

PERCEPTION OF DECISION MAKERS ON DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM IN LOCALITIES ALONG BORCEA BRANCH OF THE DANUBE RIVER, CĂLĂRAȘI COUNTY, ROMANIA. CASE STUDY.

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Abstract

Rural tourism is a component of economic and social development but also of rural civilization. The issue of rural area is extremely complex and its economic and social development has not yet been sufficiently addressed, in fact lacking a unitary concept on how the rural area of our country can be included in an evolutionary process. The tourism potential of Călărași county is given by the multitude of natural and anthropogenic tourism resources it possesses. The county location along the Danube and Borcea branch represents one of its main assets, which is why we set out to survey the perception of decision-makers in the localities located along Borcea branch of the Danube in Călărași county, in order to highlight the unused potential of the area. The research recorded the opinions and attitudes of 118 respondents, decision-makers in the localities located on the banks of Borcea Branch, Călărași county, regarding the development of rural tourism in this area. The questionnaire, with a number of 12 questions, 11 questions with multiple answer options and one open question, also included 4 filter questions. Starting from the consideration that in the development of the objectives and strategy for the rural tourism sector in the localities bordering Borcea Branch, Călărași county, the opinion and involvement of decision-makers from these localities is important, we surveyed and interviewed people who can play an important role in this regard. We note that 64% of the respondents, especially those who work in the city halls but also some of the managers, want to get involved in the development of rural tourism in the localities bordering Borcea Branch of the Danube. Also, 86% of the respondents believe that rural tourism could be a factor in the economic and social development of rural localities, by creating new jobs, stimulating the consumption of agri-food products and increasing revenues to local budgets.

Key words: Borcea branch of the Danube River, sustainable development, questionnaire, strategy, rural tourism

INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism is the form of tourism practiced in rural area, with destinations that belong to this space and have a functional structure of accommodation and heterogeneous services. This activity is organized and coordinated by the population belonging to rural society, which has a strong connection with nature and the environment [4].

Rural tourism has been practiced in Romania for a long time in an unorganized way, resulting from the need of tourists to find an accessible and more comfortable accommodation than in the case of campsites or chalets, during their holidays [8, 6]. After 1989, the need to organize these accommodation spaces was manifested, by approving, registering and classifying them. Organized rural tourism first appeared in the

Rucăr-Bran area, then ANTREC (National Association of Rural, Ecological and Cultural Tourism) was established [2]. With the establishment of this organization, farms were approved in all counties and competition emerged, based on the natural tourist resources specific to each area, on the attractions offered to tourists. As a result of these transformations and the trend of modernization and improvement of rural tourist activities, rural tourism has occupied and occupies an important place in the tourist offer in our country, representing for many of us an attractive alternative for spending holidays and vacations [1].

The objectives, principles and requirements of sustainable development are found in forms of tourism such as ecotourism and rural tourism. These forms of tourism pursue both economic development and environment protection [9].

The specialized literature also presents arguments that show the favorability of rural tourism activities precisely through the factors that influence the emergence and development of this form of tourism: increased pollution of the urban environment, worsening health problems, the picturesqueness and uniqueness of rural settlements, the diverse and exceptional offer of mountain areas, increased nostalgia for birthplaces, increased complexity of work, reduced working week, sharp decrease in purchasing power, affordable prices for all categories of consumers, accessibility in consuming fresh food, the existence of ethno-folkloric-cultural traditions, the trend of population aging [8, 5, 9]. As an alternative to Romania sustainable development, rural tourism is considered a product-price-consumption aggregate, which gives the country multiple opportunities after the accession process, through which it benefits from all the functioning mechanisms of the European Union [7].

Starting from the saying 'man sanctifies the place', in rural tourism too it can be said that man is the one who can add value to places, natural resources and anthropian resources, but also to historical resources, whether material or informative – stories, legends, stories inherited by word of mouth from our ancestors [7, 14]. The general objective of the research is closely linked to the purpose of the paper, namely, the perception and awareness of decision-makers regarding the development of the rural tourism potential of Călărași county, as a county bordering Borcea Branch of the Danube. Although nature has been generous to this county, endowing it with wonderful natural tourist resources, which, if used rationally, could be like a magnet for tourists, there is still no viable strategy that, when implemented, would lead to the development of this sector.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The quantitative field research was carried out in the period June-July 2025, based on a non-standardized questionnaire, applied face-to-face, at the subjects workplace.

