

## ANALYSIS OF THE ECOTOURIST PROFILE BEFORE THE COVID-19 CRISIS AND POST-CRISIS FORECASTS

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### Abstract

*During this period, world tourism is experiencing the biggest crisis, after the Second World War - the crisis generated by the coronavirus pandemic. Reservations were canceled, the accommodation and public catering units were closed, the flights were also canceled. The losses are valued at hundreds of billions of dollars, many tourism or service companies went bankrupt and employees lost their jobs. Our study was done before this crisis, but it becomes even more current, for the post-crisis period, when tourists and owners of tourism units will have to focus on nature, ecological tourism. The work we are proposing is the result of a study by university professors and master students from the Management and Agro-tourism specialty at the University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest. Based on research into their behavior, preferences and motivation, it has emerged that an ecotourist is characterized by a high level of education and training, above average income and willing to spend more in a destination during a stay extended.*

**Key words:** the ecotourist profile, sustainable tourism, ecotourists, COVID-19.

### INTRODUCTION

The study was carried out during 2010-2019 period, the target group consisting of 300 ecotourists: 100 from Hungary, 100 from Bulgaria, and 100 from Romania.

Applying the theory of sustainable development in tourism is a more recent approach that has been widely accepted by most international and national organizations. Since 1991, the concept of sustainable tourism has been defined by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the World Wildlife Fund, the European Federation of National and Natural Parks: "the development of all forms of tourism, tourism management and marketing that respect natural, economic environment, ensuring the exploitation of natural and cultural resources and for future generations" [1].

According to the OMT, "the development of sustainable tourism meets the needs of the tourists present and the host regions, while protecting and increasing the opportunities and opportunities for the future"[11].

Table 1. Content of Sustainable Tourism

Quality	Continuity	Balance
sustainable tourism requires a valuable experience for visitors, while improving the quality of the host community's life, cultural identity, poverty reduction, and environmental protection	sustainable tourism ensures optimal exploitation, the continuity of the natural resources on which it relies, and the preservation of the culture of the host community with satisfactory experiences for visitors	sustainable tourism ensures a balance between the needs of the tourism industry, the partisans of the environment and the local community, with economic and social benefits well distributed to all actors involved

Source: International Union for the Conservation of Nature, 1991.

It is seen as a way of managing all resources so that economic, social and aesthetic needs are fully satisfied, while preserving cultural integrity, essential ecological dimensions, biological diversity and the living system. "

There is currently no unanimously defined definition, "but there are agreed and predominantly accepted definitions, adopted and used"[7].

The International Ecotourism Society (1990), the most prestigious international organization in the field, defines ecotourism as: a responsible journey towards a natural area that contributes both to the preservation of the natural heritage and to the welfare of the local population [2].

In the definition proposed by the IUCN, "ecotourism is seen as: a respectful journey to the environment and the untouched natural sightseeing in order to admire nature and to feel good" [6].

Through ecotourism nature conservation is promoted, a negative impact produced by visitors and the involvement of the local population for beneficial socio-economic purpose [3].

Table 2. The characteristics of ecotourism

1	the main motivation of the tourists is to observe and appreciate the nature and traditional culture that dominate the natural areas
2	includes education and interpretation activities
3	as a rule, but not exclusively, are addressed to small groups organized by local or small business operators in the area
4	minimizes the negative impact on the natural and socio-cultural environment
5	supports the protection of natural areas
6	generating economic benefits for local communities, organizations and authorities that support nature conservation
7	creating alternative jobs and income opportunities for local communities
8	raising the awareness of the necessity of preserving natural and cultural values both among locals and tourists

Source: World Tourism Organization UNWTO [11].

After a large-scale process involving academic names at international level (Fennell, 1999; Weaver, 2001; Honey, 2008) [2, 4, 12] and the World Tourism Organization (1999), ecotourism has benefited from a unanimously accepted definition (Quebec Declaration, UNEP/OMT, 2002) [10].

Accordingly, "ecotourism is a form of tourism that respects the principles of sustainable tourism related to economic, social and

environmental impacts, but also includes a number of specific principles" [5].

Table 3. The principles of ecotourism

1	ecotourism actively contributes to the preservation of natural and cultural heritage
2	ecotourism "includes local communities in their planning, development and operation activities and contributes to their well-being"
3	ecotourism "involves the interpretation of the natural and cultural heritage of the destination for visitors"
4	ecotourism is intended primarily for individual visitors but also for small organized groups

Source: World Tourism Organization UNWTO [11].

