that with which the tourist is familiar. This is because usually it comes from urban areas. Most often, this rural environment is in the mountainous or piedmont area;

■ people in charge of these activities have different levels of training. In the agricultural activity, rural dwellers are hosting tourists, not having special training in tourism. They have folk outfits and attract tourists with popular specific. In contrast, in the classic tourism, people who practice this activity are trained and specialized in tourism;

■ agricultural tourism product is different to the classic tourism. Thus, accommodation is different, agricultural tourism rented rooms are rustic with folk decorative elements, individualized and highly diversified. Food is also different, being prepared at a small scale with products from the peasant household, according to traditional recipes. The negative aspect is completed by the existence of fresh and unpolluted products. Agricultural tourism services are also different. There are visits to workshops, observation of usual rural activities, are practiced sports or recreational activities specific to rural areas;

■ although tourism activity cannot be stored like the one from classic tourism, the peasant household is elastic, and can be more easily adapt to each conjuncture and the activity of agricultural tourism is an alternative activity, sometimes auxiliary, that does not generate serious situations that cease the household existence.

However, an adequate organization of these activities should take into account several key issues for its effectiveness:

■ a first issue concerns the accurate knowledge of the absorption capacity of tourists. This capacity involves assessing both the accommodations and especially its correlation with the possibility of providing food, providing transportation and other services that were advertised as available to tourists. The lack of such correlations determines either a waste of resources and inefficient use of them or on the contrary (overloading them with negative consequences on the quality) inability to

provide the required services, with repercussions on customer satisfaction;

■ another aspect, which is closely related to the first, is the correct estimation of investment to be made in a household that wants to practice such activities. To achieve positive results, any practitioner of agricultural tourism, must provide to tourists a minimum of comfort according to the existing agricultural tourism norms. Even a simple activity such as camping in the household's yard, requires certain services that can be achieved with some effort: water, toilet, security at night, etc. Obviously, the more complex the services are and its quality is better, agricultural tourism activity is more likely to succeed.

■ a third issue to be analyzed is that of the opportunities provided for rural diversification of the services that can be offered to tourists. This analysis has a double meaning; it is the clear program of collateral services that can be satisfied in that environment, inherent possibilities of economic development of the rural area.

■ the fourth issue involves a conscientious analysis of the quality (qualitative parameters) of services that can be offered. It is important to note the motivation of rural tourism and agricultural tourism: that of going back to origins, to simplicity, to tradition, ancient customs and nature.

■ Agricultural tourism activity can take place in virtually limitless variations: from the simple assurance of a camping spot in the household yard, to simple hosting in rooms or houses unused to the most complex forms that require refined accommodation, meals and entertainment. If the first two activities are the simplest forms of supplementing incomes by renting surplus, the others involve complex and diverse efforts. They are themselves extremely varied: accommodation can be simple or with multi-stage facilities and comfort; food involves a large number of possibilities from a simple breakfast to all three meals or special or occasional orders.

Agricultural tourism is an important source of revenue growth for the rural community members, and for the whole rural area an alternative economic and social development.

Agricultural tourism allows the development of a large variety of the small industry, parallel with the revival of traditions and development of complex rural services with beneficial consequences for rural dwellers. There is an interrelationship between agricultural tourism and other economic village branches, because agricultural tourism determines their development (pottery, milling, vegetable growing, harvesting medicinal plants, cultivation of berries and processing, fisheries, handicrafts, weaving) and these in turn creates new opportunities for rural tourism development and expanding. Agricultural tourism is one of the important branches of national economy that aims to develop tourism in rural areas closely correlated to the local economy being a close link between tourism and other sectors of the local economy and in this case specifically with agriculture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In current conditions, when "mass tourism" becomes almost impracticable because of high prices, a chance to practice tourism is agricultural tourism.

The current trend of integration of rural tourism in the international tourism circuit, assumes the existence within this tourism of an infrastructure and a degree of comfort to Western standards, infrastructure being a

motivating factor in choosing a private farm as a destination for the holidays.

Agricultural tourism may be an opportunity to start a new activity parallel to that which already is done by rural dwellers, using to increase profitability the infrastructure already available. The reasons for the decision to practice agricultural tourism are:

- the market is expanding; the development of the tourism demand is estimated by a 3.5% annual growth for international tourism and with a 4% for rural tourism;

- investments are much smaller than in classic tourism, this because they only require upgrades, refurbishments and adequate facilities for receiving tourists;

- there is not needed expertise that is difficult to achieve. At a household level, getting the minimum necessary knowledge is possible after taking certain courses of short duration;

- work is complementary, it does not mean ordinary business interruption (agricultural);

- can harness higher household products obtained from agricultural activity. The law provides for the possibility to sell products from their own farms and more efficient use of them

- is a family business that can be achieved by all family members and also by rotating after the existing possibilities;

- the state encourages this activity through a number of financial incentives.