The research recorded the opinions and attitudes of 118 respondents, decision-makers

in the localities located on the banks of Borcea branch, Călărași county, regarding the development of rural tourism in this area, namely:

- assessments of the importance of rural tourism for community development and the profile of the rural tourist
- forms of rural tourism that could be developed and practiced in the area
- the main reasons that would determine tourists to visit their locality
- the tourist assets of the locality and the perception of their involvement in the development of rural tourism
- assessments of the way to promote existing tourist facilities in the locality, etc.

The questionnaire, with a total of 12 questions, 11 multiple-choice questions and one open-ended question, also included 4 filter questions that targeted the respondent's age group, decision-making structure, education levels and residence area.

We also used interviews to collect additional information. For information collecting, interviews were generally preferable to questionnaires because they allowed for direct interaction, detailed questioning and unlimited discussions. The main issues were identified immediately (sometimes through "body language") through several questions. In an interview, not all questions need to be determined in advance (as is done in a questionnaire). It was an interview in the true sense of the word, sometimes unscheduled, which generally lasted 30 – 40 minutes.

The data obtained were processed, ensuring the confidentiality of the information, and the results of the processing are available to the research participants.

The results obtained as a result of the interpretation of this data set led to the emergence of a set of conclusions.

Starting from the consideration that in the development of the objectives and strategy for the rural tourism sector in the localities bordering Borcea branch, Călărași county, the opinion and involvement of decision-makers from these localities is important, we questioned and interviewed people who can play an important role in this regard, as presented in Table 1.

We also took into account the fact that rural tourism development initiatives must be approached in a public-private partnership, which is why, along with political decision-makers, we also questioned people who have a say in the community, namely, managers from different fields of activity, directors of educational institutions, cultural centers, etc., doctors, priests, police officers and pensioners respected in the community.

Table 1. Categories of respondents depending on workplace

Specification	No.respondents	%
Mayor	6	5.1
Vice-mayor	11	9.3
Local counsellor	23	19.5
Teaching staff	15	12.7
Manager/Administrator LTD CO/SC/II/ANP	20	16.9
Director of public institutions	16	13.7
Doctor	5	4.2
Priest	6	5.1
Local policemen	5	4.2
Others	11	9.3
TOTAL	118	100

Source: Processing information in questionnaire applied to decision makers [10].

As mentioned in Figure 1, 50% of respondents fall into the age category 31-50, active people, from all the categories mentioned in Table 1, who can contribute to the development of rural tourism in the community in which they operate.

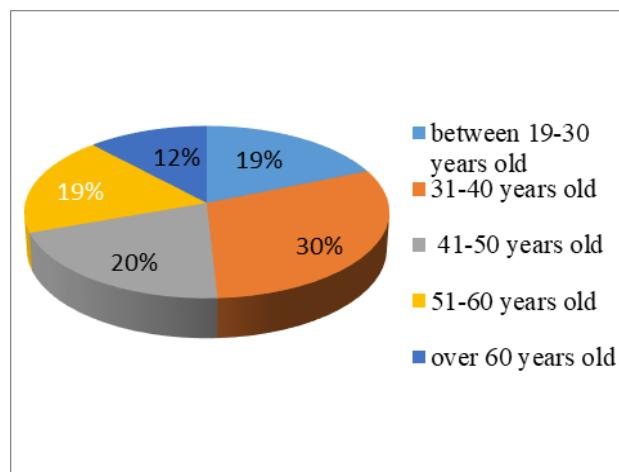


Fig. 1. Structure of respondents by age category
Source: Processing information in questionnaire applied to decision makers [10].

We also included in the sample 12% of people over 60, some retired, but who, through the respect gained in the community, can influence the decision of young people and, at the same time, have a lot of information about the natural and anthropogenic objectives in the area.

In rural communities, educated people are respected and can influence decision-making power. Based on this consideration, we included in the study sample only people who are at least high school graduates. From Figure 2, we find that 67% of the respondents have higher education.