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study aims to present the current stage of development of ecotourism at national and international level and to come up with a set of directions that guide the efforts to capitalize through ecotourism of areas where the nature and the local culture occupy a central place, in accordance with the requirements of national law, as well as international conventions.

The work we are proposing is the result of a study by university teaching staff, master students and PhD students from the Management and Agro-tourism specialty at the University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest. The study was carried out during 2010-2019 period, the target group consisting of 300 ecotourists: 100 from Hungary, 100 from Bulgaria, and 100 from Romania.

Sustainable tourism "covers all forms and activities in the hospitality industry, including conventional mass tourism, cultural, mountain, coastal, spa, business, rural, etc." Sustainable tourism development "is a must, and the link between tourism and the environment is much stronger than in other industries "[8].

Tourism has often created negative economic, social or environmental effects, and their countermeasures can only be achieved through a professional management that attracts all stakeholders involved in tourism development into the decision-making process. Collaboration between authorities (which have legislative, economic, social instruments),

economic agents (initiating planning and tourism services), "advocates for environmental protection and preservation of cultural heritage, local service providers, tour operators and travel agencies and last but not least, tourists, as beneficiaries, is absolutely necessary for the sustainable development of tourism" [13].

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Ecotourism is viewed from different perspectives on geographic areas. Thus, if in North America "ecotourism develops in virgin natural areas, where human intervention is minimized, in Europe, where the natural landscape is generally linked to human presence and the local community, there are quite close connections between ecotourism and rural tourism." In recent years at European level, natural landscapes have become more important for biodiversity and ecotourism. In Romania, ecotourism has a wide recognition - at governmental level, in the private sector and at the public level.

Table 4. The place and importance of ecotourism development strategy

Trends:	Motivations:
-increased leisure time; -increasing the mobility of the population; -increasing interest of the local population for tourism development; -socio- demographic; -changing the motivation of travel; -improving the image protected areas; -increasing demand for traveling in natural spaces; -increasing concerns for protection	-great benefits -protecting and conservation natural heritage and cultural; -increased experience travel. -the danger of some effects negative in case of a chaotic developments.

Source: Center for Responsible Travel CREST (2015) [1].

Ecotourism is recognized as being specific to rural areas within communities that have a tradition in farming, and covers both access to flora and fauna in the area, as well as to the

social habits and lifestyles of people in the visited areas [7].

Exploiting the natural environment is one of the fundamental requirements of ecotourism. This statement "leaves a wide-open door to a wide range of activities, provided they comply with the conditions outlined above. " From this perspective, "ecotourism interferes with other forms of travel based on nature. "

Thus, in ecotourism activities can be included:

- Types of adventure activities (rafting, canoeing, equestrian tourism on pre-arranged routes, cross-country skiing, bike trips on arranged routes, etc.);
- Guided tours / hiking;
- Nature observation tours (flora, fauna);
- Excursions to experiment with nature conservation activities;
- Excursions to local communities (visiting cultural objectives, visiting traditional farms, watching traditional cultural events, eating traditional food, purchasing non-traditional food products, etc.).

Activities that, although occurring in nature, have an obvious negative impact on the natural or socio-cultural environment (off-road activities) cannot be considered as ecotourism activities.

The application of ecotourism as a model for the development of tourism and its principles has a double target: on the one hand the integrated capitalization of the exceptional natural and cultural resources, with the improvement of the "quality of life in the local communities, and on the other hand satisfaction of the motivations and requirements of the tourists in consistency with environmental conservation for future generations".

The development of ecotourism mainly targets four plans:

- economic, by increasing the capitalization of resources, especially the least known, to reduce the pressure on the most intensely exploited;
- ecologically, by ensuring the rational use of all resources, reducing and eliminating waste, recycling, preserving and protecting the environment, reducing the process of avoiding agricultural and forestry land in the agricultural and forestry;

- social, by increasing the number of jobs, maintaining traditional crafts, attracting the population into practicing different forms of tourism;
- cultural, by capitalizing on the elements of civilization, art and culture, expressing a certain cultural identity and developing the spirit of tolerance.