Table 1. Evolution of the number of tourists accommodated in Romania during 2010 - 2015

Years	No. of tourists (Thousands)	Dynamic indicator I	Of which					
			Romanian (thousands)	Dynamic indicator	Ratio of Romanian tourists	Foreigners (thousands)	Dynamic indicator	Ratio of foreign tourist
2010	678	64.2	653	63.2	96.3	25	52.1	3.7
2011	689.5	65.3	663	65.8	96.2	26.5	55.2	3.8
2012	634.5	60.1	601.7	59.7	94.8	32.8	68.3	5.2
2013	674	63.8	637	63.2	94.5	37	77.1	5.5
2014	682.8	64.7	637.7	63.3	93.4	45.1	93.6	6.6
2015	650	61.6	614	61.2	90.2	36	90.2	5.6
I	-	96.93	-	96.78	-	-	99.55	-
R	-	-3.07	-	-3.22	-	-	-0.45	-

Source: INS - Statistical Yearbook of Romania, 2010-2015, Processed by authors

"Tourist attractions have a more restricted sphere, limited to elements that draw attention, produce impression, incites to travel" (Stănciulescu and Micu, 2009) [4].

A rural location can provide many services to tourists, the number and type depending on the size and location of the guesthouse, the

tourism potential of the area, the creativity of the householder.

"The intensification of the demand for practicing agricultural tourism has positively influenced the concerns of the developers from tourism, meaning reorientation to the activities of this form of tourism." (Boiță and

Constantin, 2010) [1].

The most expressive indicators used to characterize the dynamics of tourist traffic are: number of tourists, number of overnight stays and average length of stay. Number of tourists as the most representative physical, quantitative indicator had during 2010-2015 the progress in shown (Table 1).

Since 2010 the number of tourists arriving in Romania fell, reaching 61.6% in 2015. An important factor that determined this trend is the declining purchasing power of the Romanian population, due to lower revenue growth compared to the price jump.

In these circumstances the number of Romanian tourists who arrived in Romania, with a total share of tourists (90-93%) was decreasing and naturally has shaped the total number of tourists accommodated in this period.

Thus, if the average annual decline in the total of tourist's arrivals in Romania was at a rate of 3.07% for Romanian tourists registered in 2015, which represented 61.2% of those who arrived in 2010, the average annual decline was 3.22. After a sinusoidal evolution and a minimum recorded in 2010, foreign tourist arrivals in Romania have returned, the level in 2015 stood at 90.2% compared to 2010. It should be emphasized that the results of a poll are estimates of the parameters of the population and an estimate assumes a margin of error. In opinion polls is accepted a margin of error of +/- 3%.

Table 2. Expected and observed frequency of responses

Response Type	Observed frequency	Expected frequency
Yes	90	75
No	60	75

The statistical results obtained and the relationships uncovered should be interpreted qualitatively in order to provide a holistic view on the issue investigated.

Statistical inference is based on data obtained, systematized and interpreted from a sample extracted from a population; therefore, it requires that the sample chosen to be representative and characteristic for that population. This survey was attended by 150

tourists from the Western part of Romania.

This study is non-experimental, with a pencil-paper design. Analysis was conducted between different samples of subjects. To test the hypothesis was applied a questionnaire created by the authors.

The questionnaire consists of 7 items, of which 6 are closed questions and one open. The participants have to choose the response that corresponds to their expectations the best of the 2 possible answers (Yes / No). The questionnaire was pre-tested with the classic method on a sample of 150 subjects. We gathered the "yes" and the "no" answers ". For statistical processing, we used the largest quota, where the majority answers "yes" were marked with the code '22' and the majority answers "no" were marked with the code "11".

The survey was conducted in October 2016 specifying to the participants the privacy of the data and only their use for scientific purposes.

For data processing was used SPSS software, version 11, and to test the statistical hypothesis the χ^2 technique was used (Table 2 and 3).

Table 3. Test of the statistical hypothesis

Variable	Tourists feedback
The value of χ^2 test	$\chi^2 (1) = 0.11, p < .05$
N	150

Preliminary results

The main conclusions drawn from the study are the following:

■ Regarding the practice of agricultural tourism in the last 10 years, as seen in the graph (Fig. 1) most respondents have practiced agricultural tourism 4 times or more (33%). This share is with 13% higher than that of those who are on their first stay. The share of those who previously practiced agricultural tourism 2 or 3 times is equal (17%).

