

THE ECOTOURISM IN DOBRUDGEA'S RURAL AREA - REALITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

The paper aimed to present some aspects of the development stage of ecotourism activities within and around the natural protected areas in Dobrugea – a historical province from Romania's South-East extremity, as well as a set of proposals to orient the efforts of putting into value these destinations through ecotourism activities, in agreement with the requirements of the national legislation and the international conventions to which Romania adhered. The whole volume of information presented in this paper was obtained by bibliographic documentation and field visits. The analysis of data suggested that the development of ecotourism areas should be based on empowering local communities by education, social entrepreneurship and cultural preservation programs.

Key words: ecotourism, natural potential, rural area, development strategy, Dobrugea

INTRODUCTION

The tourism sector is a privileged field of application of the sustainable development principles. When managed properly, this industry can result in a positive impact on the economic, environmental and social field. Ecotourism, a form of sustainable tourism, is a particularly promising niche. Global demand for this type of experience is growing remarkably and is expected to continue to increase over the coming years. [15, 17]

Ecotourism is a well-exploited segment at tourism industry level and has a particular resonance among tourists, especially among those who have a special consideration for the environment and want the best possible protection and conservation of it. However, this term and its variations (eco-vacation, ecotour, eco-adventure, eco-cruise, etc.) were often introduced in tourism offers only as simple words, tricks to attract a wide range of tourists, or to enter and to benefit from the special natural and cultural areas. [1]

The fast growing transportation industry, the free flow of information over the internet and different media, and the decreasing communication costs are all factors supporting the new emerging ecotourism. [5]

The tourism activities developed under the aegis of ecotourism offer to tourism industry, tourists, authorities and local people the possibility to cooperate for the organization and development of responsible journeys into the natural areas unaltered by the anthropic activity, in order to admire the ecological richness, to study, to understand and enjoy both nature and cultural diversity, in a manner that will take into account the impact upon the environment, in the idea of maintaining the viability in the respective area on an indefinite period of time. [10]

At the same time, the development of ecotourism activities in the protected areas implies a series of socio-economic benefits such as:

- Generates job creation at local level (directly in the tourism sector or in related sectors).
- Stimulates the local economy by developing services (hotels, restaurants, souvenir industry, craft products and guiding services).
- Generates economic exchanges with the exterior of the protected areas.
- Determines diversification of local economy, particularly in the rural area where people are working in the farming sector only during one season in a year.
- Stimulates mainly the rural economy by the creation or increase of demand for agricultural

products needed to ensure tourism services and by capital insertion.

- Intensifies the development of infrastructure, which also brings benefits to the local population.
- Once developed the tourism in a protected area, the local/regional/national authorities can be stimulated to contribute to the development of peripheral regions by capital insertion.
- Encourages the increase of agricultural productivity on restricted land areas (intensive agriculture) to maintain a larger area under natural vegetation.
- Can contribute to the improvement of the intercultural relations in a region. Tourists often want to know the traditions and customs specific to an ethnographic region, and the guest community is thus stimulated to revive the folk traditions.
- In the conditions of normal development, tourism can lead to self-financing the development mechanisms that the park authorities can benefit by as instrument for the preservation of natural areas.
- Creates leisure facilities that can be also used by local communities over the year.
- Supports the preservation activities, by persuading the governments and large public on the importance of natural areas. [7]

Romania has a lot of attractions, making it one of the most attractive ecotourism destinations in Europe. The authenticity and the uniqueness of those attractions create a story that is looking forward to be revealed to all tourists visiting Romania. [5]

Among the zones where ecotourism programs are developed, we can also mention Dobrugea, a historical province from Romania's South-East extremity, with an area divided into two counties from the administrative point of view: Tulcea and Constanța, consisting of three geographical relief units: delta, plateau and seashore. [13]

In this context, the present paper had the purpose to analyze some aspects of the development stage of the ecotourism activities within and around the natural protected areas in Dobrugea, as well as a set of proposals to orient the efforts of putting into value these destinations through ecotourism, in line with

the requirements of the national legislation and the international conventions to which Romania adhered.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research methods are of inventory-type analysis of resources in the Dobrugean ecotourism. The analysis is based on data and information taken from documentation and field visits.

Dobrugea's ecotourism patrimony is evaluated according to the normative acts, which regulate the management of tourism resources.