Through ecotourism it is possible to extend the spectrum of traditional economic activities without marginalizing or replacing them, so that the local economy is not subordinated to external and internal changes and influences. Tourism activities under the emblem of ecotourism offer specific opportunities, with the local population and the tourism industry having to use natural resources in a sustainable manner and appreciate the valuable natural and cultural objectives. By extrapolating it can be said that ecotourism requires an excellent opportunity for the development of the areas that have the resources and conditions necessary for its valorization, a safe alternative for the integration of the natural landscapes and the ecological biodiversity into the tourism activity [12].

Over the last six decades, tourism has experienced continuous expansion, with average annual growth rates ranging between 5 and 10%, becoming a major sector, providing global economic and development opportunities. According to the World Tourism Organization, international travel arrivals increased from 25 million in 1950 to 278 million in 1980, 527 million in 1995 and reaching 1,133 billion people in 2014. Also, international tourism receipts have risen from \$ 2 billion in 1950 to \$ 104 billion in 1980, \$ 415 billion in 1995 to \$ 1,245 billion in 2014.8. The tourism industry contributed \$ 7.6 trillion or 9.8% to global GDP in 2014. Also, last year, about 277 million people were employed (directly or indirectly) in the tourism sector, and by 2025 their number is expected to grow to 356 million, and the contribution to the global economy is estimated to reach \$ 11 trillion.

In line with the long-term OMT (Tourism Toward 2030) forecast, the number of international tourists' arrivals worldwide is expected to increase by 3.3% per annum over

the 2010-2030 period. By 2020, international arrivals to tourists are expected to reach 1.4 billion, and by 2030 to 1.8 billion people.

Tourism is "not only an increase in the number of tourists, it has turned out to be a diverse and complex activity". Although mass tourism "remains the predominant form, other tourism activities related to culture, environment, education, health, etc. they came out". They reflect the preferences for environmental quality and "a much more energetic and participatory form of recreation". Skiing, hiking, cycling, canoeing etc. have become increasingly demanding activities, satisfying the need to be close to nature, moving, exploring and learning. Ecotourism, as a market niche in tourism, is considered to be "one of the fastest growing segments of the tourism industry". It is estimated that the interest for ecotourism is increasing from 25% to 30% and this is possible due to the continuous concern for nature protection, but also due to the growing interest of tourists for experiences in nature [13].

OMT also estimates ecotourism, natural tourism, cultural tourism and adventure tourism will have rapid growth over the next two decades, and it is estimated that spending on ecotourism products will grow in the future at a higher pace than the tourism industry in its whole. According to estimates by the International Society for Ecotourism (TIES), ecotourism could increase over the next six years to around 25% of the global travel market, and revenue could reach \$ 470 billion a year.

Ecotourism attracts "those tourists who want to interact with the natural environment and want to widen the level of knowledge, understanding and appreciation".

One of the tendencies that fuel the growth of this form of tourism is the preference for travellers to choose educational holidays that enrich their existence. The desire to learn and experience the experience of nature is influenced by at least three major factors:

- Changing attitudes towards the environment, which are based on recognizing interdependence between species and ecosystems;

- Development of environmental education in primary and secondary schools;
- Development of media on environmental issues.

In recent years, with increasing awareness and awareness of ecological and environmental concerns, travel enthusiasts have begun to move to new destinations that have little to do with economic development, such as Costa Rica, Botswana, Peru, Belize, the Galapagos Islands, etc. One of the most important trends influencing the demand for ecotourism, especially for soft (light) activities, is the aging of the population in developed countries, especially in those countries where the demand for the international ecotourism market is centred: North America, Europe North and less Japan. At the opposite end, the youth tourism market (Millennia, also known as Generation Y) is also an important source of ecotourism, especially for outdoor activities, offering good potential for future development of this form of tourism.

The tendency to depersonalize the workplace and the ultra-technological environment also contributes to an increase in demand for ecotourism holidays. The upward trend of ecotourism is also influenced by the growing desire of urban society to be more active. In a report on adventure tourism, the American Travel Industry Association (TIA) found that about half of the United States population had participated in the last few years in various forms of "active travel" included in ecotourism or adventure tourism. the tendency is determined by people's desire to overcome their limits, maintain their physical condition, and the need to spend quality time with friends or family. All these trends indicate not only an increase in demand for ecotourism, but also a transformation from a market niche into a major segment. If initially ecotourism was addressed to experienced tourists with high levels of income and education, the clientele would now expand to include a wide range of income, studies and travel experiences. Tourism is also a positive development in protected areas, with an increase in interest in this type of travel. It is estimated that worldwide protected areas receive 8 billion visitors annually, of which 80% are registered

in protected areas in Europe and North America. Quantitative developments will be accompanied by a suite of qualitative mutations, the most important being listed below:

