

OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM IN SMALL SETTLEMENTS

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Abstract

The paper aimed to present the analysis of the situation and opportunities for the development of rural tourism in the lesser known tourist destinations that have attractive natural landmarks, historical heritage and folklore traditions. Separate settlements were selected in mountain and lowland areas, to distinguish and specify their specific problems. Rural tourism establishments – guest house and a house with a courtyard and a farm were surveyed during the period 2009 – 2016. In the study used the following methods: questionnaire survey among the owners of sites for rural tourism; polls among members of the rural tourism product; the method of comparison; the experimental method; SWOT-analysis of the strengths and weaknesses in the operation of the sites for rural tourism in the studied localities. Diversification of economic activities in small settlements (less than 300 inhabitants) for the development of improved conditions of rural tourism, growing role of services in the local economy: retail trade, transport, communications, etc.; more effectively conserve nature and cultural heritage; with employment persist people of working age in the small settlement. So the integration between rural tourism and other activities support economic revitalization of the area, preserve and stabilize the small settlements and improve the lives of the people in them.

Key words: development, rural tourism, analysis, small settlements

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a priority branch of the Bulgarian economy, forming a significant part of the gross domestic product of the country. Over the last decade, alternative forms of tourism and, in particular, rural tourism have been successfully developed in many settlements and areas in the country. More and more people prefer the conditions for rest and relaxation that the authentic rural environment offers, the contact with nature, with the rural life and folk traditions, customs and crafts. The needs of tourists are recreational, cognitive, healing, entertaining, etc. Therefore, the basic condition for the development of rural tourism in a given settlement or region is to have not only a material base but also attractive tourist resources - natural landmarks, cultural and historical heritage, unique folklore, folk traditions, crafts, etc.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the state of rural tourism in lesser known tourist destinations, which have attractive natural

landmarks, historical heritage and folklore traditions; to pinpoint the problems and to uncover the untapped opportunities for the development of rural tourism. Rural tourist services have been developed to a certain level though, but in fact agricultural tourism in Bulgaria is not available.[2]

In small settlements, farming is the main occupation and to a lesser extent - livestock breeding. In the last decade, the size of the uncultivated lands has decreased twice (Agrostatistics, 2016). About 98.5% of farms are owned by individuals. The average size of farms of individuals is about 1.8 ha. 98% of private farms cultivate less than 10 ha. Studies of some authors [1], [6] show that for the private farmer who owns a small amount of farmland, in order to increase his income, it is more appropriate to undertake other non-agricultural activities, rather than expanding his agricultural land. An important factor in diversifying the farmer's activity may be the development of rural tourism. In order to ensure the sustainable development of the economy of small settlements and create new

employment opportunities, it is necessary to diversify the economy of the settlement by developing other non-agricultural activities. Tourism is a significant factor to hold optimal amount of population in villages to maintain dynamism in touristically attractive regions and to prevent migration. [7] Studies of some authors [4] strongly suggests that integrated territorial development - partnership, cooperation and interaction between rural tourism, agribusiness, industrial business and services have led to multifunctional use of available resources, stabilization of declining productions, and all this increases the beneficial economic effect for the settlement and the region. Rural development carried out by rural tourism organizations and cooperatives increases the levels of welfare people living in rural areas. [3] Rural tourism researchers [8] have already established the activities that are most often combined with rural tourism: trips: hiking, horseback riding, carriage ride, sledding, bicycling, motorcycling, ski passes, tour of the area; cultural activities: visits to archaeological sites, churches, monasteries, museums, participation in craftsmanship, acquaintance with local folklore and local cuisine, participation in exhibitions, fairs, gatherings, acquaintance with local businesses, studying the flora and fauna of the region; health related activities: mineral baths, spa procedures, fitness, massage, etc .; water activities: swimming and sailing, sailing, fishing, canoeing, surfing; sports activities: participation in mountain orientations, skiing, rock climbing, tennis, golf, hunting, sporting events; air activities: helicopter tour, hang gliding, hot air ballooning; agricultural activities: harvesting of grapes, fruits, vegetables, milking goat, sheep, cows, taking animals to grazing fields, mowing and gathering of hay, cleaning and feeding of animals, watching tillage with plows, etc.

According to the preferences of tourists from different age groups, it is clear that nature walks and exploratory excursions around the region are preferred by almost all age groups of tourists. All the tourists want to get acquainted and taste the specific local cuisine and traditional foods, they state their desire

for recreation among the pastoral countryside. Therefore, these elements of the rural tourism product are an integral part of its structure in all studied rural tourism sites.