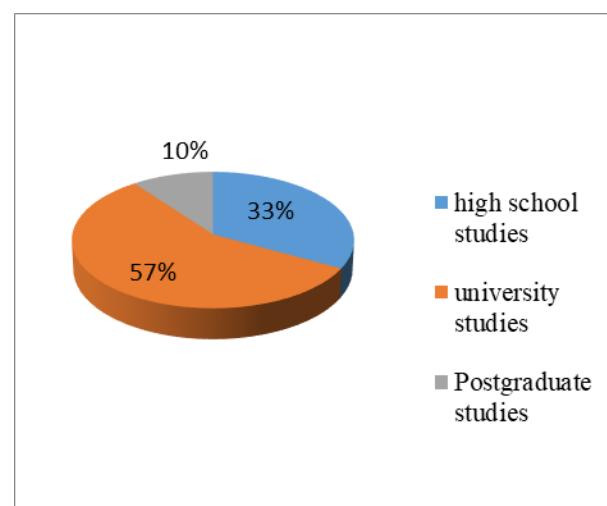


Fig. 2. Structure of respondents according to study level
Source: Processing information in questionnaire applied to decision makers [10].

Although they work in the rural area, 22% of respondents live in urban area and commute daily; this is the case for some teaching staff, doctors, policemen, managers/administrators.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Borcea branch is part of the Danube Plain, being positioned near the national road DN3B, which connects Călărași town and Fetești town [12]. Right in front of Călărași town, Borcea branch splits into two watercourses: Borcea branch and Bala branch, which are to reunite near Unirea locality, following the route until leaving the county in a single watercourse: Borcea branch [3]. The rural localities that border the county in the South and which also benefit from the natural wealth of Borcea branch are: Modelu commune with the villages

of Radu Negru, Modelu, Stoeneşti and Tonea; Roseşti commune consisting only of Roseşti village; Dichiseni commune with Coslogenii, Dichiseni and Satnoieni villages, Unirea commune consisting of Oltina and Unirea villages, Jegalia commune consisting of Iezeru, Jegalia and Găldău villages and Borcea commune consisting of Borcea and Pietroiu villages [13].

The natural resources of rural tourism are truly fascinating because nature offers us the most wonderful things to enjoy, and the people of the rural area are true treasures because they have the ability to enjoy the smallest things, the beauty of nature and can share wonderful stories about the rural space.

Natural resources are represented by both the flora and fauna of the area, as well as the people of the places, crafts, traditions and customs transmitted from generation to generation [12, 11].

Regarding the respondents' assessment of the importance of tourism on a personal level, as mentioned in Figure 3. 76% rate it as very important and important. However, there are also 9% of respondents who consider tourism to be little important to them.

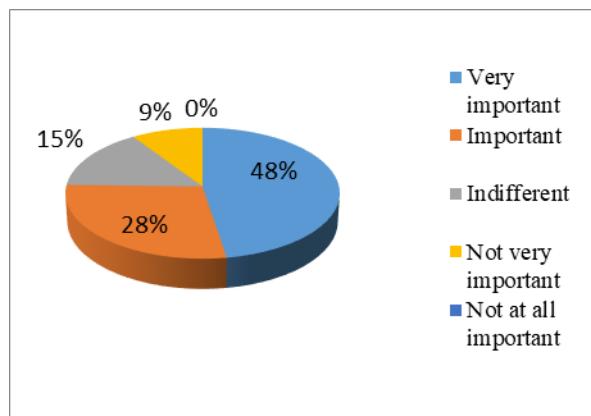


Fig. 3. Structure of responses on assessment of tourism importance

Source: Precessinf information in questionnaire applied to decision makers [10].

As it is mentioned in Figure 4, 83 of the respondents (70%) are not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way tourism is carried out in Călăraşii county, most of them mentioning the accommodation infrastructure, road infrastructure, public catering services among the reasons for these dissatisfactions.

However, there is also a percentage of 22% of the respondents who declare themselves quite satisfied and even very satisfied with the tourism infrastructure of Călăraşii county.

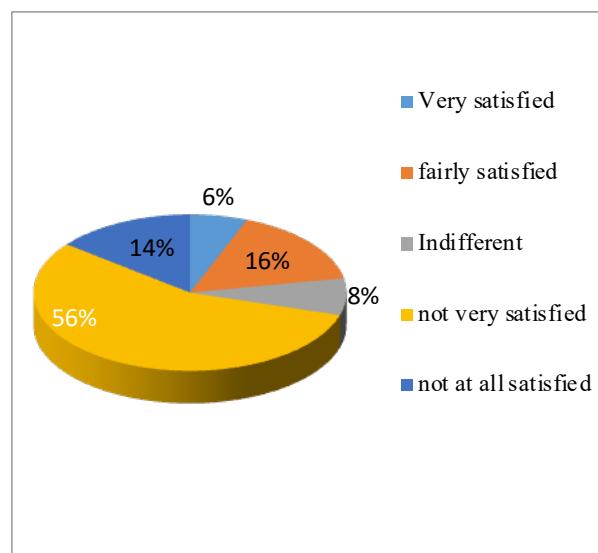


Fig. 4. Structure of responses on assessment of tourism in Călăraşii county

Source: Precessinf information in questionnaire applied to decision makers [10].

