

THE ROLE OF DESTINATION MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATIONS (DMOs) FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL TOURISM IN BULGARIA

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Abstract

Bulgaria has all the necessary resources for the development of specialized types of tourism. There are also sea and mountain tourism, there are opportunities for development of rural, spa, cultural, culinary, wine tourism and others. In this connection, the country is divided into several tourist areas, each of which has a certain tourist specialization. The attention is directed to the tourist region of Rhodope, with specialization in rural tourism. The main purpose is to analyze the organization's management of the region as a destination and to explore the opportunities for developing sustainable rural tourism and its popularization at both national and international level.

Key words: *tourist destination management organizations, rural tourism, sustainable development, sustainable rural tourism*

INTRODUCTION

Bulgaria has all the necessary natural and anthropogenic tourist resources for the development of both seaside and mountain recreational tourism but also other specialized types of tourism such as cultural-historical, adventurous, rural and agrarian, wine, health and SPA tourism, etc.

A typical feature of tourism through is its rapid development, which produces adverse effects on the environment in general – the natural, the anthropogenic and the sociocultural environment. This strongly calls for the development of sustainable forms of tourism or such forms of destination management that will ensure the development of sustainable tourism.

Sustainable development involves the creation of opportunities to satisfy the needs of next generations, to ensure social tolerance, to protect the ecological integrity of environment and the growth of economy.

Eventually, tourism development can take into account the preservation of cultural heritage, the promotion of tourist attractions, investments, diversification of activities, service and staff quality [8].

This strongly calls for the introduction of changes into the organization and management of tourism at its different levels (site, destination, region, government), and also into the tooling set of tourist policy. A milestone in this respect would be the restructuring of tourist destination management organizations. From being regarded predominantly as marketing units, organizations should take up the strategic position of managers, and based on the regulatory requirements and the consumers' requirements, they should provide the necessary managing potential and tooling set that would be required to ensure the development of sustainable forms of tourism. Exactly for this purpose the National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism was created, it includes adequate measures for developing sustainable forms of tourism [2]. It is clear that the so called "massification" of contemporary tourism causes significant problems of economic, social, cultural and environmental nature [6]. Having in mind the globalization and its effects on tourism, there is an urgent need to change completely the tourist product policy [7]. Looking from the perspective of specialized types of tourism, the rural, the cultural and the

ecological tourism are often viewed as sustainable forms of tourism. This fact is due to the philosophy of marketed product:

- preservation of nature and biological diversity;
- preservation, restoration and development of our cultural historical heritage;
- ensuring social tolerance and consideration for the needs of local inhabitants;
- economic growth and progress.

It is exactly this philosophy that formed the basis for the wording of the **purpose** of this article, which is **to specify the role of tourist destination management organizations for the development of sustainable rural tourism in Bulgaria.**

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To define the role of tourist destination management organizations for the development of sustainable tourism we applied the method of observation, the method of comparative analysis (benchmarking), the normative method, plus a number of other management methods that have to do with the creation of a managerial structure for an organization.

We made an attempt to introduce the concept of developing the so called “slow tourism”. In general, slow tourism is defined as “a contemporary concept for creating alternative forms of tourism and harmonic development of destinations based on ethical values, full-valued tourist travels that were given one’s individual meaning, free from the stress and dynamicity that are typical of mass tourism, and taking place in natural, unique and authentic environment” [3]. It is exactly thanks to the above-mentioned specific features of slow tourism that it can be greatly associated with the services provided in the sphere of rural tourism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The term “tourist destination” has a somewhat marketing connotation because “it reflects the interaction between the tourist needs and demands on the background of the target spatial direction of tourist streams toward a

particular host territory” [5]. The term tourist destination can also be defined as a territorial system having enough and diverse attractions and services available that are perceived as unique and capable of satisfying certain tourist needs, which has to be managed as a strategic business unit.

In this context and for the purpose of our study we can define **rural tourist destination** as a **territorial system, which is part of a rural region and possesses unique rural tourist resources to satisfy specific tourist needs in the sphere of rural and agrarian tourism, which should be managed, organized and planned as an autonomous business unit.**

The development of rural tourism is directly related to a series of other industries, which brings a number of challenges to the face of management. On the other hand, rural tourism interacts all the time with different elements of the two major areas of reality – the natural environment and the anthropogenic environment (including its sociocultural aspects). Therefore, the rural tourist destination management must ensure the proper functioning and harmonic interaction between the basic components of rural tourism, together with compliance with the requirements for ensuring the balance between the tourists’ needs and the local inhabitants’ needs. In this respect, the tourist destination management can be discussed in terms of its business, institutional and territorial aspects (Fig.1).