- increasing demand for tourism in protected natural areas, motivated in particular by increasing the role of these areas in preserving the natural ecosystems in most countries of the world;
- the diversification of the offer by the fact that at present the protected natural areas offer numerous opportunities for spending holidays, meeting the needs of the various tourists;
- Improving the services offered in protected natural areas has become a goal that many tour operators in these areas want to reach, due to the increasing demands of tourists arriving here;
- active participation is one of the significant trends of tourism in protected areas, motivated by the fact that tourists feel the need to actively involve themselves in the conservation, awareness and promotion of these areas;
- promoting ecotourism as the main tourism activity in the protected areas - their managers and tour operators around the world see ecotourism as the main tourist activity that takes place, on the one hand, with a low, almost minimal impact on the environment, and on the one hand another part through its educational role.

In the years to come, the quality of the environment, the lack of pollution, the cleanliness and the attitude of the local population will be more important for potential tourists than the variety of entertainment and shopping opportunities. In the world, this innocuous style of travel has begun to have more and more followers.

With the development of this form of tourism, the tourists' preferences have also changed a lot. In recent years, various market studies have shown a strong interest among consumers in tourism products and services that protect the environment and respect local culture and traditions:

- About 43% of Blue & Green Tomorrow's survey respondents said they would have considered the environmental footprint during their holidays in 2014;

-66% of consumers around the world have mentioned that they prefer the products and services of companies that have implemented corporate social responsibility programs, with 46% willing to pay extra for them;

-one in five consumers (21%) said they were prepared to pay more for a holiday to a company that has an impressive record of environmental and social responsibility activities; this percentage has seen an upward trend from 14% in 2012 and 17% in 2010 (research done by ABTA - the UK's largest tour operators' association);

-24% of research workers surveyed by Travel Guard in 2013 said that interest in "green" trips is now the highest level in the past 10 years;

-Nearly "two-thirds of US tourists who have made at least one trip in the last year consider the environment when choosing hotels, transport and food services (a survey conducted by TripAdvisor.com in 2013); "

-Consumers expect tourism companies to bring sustainable products into their tourism offer. A majority of 70% believe that companies should be more involved in protecting the natural environment, 75% of consumers want a more responsible holiday, and 66% would like to be able to identify a "green" holiday easily (2012 report, conducted by Travel Foundation and Forum for the Future);

-a significant number of international tourists are looking for experiences based on natural and cultural resources such as visiting historical sites (40%), cultural sites (23%) and national parks (20%) (National Tourism and Traveling Strategy, USA, 2012). This strategy has identified similar trends among US citizens traveling abroad: tourism based on nature, culture, heritage and outdoor adventure is an important segment of the foreign tourism market;

-95% of business people believe that the hotel industry needs to undertake "green" initiatives and that sustainability will become a defining aspect for the hospitality industry (according to a Deloitte report of 2015);

-35% of adults said they would like to try a holiday involving a volunteer component, and 6% said they had already done so (according to a Mintel survey in 2012).

On the other hand, sustainability has been increasingly integrated into the tourism industry, with an increasing number of operators in this field adhering to various voluntary environmental certification schemes. Following researches in the analyzed field, the following aspects were identified:

-85% of US hoteliers mentioned that they have implemented "green" practices within their units (according to a study by TripAdvisor in 2013);

-Most tourism structures (91%) agree that it is very important to operate in an environmentally friendly way, using clean technologies. Currently over three-quarters of them (77%) have acted to reduce the negative impact and optimize the positive impact of their work on the environment (according to a TripAdvisor survey, 2012-2013);

-73% of a sample of 120 multinational corporations in Europe and the US identified as the top priority "integrating sustainability into their corporate strategy" (Conference Board survey in 2013).

In addition to concerns about the sustainability of individual businesses, in recent years, special attention has been paid to protecting and improving the sustainability of the environment in tourist destinations. Progressively, various measurement tools and criteria have been developed to certify "green" destinations, through initiatives of the WTO, the European Union, Ethical Traveler, EarthCheck, Green Globe or Sustainable Travel International. In November 2013, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) launched the Global Criteria for Sustainable Tourism Destinations (GSTC-D), which is a common understanding of the minimum requirements for a sustainable destination.