Taking into account the floristic and faunistic importance of the Dobrugean zone, some of the sites of the European Ecological Network Nature 2000 include more protected areas which has a great natural value and can generate revenues from ecotourism and other associated activities. The protected natural area is defined as "the terrestrial, aquatic and/or underground area, in which there are wild plant and animal species, bio-geographic elements and formations, or of other nature, with special ecological, scientific or cultural value, which has a special protection and preservation regime, established according to the legal provisions". [8]

In order ensure the special protection and preservation measures of the natural heritage, a differentiated protection, preservation and utilization regime has been established, according to the following categories of natural protected areas (Table 1).

Table 1. Categories of natural protected areas

Categories	Characteristics
of national interest	scientific reserves, national parks, natural monuments, natural reserves, natural parks;
of international interest	natural sites of the world natural heritage, wetlands of international importance, biosphere reserves;
of community interest or Natura 2000 sites	Sites of Community Interest (SCI), Special Protection Areas (SPA);
of county interest or local interest	settled only on the public/private area of the administrative-territorial units (if the case)

Source: <http://www.anpm.ro/> [8]

The sustainable tourism inside and outside the protected areas imposes:

- the close cooperation with the authorities of the protected areas;
- the tourist operators and guides who work in the protected areas must have high ecologic knowledge;
- practical and financial contributions of tourist operators for the preservation of the protected areas;
- rules for the promotion and marketing of holidays based on the protected areas;
- guidelines for the local communities involvement;
- standards for the design and operation of sustainable and business tourism. [2]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Situated in the South-East of Romania, Dobrudgea has a surface of 15,570 km². It is a well geographically individualised territory, limited by the Danube and the Black Sea. From the administrative point of view, This area is divided between two counties: Constanta and Tulcea, included in the South-East development region of Romania. It has 17 urban settlements (4 municipalities and 13 towns), 104 communes and 322 villages with a population of 884,406 inhabitants on January 1, 2016. [9]

Dobrudgea is an extremely important zone from the bio-geographic point of view, which determined the concentration of a number of flora and fauna species of conservation interest and also the interference of the floristic species from the Central European, Mediterranean and Asian areas.

The territory of the Tulcea and Constanta, from north to south and from east to west, is characterized by an important number of natural and semi-natural habitats with a vast diversity:

- water habitats (fresh water habitats, salt water habitats, marine and coast habitats),
- terrestrial habitats (forests habitats, steppe pastures and bushes, silvo-steppe habitats, moors and peatery habitats) and
- underground habitats (cave habitats). [13]

In Dobrudgea the main areas with ecotourism potential are: the Danube Delta and Razim-Sinoe lagoon complex, the Măcin Mountains National Park, the Romanian Black Sea Coast and the Northern Dobrudgean Plateau (Table 2).

Table 2. Characteristics of the main protected areas located in Dobrudgea

Name	Characteristics
Danube Delta and the lagoon complex Razim-Sinoe	With a great diversity of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems, which has a triple international status at present: Biosphere Reserve, Ramsar site (wetland of international importance) and World Natural and Cultural Heritage Site where real opportunities exist for ecotourism activity.
Măcin Mountains National Park	Located in the north-western part of the county Tulcea, with maximum altitude 467 m (the mountain peak Greci-Țuțuiatul), which is fascinating by its unique geo-morphology and biogeography.
Romanian Black Sea Coast	With its specific ecotourism potential represented by the Sites of Community Interest, such as: sea dunes from Agigea and sea zones from Tuzla, Costinesti, Vama Veche.
Northern Dobrudgean Plateau	With ecotourism potential, yet totally un-explored (large forests and a rich hunting fund).

Source: own processing [12, 19, 21, 22]

At present, on the lists of sites from Natura 2000 referring to Dobrudgea, there are 64 sites, out of which 31 Special Protection Areas (SPA) and 33 Sites of Community Interest (SCI) (Table 3).