The business aspect is associated with the management of tourism as a business, which is carried out by companies specialized in the main tourist activities (such as the hospitality business – hotel and restaurant management, tour operation and travel agency) but also in various other activities that either directly or indirectly influence the development of tourism (transport, construction, advertising, agriculture, etc.).

A typical feature of a rural tourist business is the prevalence of small-scale companies with family-owned sites, which renders the management of a destination very difficult. On the other hand, such difficulties provide a very sound motivation to establish destination

management organizations, especially if the priority is to be put on sustainable tourism.

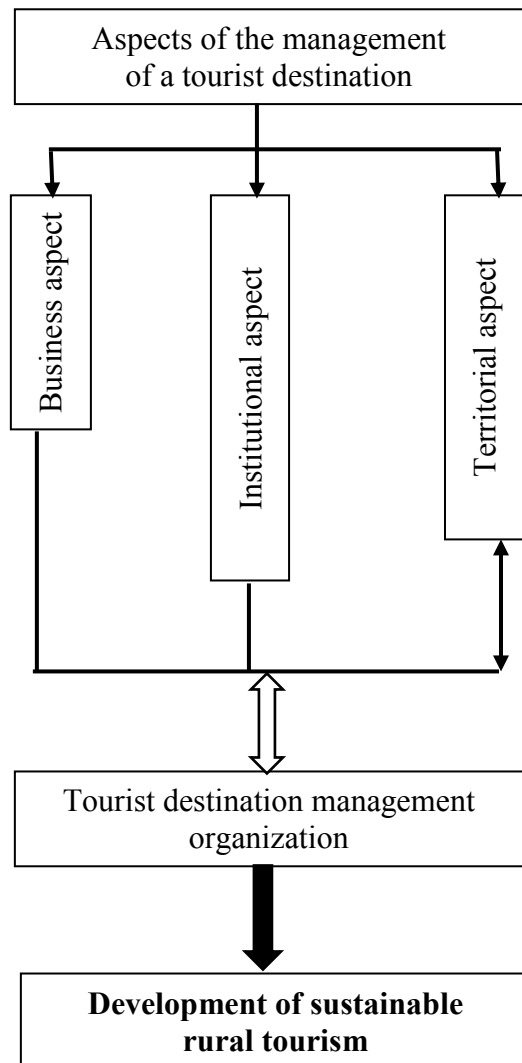


Fig. 1. Aspects of the management of tourist destinations in view of achieving sustainable rural tourism.
 Source: Author's figure.

The institutional aspect is associated with the management delivered by government agencies and non-government organizations. A specific feature of rural tourism is also the function of certain informal institutions, which can be very much regarded as one of the basic organizational issues and factors that could help overcome the effects of subjectivity at the level of destination management.

The territorial aspect of management is mainly associated with the arrangement of recreational territories, the building of super and infrastructure for the needs of tourism, the preservation and the environment-friendly and

effective use of available tourist resources. The territorial aspect of management is influenced to a great extent by the business and institutional aspects because the subjects of management come from the institutional and business spheres.

An important issue in the territorial aspect of a rural tourist destination management is the management of agrarian lands because a large portion of those lands can serve as a resource for the development of sustainable forms of rural and agrarian tourism.

Based on the above aspects of management, we can summarize some key features of tourist destination management organizations, in particular concerning the rural tourist destinations.

Destination management comprises all the methods by which tourism can affect the destination, aimed at achieving the objectives set by the management. They include planning and control of tourism development, and of rural tourism in particular (including by applying the tooling set of tourism policy and the measures for rural development), provision of the required infrastructure, management of tourist streams, information services, business support, establishment and adherence to standards, monitoring.

Rural tourist destination management should be oriented towards the creation of conditions that will ensure the provision of unique experiences for the tourists in rural environment. Rural environment means rural lifestyle, ethical conduct, rural authenticity and culture. The effect that is sought after can only be achieved by combining the efforts of many organizations often very diverse in nature but always operating as one whole. In this regard, destination management requires that all interests and understandings no matter how different they may be are united for the purpose of achieving one common goal – to ensure the destination viability and integrity now and in the future.