In Table 2, we quantified the responses regarding the types of tourism that can be practiced in Borcea branch localities. In first place, as expected given the fact that they are localities with access to water but also with a special hunting background on the other side of Borcea branch is **hunting and fishing tourism**, followed by **rest and recreation tourism**, **visits to cultural-historical sites**, **agrotourism and ecotourism**.

In the category 'others', respondents mentioned the traditional cuisine of the area. In order to verify the accuracy of the responses, we asked respondents for their opinion on the reasons that would determine tourists to visit their locality. The answers, presented in Table 3, correlated with the answers regarding the types of tourism that can be practiced in the localities along Borcea branch, demonstrated stability and seriousness on the part of the respondents, who, in the first places among the reasons for the visit, mention hunting and fishing, the natural and unpolluted landscape, rest and recreation in the rural area without the daily hustle and bustle of the town. As it can be seen from the information contained in Table 4.,

regarding the statements regarding the ingredients of a successful trip/vacation, respondents appreciated in a percentage of over 90%, the quality of food services, the destination location, the entertainment and recreation facilities, and the accommodation services. 17.8% of respondents mentioned the quality of the surroundings and the proximity

of the location to the center of the accommodation. Some of the respondents mentioned that these very ingredients that they particularly appreciate in a successful trip cannot be brought to the forefront by the poor infrastructure of the facilities made available to tourists who would like to spend a vacation in their locality.

Table 2. Respondents' perception on categories of tourism that can be developed and practiced in locality

Category of tourism	No. of respondents	%
a.events tourism	89	75.4
b hunting and fishing tourism	115	97.5
c.visits to tourist (cultural-hisotrical) sites	111	94.1
d.religious tourism	67	56.7
e. rural tourism, agritourism, ecotourism	109	92.4
f. sportive, nautical tourism	78	66.1
g.entertainment tourism (beach, campsite)	87	73.7
h.Rest and relaxation tourism	113	95.7
i.hiking	32	19.4
j.others	13	11.0

Source: Processing information in questionnaire applied to decision makers [10].

Table 3. Respondents' perception on main reasons that determine tourist to visit locality

Main reasons that determine tourists to visit locality	No. respondents	%
a. landscape, natural beauty, unpolluted natural area	113	95.7
b. will to know, curiosity	87	73.7
c. water sports practicing, beach	78	66.1
d.hiking practicing	32	19.4
e. hunting and fishing	114	96.6
f. study visits, pilgrimage	68	57.6
h. rest, relaxation	113	95.7
i. anthropic tourist sites.	109	92.4
j.others	13	11.0

Source: Processing information in questionnaire applied to decision makers [10].

Table 4. Respondents' perception on ingredients of a successful trip

Ingredients of a successful trip	No. respondents	%
a.Quality of accommodation services	105	88.9
b.Quality of destination location	109	92.4
c.Quality of catering services	114	96.6
d.Diversity of relaxation facilities	107	90.7
e.Diversity of entertainment facilities	111	94.1
f.easy to reach destination	75	63.5
g.others	21	17.8

Source: Processing information in questionnaire applied to decision makers [10].

Table 5. Respondents' perception on main assets that determine tourist to visit locality

Atuuri	No. respondents	%
a.Hospitable atmosphere	118	100
b.Entertainment and leisure facilities	107	90.7
c. Access to Borcea branch	118	100
d.Local gastronomy	64	54.2
e.Unique natural landscape	113	95.7
f.Cultural and religious sites	101	85.6
g.Local traditions	87	73.7

Source: Processing information in questionnaire applied to decision makers [10].

Table 6. Respondents' perception on influence of information sources on selecting rural tourist destination

Influence of information sources on selecting rural tourist destination	No. respondents	%
a.Promotion on town hall website	98	83.1
b.Promotion of Călărași County Association of Agritourism, Rural and Ecological Tourism	87	73.7
c.Catalogues, leaflets, tourist guides	76	64.4
d.Tourist recommendations	90	76.3
e. Tour operators recommendations	67	56.8
f.Advertisements in newspapers, magazines, radio, TV	101	85.6
g.Other means on Internet	103	87.2

Source: Processing information in questionnaire applied to decision makers [10].