Table 3. Number of Romanian sites Natura 2000, in the year 2016

	SPA	SCI
Constanta	22	24
Tulcea	9	8
Dobrudgea	31	32
Romania	148	384

Source: <http://www.anpm.ro/> [8]

The Natura 2000 sites are suitable for ecotourism and agro-tourism development based on tradition and organic products, which may lead to a brand. Tourism and specifically eco-friendly tourism industries (eco-tourism, agro-tourism, etc.) are encouraging development activities in the regional and national Natura 2000 sites as a sustainable opportunity for people and nature. Following the example of other countries, the local community can create multiple niches to give the possibility for the

local people to participate in the development of tourism promoting mechanisms. Together, these can promote their traditions and the local natural resources at national and international level. [16]

In Romania, the ecotourism programs have a relatively recent history. The first ecotourism packages emerged around the year 2000, when a series of national or natural parks started to develop projects that also had ecotourism components. [6]

The ecotourism activities can include:

- types of adventure activities (for example rafting, canoeing, on horse tourism on pre-established routes, tour skiing, bicycle trips on established routes, etc.);
- guided trips / organized journeys;
- tours for nature observation (flora, fauna);
- experimentation trips for nature preservation activities;
- trips to local communities (visits to cultural objectives, visiting traditional farms, viewing traditional cultural manifestations, traditional food products consumption, acquisition of non-food traditional products etc.).

Therefore, tourist and agro-tourist pensions play a more and more important role in Romania's tourism and their services look to be more attractive in comparison to other sorts of accommodation units due to a good correlation between the provided services and prices. [11] Ecotourism in Dobrugea is still a narrow segment of the tourism market, confronted with many problems such as:

- weak cooperation at local level,
- modest promotion at national and international level,
- existence of a limited offer, weakly diversified,
- weak development of the infrastructure specific for ecotourism at the level of protected areas,
- labour force migration,
- low training level of those employed in this field etc. [14]

The tourist accommodation structures represent the most important component of the specific technical-material basis, as it responds to one of the tourists' fundamental needs, which is rest and bedding. The lack of such

organized spaces can be harmful for the environment.

The protected areas do not have a sufficient number of housing units (for example the Macinului Mountains National Park); however, in most cases, this is compensated by the housing units from the vicinity of protected areas. The Romanian National Forest Administration "Romsilva" considers that there are no problems related to the reception capacity for the visitors in the parks under its administration and that there are enough places for the controlled increase of their number without endangering the environment. [3]

The visiting centers and information points play a special role within the tourism infrastructure of the protected areas in Dobrugea. These have an important role in promoting the management objectives of the protected natural areas, in order to get the large public aware of the importance of measures for natural species/habitats preservation in the context of the sustainable management of natural resources. In general, at present, the protected areas in Dobrugea are poorly equipped from this point of view.

Within the process of tourist valorization of the protected areas, a special role is played by the specific access infrastructure (roads, paths, pre-established trails). The access inside the parks, depending on the land area configuration, is by various means, including: walking, private vehicles, boats, small ships and bicycles.

The category of "ecotourist" can also include a person who, during the sojourn in a tourist resort buys an ecotourism program for one day within a national park nearby, even if the activities developed in nature occupy only a small part of his sojourn. Yet, there are activities that cannot be considered ecotourism activities, namely those activities that although are developed in nature, they have an obvious negative impact upon the natural or socio-cultural environment (for example the off-road activities).

The conducted studies showed that those interested in a real experience in ecotourism generally demand more than the average classical tourists. As a result, ecotourism is

mainly destined to the tourists with a medium or high income level, with a culture oriented towards the knowledge of nature, who tend to practice a healthy way of living; these tourists need an increasingly better quality of the environment in which they choose to spend their holidays: fresh air, unpolluted waters and places, nice landscapes, etc.

Tourists also started to appreciate more and more the sojourns in places in which the natural resources are protected in an institutionalized manner, yet this is an adjacent point of interest and does not constitute a concern for the majority of tourists.

At present, as long as there is no taxation system for tourists at the park entrance, there is no evidence of the number of visitors, this being only estimated. According to the data of the National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism, Bucharest, until now, in the Dobrugean protected areas, there were systematic actions for monitoring and registration of visitors only in the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve and in the National Park Macinului Mountains. [3]

In the year 2008, in the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve (Tulcea municipality included), 96090 tourists were accommodated, out of which 82% were Romanian tourists and 18% foreign tourists (fig. 1); in the year 2012, in the same area 88021 tourists were accommodated, out of which 64% were Romanian tourists and 36% foreign tourists. [9]