This is very much the basis underlying the philosophy of rural tourism and the tourist products it offers. Preserving the culture and customs, taking care of the economic development while at the same time taking into consideration the needs of local

inhabitants, the condition of nature and providing for the needs of next generations. The problem has to do with the huge number of companies operating in this field, the missing proper coordination between them and the discrepancy between the needs of contemporary tourists (very much provoked by the modern-time development of tourist services) and the philosophy of life “conservation” which underlies the concept of rural tourism.

It is exactly here that one of the key roles of rural tourist destination management organizations is manifested. Quite often they become the principal advocates of tourist industry by guaranteeing mitigation of the negative effects from tourism on the environment in general and on the local communities in particular, by creating at the same time possibilities to “exchange” people, ideas, and opportunities. This can very much be the basis for overcoming the “rural backwardness”, the stereotypes and some behavioral patterns that are typical for quite many Bulgarian villages.

Actually, a rural tourist destination management organization can be most useful for facilitating the dialogue between the private sector, the public sector and the other parties concerned about the development of rural tourism. The purpose here is to set the required balance between modernization and conservation so as to guarantee the long-term sustainability of a destination.

The key strategic aims of every rural tourist destination management organization should be:

- (i) to improve the long-term prosperity of local inhabitants;
- (ii) to ensure maximum satisfaction of visitors by providing high-quality basic services, plus extra services that are specific and typical for the region and the village;
- (iii) to increase the liquidity and to ensure maximum profitability for local enterprises as well as the maximum multiplication effect for rural tourism;
- (iv) to bring to minimum the adverse effects of tourism by guaranteeing a stable balance between the economic benefits and the sociocultural and environmental costs;

(v) to make rural environment ready to host tourists with specific needs;

(vi) to attract major agricultural producers into the tourist business.

The last aim has become expedient because the rural tourist destination management requires that all processes and activities are organized in such a way as to guarantee the sustainable development of a destination. For rural tourist destinations this very much involves the performance of agricultural activities in the concerned region as a basic branch of industry, which is closely bound to the development of rural and agrarian tourism. To achieve sustainable development of destinations, the presence and completeness of the main components of sustainable development must be guaranteed:

(a) **ecological sustainability** – development must be compatible with the processes required to maintain the ecological balance, biological diversity and biological resources;

(b) **economic sustainability and succession of generations** – development must produce economic effectiveness and ensure equality and succession to the generations to come;

(c) **social sustainability** – development must create higher living standards for local inhabitants, maintain and develop the established ethical conduct and communication, and guarantee the harmony and understanding in society;

(d) **cultural sustainability** – development must be compatible with the culture and values of local inhabitants and guarantee the preservation, development and delivery of all tangible and intangible items bearing the national culture and spirit to the generations to come.

The problem, according to the business approach, is that sustainable development is mainly and most of all associated with such circumstances and factors that could guarantee maximum profit from related economic activities [1]. For the development of sustainable rural tourism this problem goes even deeper. The major part of companies offering tourist services lack the necessary theoretical knowledge about tourism, not to mention in the sphere of economics, therefore

they are basically not ready or able to provide sustainable rural tourism.

There follows the conclusion that in order to develop sustainable rural tourism all concerned institutions in the private and in the public sector and all the subjects of tourist destination management should strive to reach unanimity, coordination and single focus of their efforts. Therefore, **the main purpose of a rural tourist destination management organization can be defined as follows – to synchronize the efforts of all concerned parties as part of the process for achieving sustainable development.**

For this purpose, some of the basic processes related to the management and organization of rural tourist sites must be standardized. Considering the multitude and diversity of sites where rural tourist services are provided, there appears the need to create models (patterns) for organizing and managing the different activities performed at the tourist sites but also certain models (patterns) to be applied for shaping the design of tourist product. The idea is to introduce standards for certain organizational and managerial activities in order to make it easier for the rural tourist sites to adapt to ambient

environment, thus ensuring their economic stability. On the other hand, this will greatly facilitate and increase the efficiency of efforts made by the rural tourist destination management organizations to coordinate and achieve sustainable rural tourism.

The normative method and the designed normative models can be used as a starting point for the development of such patterns.