So, we can estimate that most tourists visiting such locations are firmly convinced of the benefits of practicing agricultural tourism.

■ If we refer to the frequency of visits to the Caras - Severin area, most of the respondents appear to remain faithful to the chosen area,

visiting it over 2 times. None of the respondents responded with “never”, which aims to support the estimate that the tourist that once visited a location and found it satisfactory to its desires and needs, remains faithful to the choice made and doesn't seek a new destination

■ In terms of the average duration of a visit to Caraş- Severin, it may be noticed that the vast majority spend a week or over seven days at the destination; the share of those who only stay here overnight is quite low in both locations considered.

■ Regarding the appeals that leads tourists to frequent hostels in Caras - Severin, it may be noticed that in addition to the landscape, included in the "other" category, a large share for both hostels, what attracts tourists in the Caras - Severin area is the natural.

■ Referring to the sources of information, we concluded that the main sources of information used in selecting the destination by Romanian tourists are accounting from kith and kin, followed by internet and ANTREC leaflets.

These results can be explained by the preponderance of tourists who base their choice on subjective information received from their entourage and less by means of objective information. Also among the other age categories the Internet is considered a reliable and sufficient source of information, statistics showing that travel agents bring to hostel 15% of the average, the best way to promote the tourist offer remaining the Internet

■ Concerning what type of tourism is practiced in the Caras - Severin area, as expected most choose a tourism stay, besides the relaxation, followed by the knowledge or weekends tourism and less of proactive tourism.

■ Regarding the preferred means of travel, most tourists go to travel in groups, by group meaning their partner and/or extended family. Considering that most responded that they practice tourism for the stay, the number of those traveling individually is smaller, association with the affiliation group improving the feeling of relaxation that is intended to be achieved by “going on leavelf we talk about the reservation, where it was

taken, most respondents made a reservation in advance. However, the differences between those who did and didn't do a reservation are not high, a result explained by the fact that as mentioned previously, most tourists weren't on their first visit to the location. Those that have made a reservation they "went" straight to the source, making it at the tourist reception, and the rest have resorted to intermediaries: ANTREC or travel agency, which is consistent with the information mode.

■ concerning the destination, many use the Internet, organizing their own stay. Concerning the services that were included, most opted for packages including full board, half board and accommodation with breakfast being at parity. These results can be explained by differences in material possibilities. Some tourists opted for transportation as well. To move to the hostel most, use their personal vehicle, offering greater comfort, followed by the train, minibus or coach or combinations thereof.

■ Regarding the level of comfort, most opt for accommodation presenting a medium level of comfort (2 or 3 stars), extremes underrepresented.

■ About the quality of the menu, the majority answered that it was good.

■ Regarding willingness to spend extra for a higher standard, tourists who attended Gărâna Pension responded in a significant number with yes.

■ Regarding the availability of the tourists to return in the next three years to Gărâna Pension, object of this study, most respondents said they would return to it, but this result should be evaluated with caution considering the number of those who answered "I don't know" which can denote either indecision or social desirability of the subject.

■ In this study, have participated 80 males and 70 females.

■ The majority of respondents were aged between 26-35 years and 56-65 years.

■ In terms of occupation, most participants in this study were either employees or retirees. The result shows interest in agricultural tourism, but in the future, it is necessary to

pursue a more “aggressive” program with more coverage of the pensions in Romania.

CONCLUSIONS

As in all tourism services also in agricultural tourism the indicators used in assessing economic agents refer to items like: demand, supply, quality of service. Analysis of the possibilities and implications of the activity of rural tourism and ecotourism is given by the rough standard margin that is considered the methodological concept of making such analyzes.

The potential given by relief, climate, natural, architectural conditions and beyond, are for Western Romania, elements of attractiveness for tourism.

The Romanian village, through its millennial existence, represented the vein of continuity for our people in this area, today Romania, as an adaptation to the geographical environment, which was the crucible for its forming, its culture and its civilization.

The agricultural potential of the Romanian village is extremely complex, comprising in its composition natural and cultural-historical ingredients of great variety and tourist attraction. Along with the natural composed of landscape aspects, elements of flora and fauna, great attractiveness landforms, rivers and lakes, balneary elements, some nature reserves, national parks, the rural Romanian space also benefits from an ethnographic and folklore potential of high originality and authenticity.

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