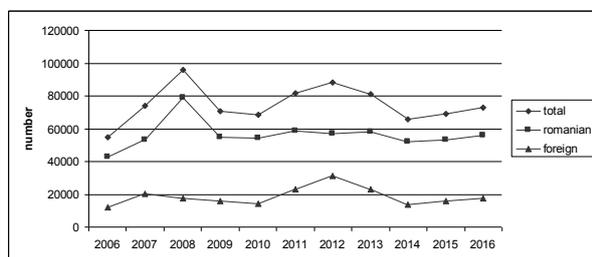


Fig.1. Number of tourist arrivals in the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, 2006-2016

Source: NIS, Tempo-online, 2017 [9]

In the National Park Macinului Mountains, about 10,000 visitors are mainly Romanians from the zones near the Park (the local communities or the municipalities of Brăila, Galați, Tulcea, Constanța), with an average

duration of stay of one day (and a minimum economic impact upon the local communities); the main visitor groups are local people in the localities near the park (for a picnic), bird-watchers, rovers in small groups (2-10 persons), organized groups of 20-40 persons who ask for a guide from the park administration, cycling tourists, climbers, families with caravans and personal cars. [3]

Although the estimated number of visitors in natural and national parks is high enough, we must have in view that only a small part of them have the ecotourism practice as motivation.

There are a multitude of actors involved in ecotourism development in Romania. Some of them play a more important role than others, but each of them brings a special contribution in the development of ecotourism.

The key actors involved in the development of ecotourism can be classified as follows:

- governmental institutions,
- local public administrations,
- administrations of the protected areas,
- members of the private tourism sector,
- non-governmental organizations,
- local communities,
- financiers,
- university environment,
- tourists.

In this respect, the organizations/institutions in charge (mainly environmental ones) can express their point of view on this matter, but for this purpose a special focus on verification and control is needed. In Romania, the main responsible institutions are the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism and the Ministry of Environment and Forests (with the National Agency for Environmental Protection and the National Institute for Research and Development in Environmental Protection).

The ideal situation would be when the two Ministries would build bridges for cooperation with other ministries (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, Ministry of Economy, Trade and Business Environment, Ministry of Finance) to create plans and strategies for the development and control of ecotourism impacts on the natural environment

and on how it is perceived/practiced by the society. [1]

At the moment, in Romania the NGOs with environmental profile can play a very important contribution, and by close collaboration at ministerial level, and with a particular focus on education and the local community, the "ecotourism principle" can become a reality. [3]

According to the data of the Romanian Ecotourism Association (REA) [18] and the National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism, Bucharest, [4] the economic impact produced by the ecotourism programs developed by the tourism operators – REA members is obviously on the rise. But what is remarkable is the fact that the impact at local level is much above the classical tourism average. In the case of REA members, around 80-90% of the receipts from tourism are used for the development of the area in which the ecotourism activities take place, mainly in the countryside.

The development of ecotourism activities in the local communities and within the protected areas implies the following socio-economic advantages:

- It creates jobs at local level (directly in the tourism sector or in the related sectors);
- It stimulates the local economy through the development of infrastructure and tourism services (accommodation services, food, transport, leisure facilities, craft products and guidance services, souvenirs);
- It stimulates rural economy through the creation or increase of demand for agricultural products necessary to ensure the tourism services;
- It gives momentum to infrastructure development, which also benefits the local population;
- It stimulates the development of the peripheral regions by capital insertion;
- It stimulates the improvement of the intercultural relationships specific to an ethnographic region, and the host community is thus stimulated to revigorate the folk traditions;
- In the conditions of a normal development, tourism can lead to self-financing of the

development mechanisms that could benefit the administrators of the protected areas as an instrument for their preservation;

- It supports the preservation activities, by convincing the Government and the public of the importance of the natural areas. [4]

The management plan of a protected area is the official document for establishing the objectives of it and the management measures for the efficient and responsible managing of the respective zones. This synthesizes the existing information at the date of plan making, establishes the major fields and the management objectives, as well as an action plan over a certain time horizon, generally for five years. [8]

The management plan lies at the basis of the protected area activity and represents a reference document for the planning of all the short and medium term activities in relation to it for all land owners/administrators and for all wishing to initiate and develop activities on their territory.