Based on research into their behaviour, preferences and motivation, it has emerged that an ecotourist is characterized by a high level of education and training, above average income and willing to spend more in a destination during a stay extended.

Ecotourists cover a broad spectrum of travellers more and more motivated to experience, being interested in the natural environment of the places they visit, as well as in learning about local communities.

They are particularly attracted to rural areas where there is a mix of traditional landscapes and villages. They are in a constant search for various experiences that cannot be ensured through holidays for mass tourism. Generally, ecotourists want "content holidays", that is holidays to help them discover new skills and talents, experience new emotions through their various experiences. They expect unique experiences at that destination and the accumulation of information about its distinct specificity. They respect environmental factors, prefer to visit intact natural and cultural environments, and expect tourism product suppliers to demonstrate that they respect the local environment and operate in accordance with environmental principles.

Based on research into their behavior, preferences and motivation, it has emerged that an ecotourist is characterized by a high level of education and training, above average income and willing to spend more in a destination during a stay extended. People who are involved in ecotourism activities are proven to be more environmentally aware and more active than other "normal" consumers. Most travel alone or in small groups and prefer low-capacity accommodation.

Table 5. The main types of ecotourists

1	"hardcore" ecotourists - scientists or people traveling for educational purposes
2	ecotourist "table" - people who visit famous natural destinations
3	"occasional" ecotourists - tourists who come into contact with nature during a holiday, incidentally
4	"dedicated" ecotourists - people who travel to protected areas to understand natural and local history. Their main motivation is to choose a sustainable holiday, they are interested in comfort but are ready to accept the small inconveniences to support the protection of environmental factors

Source: Own calculation.

Based on these studies, it appears that the ecotourism market is divided into four segments based on their behavior and motivation.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the behavioral point of view, the soft/hard model prevails. A typology has been

identified and ecotourists have been grouped into three categories:

a)"Hard" ecotourists: tourists with strong attitudes towards protecting and preserving the environment and who prefer to travel in small groups. They are interested in long journeys with a small number of services offered, are physically active and enjoy challenging activities. He generally organizes his own trip to feel that he is a unique journey, a real-life experience.

b)"Soft" ecotourists: travelers who prefer both ecotourism activities and traditional holidays and are motivated by the experience and quality that an ecotourism destination can offer them. They opt for tourism in organized groups, want to have a certain level of comfort and good quality services and are not very physically active.

This category tends to appeal to a travel agency that offers them unique, complex experiences in the context of protecting the traditions and culture of the community and the protection of the environment.

c)"Structured" ecotourists: these travelers are a combination of "hard" - because they prefer to interact with nature and practice physical activities - and "soft" as they are looking for short and multiple tours in larger groups with comfortable accommodation and dining.

From a demographic point of view, ecotourists were grouped as follows:

a) Young ecotourists: aged 18-44 years old, differentiated as follows:

-Young professionals who have high incomes, but only a limited amount of time to travel. They generally travel to the couple, although there is also a market for those who travel alone and are looking for unusual experiences. They choose the experience and comfort of a luxury ecotourism holiday, and their sustainability is not their primary motivation.

-Backpackers and young people who take a break. They travel around the world, have a very small budget, and sometimes resort to couchsurfing (a cheap way to travel through the hospitality of people from all corners of the world who open their homes for travelers or excursionists, with the only benefits of interacting social and winning new friends). Such a vacation gives tourists the opportunity

to experience the way of life of the locals and to try the traditional products. They can also combine their journeys with volunteer work on various conservation projects. Most of these young people will travel to that region for long periods of time.

b) Families with children older than 8 years who are looking for experiences where they can relax and enjoy with their children, being very interested in the activities that combine fun and adventure with learning. For this segment of ecotourists, the health and safety of that destination is also very important.

c) "Empty-Nesters" - these are people aged 45 to 65, who enjoy good health, have time to travel alone, without children, and often have a high financial potential. They are experienced travelers and have high expectations regarding the quality / price ratio of tourism services, but still, if they are, they are willing to pay more for high quality eco-experiences.

Our study was done before this crisis, but it becomes even more current, for the post-crisis period, when tourists and owners of tourism units will have to focus on nature, ecological tourism.

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