It is notable that very often the reason for choosing a particular tourist facility is not a single factor but a number of them. It is noticeable that very often the reason for choosing a certain tourist site is not one but several factors. [5]

As is clear from researchers' studies and views, rural tourism users are looking for a comprehensive tourism product with rich content. Such a complete tourism product can be fully realized through partnership and mutual support between sites of rural tourism, agribusiness, industrial business, services, public authorities and other activities carried out on the territory of the region. The results of the study of the socio-economic situation of residents in the studied settlements give grounds for the current experiment, namely how partnership, mutual support between rural tourism, agribusiness, industrial business, services and public authorities affects the development of rural tourism. By bringing together the organizations in the region, complementary in the technological process of creating the rural tourism product, to create a more complete experience for the user of the rural tourism product.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Small settlements were selected for analysis and assessment of the state of rural tourism in lesser known tourist destinations. Settlements in mountain and in lowland areas were selected in order to differentiate and specify their specific problems. In the mountain regions sites for village tourism are selected - village of Kosovo, village of Smilyan, village of Lyaskovo, located in the Eastern Rhodopes, and in the lowland areas - sites in the villages of Klokotnitsa, village of Gorski izvor, village of Bryastovo. All the areas studied have attractive natural landmarks, interesting historical heritage, unique folklore traditions. The sites for rural tourism - a guest house and a house with a yard and a farm were studied during the period from 2009 to

2016, i.e. for eight years. The main methods used in the study are the following: survey among the owners of rural tourism sites; surveys among users of the rural tourism product; the comparison method; the experimental method; SWOT - analysis to reveal the strengths and weaknesses in the activities of rural tourism sites in the studied settlements.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the studied settlements, only about 9% of the economically active population are employed employment. Two-thirds of the economically active population are employed in micro and small-sized private enterprises. Half of these enterprises operate on the brink of bankruptcy. The structure of farmers' income in the surveyed areas and settlements shows that the main source of income for people living in these settlements is pensions - about 35% of the total income. Only 30% of the income is provided by salary (in the case of people who have a job). 17 to 22% of the income is provided by the farmers' family farm. In the small settlements studied, the economy is weak and unsustainable, almost entirely based on agricultural production, and it is characterized by employment of seasonal workers and lack of rhythm of activities. During the study period - the last decade, the development of agricultural production in the conditions of private ownership is accompanied by a gradual renewal of the applied equipment and technologies, greatly reduces the use of manual labour. Agricultural production cooperatives and land tenants have specialized in a particular agricultural production, almost always fully mechanized and they do not seek manpower and do not offer jobs. The incomes of people of working age in these settlements are not high and this limits the development of the Services sector. Due to the difficult transport communications, the spatial, social and professional mobility of all people living in small settlements is limited. Because of all these conditions, people in working age in these small settlements are heavily affected by unemployment. The migration process is also

determined by these conditions. Economic migration includes more and more young people. The living conditions in these settlements are not above the socially acceptable minimum for all inhabitants (compared to the average for EU). Only in terms of environmental protection requirements are fulfilled.

Table 1. SWOT – analysis of rural tourism in the lowland areas

| Strengths | Weaknesses |
|--|---|
| Beautiful scenery, landscapes and climate | Not everywhere the road infrastructure is good |
| Proximity to cultural, historical and natural attractions | Hygiene in the settlements is not at the required level |
| Preserved old local traditions, crafts, customs, rituals, preserved local folklore | The age structure of the population in the villages is worsened, which affects the characteristics of the civil society |
| The villages are electrified and water-supplied | There is no coherence between the municipality, the business and the civil society |
| A quality and complex tourism product is offered | Insufficient qualification of the owners of guest houses |
| Prices are affordable for the mass visitor | Insufficient information provision |
| Preserved agricultural production - vegetable growing, grain, viticulture | There are no traditions in offering tourism products and in servicing tourists |
| | Insufficient promotional materials, no media and press releases |
| | Owners of tourist sites do not attend tourist fairs and other similar events |
| | Not all owners are members of branch organizations and associations |
| | Not all cultural and historical monuments are maintained in the necessary condition |
| Opportunities | Threats |
| Ability to combine different types of alternative tourism | Changes in legal and regulatory provisions concerning rural tourism |
| Funding from European or government projects and programs | Increase of taxes and fees |
| Increasing demand for the rural tourism product | Closure of roads in the region |
| Increasing interest in cultural and historical heritage in the region | Increasing competition of neighbouring municipalities |
| Increasing the number of tour operators that offer packages for rural tourism | Emigration of people of working age |