The main management objectives of the plan are grouped into the following themes:

- Bio-diversity preservation;
- Land utilization and utilization of natural resources;
- Preservation and promotion of cultural heritage;
- Tourism and leisure management;
- Education and awareness;
- Park management;
- Other activities specific to each park.

Another extremely useful instrument in tourism management of the protected areas is the management plan of the visitors. This directs the proper type of visitor to the proper zone in the park or its vicinity, creating the best opportunities for the fulfilment of the experience imagined by the visitor, to spend the leisure time in nature, producing a minimum negative impact upon nature and local communities and creating the best opportunities for local ecological business development in the tourism sphere. [7]

When we speak about the financing sources of the ecotourism activity, we must have in view both the financing capacity of the entities administrating the protected areas and the

possible financing sources of the other involved stakeholders. In the last years, about 85% of the financial funds at the disposal of the parks came from state sources, but not from the state budget, 12% from different projects and only 3% from own incomes (from access tariffs, sponsorships, guided trips, housing etc.). [8]

At present and for the next period, there are many financing alternatives available for the administrations of the protected areas. Among these, we can mention those of local authorities inside or near the protected areas, of the economic operators involved in the ecotourism activity and of the NGOs development activities in ecotourism or environment protection. We can also mention here the structural funds, one of the instruments by which the solidarity and cohesion policy of the EU is implemented.

The main operational programs with financing possibilities in the ecotourism activities are the following [14]:

-The Sectoral Operational Programme for Environment, Priority Axis 4 “Implementation of adequate management systems for nature protection”, co-financed from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF);

- The Regional Operational Programme ROP – Axis 5 Sustainable development and promotion of tourism, co-financed from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF);

-The National Rural Development Programme – financed/co-financed from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

-The Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development will be co-financed through the European Social Fund (ESF) and will have in view the human resources formation and development.

- The Sectoral Operational Programme Increase of Economic Competitiveness – co-financed from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF);

- INTERREG IVC Programme, co-financed through European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). This program will benefit the public authorities and the public equivalent

bodies, as partners in the common projects with the other participant states.

Among the investments, there are projects regarding biodiversity preservation, protected natural areas administration, education and public awareness of environmental protection. Once acknowledged the importance of this sector for the protection and preservation of the natural and cultural heritage, for the economic and social development of the local communities in the natural rural areas and for the increase of tourist experience, all efforts should be made for the efficient valorization of the rich heritage of our country.

CONCLUSIONS

Dobrugea is traditionally known as a destination for sea and spa tourism. But Dobrugea represents an important zone from the bio-geographic point of view, with valuable ecosystems in scientific reserves, natural reserves, national parks, natural parks, and the economic impact produced by the ecotourism programs has obviously increased.

The ecotourism is an important instrument for preserving nature, educating visitors and supporting sustainable development projects.

Due to our field research, we were able to identify, at least, two distinct Dobrugean areas where are real opportunities for ecotourism activity: the Danube Delta and the Măcin Mountains.

At present, the Danube Delta with the lagoon complex Razim-Sinoe are included in the *Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve*, which has a triple international status: Biosphere Reserve, RAMSAR site (wetland of international importance) and World Natural and Cultural Heritage Site.

The territory of the Măcin Mountains are included in the *Macin Mountains National Park*, which is accessible to a wide range of tourists, interested in hiking, landscapes, flora, local fauna, studies and documentations.

A multitude of factors are involved in ecotourism development in Dobrugea. Some of them play a more important role than the others, but each brings its special contribution to ecotourism development.

In the present economic conditions, the great majority of tourists (even the wealthy ones), are concerned about the price of tourism services. Tourists began to pay great attention to their expenditures, the prices of tourism services being the main variable in the consumers' choices.

In most protected areas in Dobrugea, networks of tourist routes were created, most of them being certified or on the way to be certified. Most routes are for camping, but cycling routes or water routes were also established (in the parks located on wetland areas).

In the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, with an old tradition in tourism, different other variants of access inside it emerged over time, i.e. transport by boats and by ships of various sizes.

However, it is estimated that the internal accessibility in the natural and national parks is low (routes in bad conditions) and this should be improved (not in quantitative terms, but rather in quality), taking into account the preservation needs, the needs for local development and the quality of tourism experience.

The inevitable path that the large tourism companies will follow is the opportunity for innovative start-ups to successfully launch their new products, grow the ecotourism market and leapfrog their established rivals.

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