At the risk of disturbing by returning to the same aspects captured in the previous questions but with the desire to make the respondents realize the unused potential of rural tourism in their locality as well as the desire to verify the accuracy of the responses, we requested the respondents' opinion on the most important assets that their locality can highlight through rural tourism. The responses, presented in Table 5, correlated with the responses regarding the types of tourism and the reasons of tourists to visit the localities bordering Borcea branch, demonstrated balance and seriousness on the part of the respondents, who, on the first places among the assets of their locality regarding the development of rural tourism, mention in percentage 100% the hospitable atmosphere with which the guests would be received and the access to Borcea branch which facilitates hunting and fishing, water sports, the beach, the natural and unpolluted landscape, rest and recreation in the rural space but also the local traditions that would pleasantly surprise the tourists.

86% of respondents believe that rural tourism could be a factor in the economic and social development of rural localities, by creating new jobs, stimulating the consumption of agri-food products and increasing revenues to local budgets.

18% of respondents, especially mayors and vice-mayors, mention that rural tourism is quite promoted in their locality, through the information provided on the locality website, but when asked why tourists do not come to the area, they do not have many answers. However, 82% of respondents are aware that neither the area is promoted enough nor the

tourist infrastructure is adequate. From the information presented in Table 6, it results that, in a percentage of over 80% of respondents, they consider that the main means of promotion, respectively, sources of information for tourists could be the town hall website, the media and the internet, followed by the recommendation of other tourists or promotion on the website of Călărași County Association of Agritourism, Rural and Ecological Tourism.

Regarding the profile of the rural tourist, they mentioned: People with less money, people with children who want to get to know animals and plants closely, people who love nature, people passionate about fishing and hunting, weekend tourists who want to relax. We note that 64% of respondents, especially those who work in town halls but also some managers, want to get involved in the development of rural tourism in the localities along Borcea branch.

As main priorities for the development of rural tourism, they mentioned:

- Developing and implementing a strategy to increase the visibility of reception units and attractions in the area.
- Attracting European funds to improve the physical and reception infrastructure.
- Developing a common image (county brand) that represents a delimited identity aspect for tourism consumers.
- Creating a local network for organizing and promoting tourism.
- Identifying and capitalizing on existing tourist attractions (physical - monuments, buildings or intangible - events, customs) in these localities.

CONCLUSIONS

The natural and anthropogenic resources of the county give it a high tourist potential. Its riverbank on the Danube and the branches into which it splits (Borcea Branch and Bala Branch) create picturesque landscapes and offer a natural setting favorable to fishing and hunting. The presence of these flowing waters on the territory of the county must be properly exploited and highlighted. In order to introduce these natural resources into tourist circuits, expenses are necessary for arranging and cleaning the banks to give them a pleasant and attractive appearance, so that tourists want to return to these places. Natural tourist resources alone are not enough to attract tourists, their exploitation and care making them real attractions for them. There are many natural and anthropogenic resources that can be exploited through tourism, but at this moment their organization into packages and their promotion as tourist packages is in its initial phase.

The tourism industry is constantly changing. Tourist needs and expectations are increasing and the competitiveness of the economic actors involved is also on an upward trajectory.

The association of actors involved in tourism clusters can represent an option that increases the quality of services of the actors involved and offers complex service packages that satisfy different needs (whether it is entertainment, cultural activities, etc.). Also, the existence of a concern at the European Union level regarding the development of financing lines dedicated to clusters could represent an opportunity at the territorial level if this form of intervention is chosen for the development of rural tourism.

Regarding the development of the banks of the Danube and Borcea branch and of the flowing and standing waters in Călărași county, this is deficient, given that there are no modern tourist infrastructures such as aquaparks, tourist ports, etc., but only small, rudimentarily developed beaches in the riverside towns.

Among the reasons for not using this significant tourism potential are the lack of strategic investors in the field of tourism, the lack of clear legislation in the field of public-

private partnership, the restrictions imposed by environment legislation. From the point of view of tourism activity, the region must also face additional challenges, such as climate and demographic changes. Increasing temperatures will reduce the tourist season, and opportunities for sports and recreational activities will simultaneously decrease, the summer season will register a higher demand, with negative effects on the environment and with exceeding the tourist support capacity of certain areas. The influence of climate change on tourism should not be treated in isolation since major changes in tourist demand can have strong effects on the economic and social policy in the respective areas (for example: on the demand for labor, transport infrastructure).

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