Source: author's study

Table 2. SWOT – analysis of rural tourism in the mountain areas

| Strengths | Weaknesses |
|--|---|
| Location amid beautiful scenery and fresh air | Villages, remote and inaccessible during the autumn and winter season |
| Municipal institutions that manage the cultural and historical heritage | Not everywhere the road infrastructure is good |
| Preserved old local unique traditions, crafts, customs | Domestic waste pollution - not everywhere the hygiene in settlements is at the required level |
| Well-furnished guest houses in typical Rhodope style | Underdeveloped and low-efficient economy in the villages |
| Developing mountain agriculture and livestock breeding-lawn maintenance, potato-growing, goat and sheep breeding | Limited number of promotional publications, not filled with meaningful information |
| | The water supply network does not cover all neighbourhoods |
| Opportunities | Threats |
| Enhancing the professional qualifications of the owners of guest houses | Changes in legal and regulatory provisions concerning rural tourism |
| Enriching the content of the offered rural tourism product | Closure of roads in the region |
| Creating a regional center for vocational training of owners and managers, guides, animators, mountain guides | Increasing competition of neighbouring municipalities |
| Funding from European or government projects and programs | Reduction of people of working age |
| Initiatives of the municipality to support rural tourism | |
| Creating a regional network for accommodation in guest houses | |
| Inclusion of new natural, cultural and historical landmarks in the tourism product | |

Source: author's study

The results of the SWOT analysis presented in the two tables show that there are enough tourist resources and facilities in the studied settlements and in the mountain and the lowland areas, in order to realize a complex rural tourism product. The identified weaknesses can be eliminated with the common efforts of the owners of tourist sites, municipal authorities and social institutions.

The identified weaknesses can be eliminated with the joint efforts of the owners of tourist sites, the municipal authorities and the social institutions.

During the eight-year study period following the implementation of the strategy for diversification of the economic life and the economy of the studied settlements in them, the following structure was established:

In the lowland areas the farm structure includes: agricultural development - grains, vegetables, silage, canning plant, tailoring workshop for ladies' and children's apparel, a large number of farmers produce home-made wine, dairy farm, guest house, possibility for spa services and water treatment with mineral water in the nearby resort centre. In the mountain area the following is developed: green school, guest house; mountain farming - potato growing, meadows, mountain livestock breeding - sheep and goats, woodworking plant, workshop for making Rhodope folk costumes, dairy farm.

In practice, under the guidance of experts, the cluster approach was implemented, cluster unions were formed based on partnership and mutual support between direct and indirect participants in the process of creating a rural tourism approach: small and medium-sized tourism enterprises, public authorities, cultural institutions, balneological centre for spa services, marketing organizations, etc. In the cluster, none of the organizations involved in it is the leading one. The exchange of experience and knowledge has contributed greatly to improving the quality of service in guest houses.

Table 3. Change in number of overnight stays for one month per room

| season | Village of Bryastovo | | Village of Klokochnitsa | | Village of Gorski izvor | |
|--------|----------------------|-------|-------------------------|-------|-------------------------|-------|
| | before | after | before | after | before | after |
| spring | 10/20 | 18/36 | 9/18 | 16/32 | 10/20 | 18/36 |
| summer | 14/28 | 30/60 | 18/36 | 28/56 | 19/38 | 29/58 |
| autumn | 18/36 | 28/56 | 17/34 | 24/48 | 21/42 | 26/52 |
| winter | 9/18 | 14/28 | 8/16 | 14/28 | 9/18 | 13/26 |

Source: author's study

As it is clear from the data in Table 3, the number of overnight stays spent in the

observed guest houses increased during all seasons of the year. This is due not only to the diligence of the owners and all those working in the guest houses, but also to the cooperation with travel agencies and joint marketing activities. There is a strong increase in the quantity of specific local food products sold after putting into operation of guest houses and the implementation of partnerships with commercial establishments. The quantity of the following products sold: home-made red wine and home-made rakia has been increased by more than five times, wine vinegar and apple vinegar - more than three times, the sales of pork babek (cured meat), sheep sizdirma (sausage) and bacon have increased four times, sales of sheep and goat yoghurt, sheep qatiq have grown more than five times. The demand for a Rhodope female costume and knitted scarves, socks and gloves has increased.

CONCLUSIONS

By diversifying the economic activity in the small settlements the conditions for development of rural tourism are improved. Through the development of rural tourism, the role of services in the local economy is growing: retail, transport, communications, etc.; the nature, the cultural and historical heritage are more effectively protected; with employment, people in working age are kept in the small settlement. Thus, the integration between rural tourism and other activities supports the economic revival of the settlement and preserves and stabilizes the small settlements and improves the lives of their population.

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