The main purpose of creating the normative model is to define the actual condition of a tourist site and to compare it to a given baseline model thus ensuring its economic X – effectiveness. When discrepancies between the normative model and the actual condition are found, measures should be taken to eliminate such discrepancies and to adapt the tourist site organization and management to the introduced norms and standards.

The design of normative models for tourist activities goes through several stages, the purpose of which is to assess and analyze the condition of processes that run in the rural tourist site and to restructure its management so as to eliminate as much and as best as possible the discrepancies between the actual condition and the design model (Fig.2).

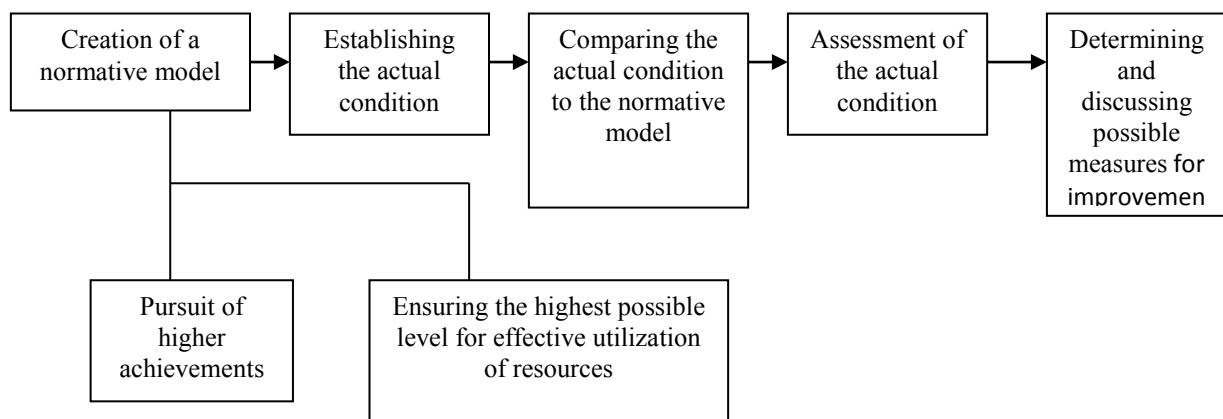


Fig. 2. Key stages in the creation of a normative model to be applied in the sphere of rural tourism

Source: Author's adaptation on Stankov, V. et al, 2007. Organization and Management of the Agricultural Enterprise (Agromanagement).

In summary, from the point of view of rural tourism, the territorial division of the country into regions can serve as a starting point for the creation of such organizations. Although the regions where rural tourism is developed are not strictly outlined, a suitable region for

this purpose can be the tourist region of Rhodope Mountains (Fig.3). This region offers its guests the unmatched opportunity to become engulfed into the typical Rhodopean atmosphere amidst its well-preserved nature, authentic culture and colorful history [4].

The region has the necessary infrastructure, the resources needed for the development of sustainable rural tourism and the favorable disposition of local inhabitants, in addition it is easily identifiable as a tourist destination. Another advantage is the existing tourist region management organization.

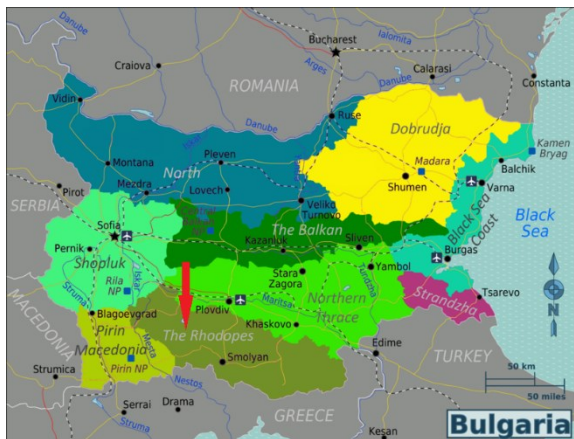


Fig. 3. Rhodopes tourist region
Source: <https://en.wikivoyage.org/wiki/Bulgaria>

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, let us point out that control, being an essential function of the management of a tourist destination for sustainable tourism, is the key role factor to guarantee:

- the protection of economic interests of tourist product and service providers and traders;
- the creation of suitable conditions to improve the destination quality and competitive capacity;
- the defense of visitors' rights;
- the prevention of unsustainable practices, risk and crisis situations in the destination;
- the protection of interests of all concerned parties in the sustainable rural tourist destination.

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