

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH ECOTOURISM BASED ON THE PRINCIPLES OF ECO-ECONOMY

Nicula Virgil

Faculty of Economic Sciences, "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu
17, Calea Dumbăvii
niculavirgil@yahoo.com

Abstract

Evaluating the preliminary conditions for accrediting the pensions in Sibiel as eco-pensions will be done by field investigation and surveys. Transforming the agro-tourist pensions from the village of Sibiel into eco-pensions, thus making Sibiel the first green village in Romania, and training the administrators of pensions and other key members of the tourist business have the role to forming an eco-economic view of the sustainable development.

The eco-economical principles are essential elements when deciding to transform an agro-tourist pension into an eco-tourist pension. Ecotourism creates jobs, sustainable development alternatives, and a well defined image that can be used in marketing the local, regional, or national products. By implementing adequate marketing strategies, we shall promote, together with the interested tourism agencies, a realistic and attractive tourist product. We shall elaborate a guide which will contain short studies, destined for the administrators of pensions, useful for implementing the eco-pensions in the Romanian rural tourism. Alongside norms regarding the use of ecological building materials, of unconventional sources of energy, the use of biotechnologies, the conservation of biodiversity, the guide will also include menus, traditional recipes for valorizing the ecological food products, and leisure activities in protected natural areas.

Keywords: eco-economy, ecotourism, sustainable development, rural tourism, agro-tourism

INTRODUCTION

Developing a rural eco-economy depends on the global vision of the natural resources and on a broad understanding of the restructuring of economic notions and concepts needed to realize this vision. What we suggest is to harmonize the existing system with international models (Swedish, Austrian, Swiss, German, French, and Italian) in order to adapt the methods and techniques of implementing an eco-pension to the local ecotourism, by taking into account the character and traditions of the Romanian tourist village.

Ecotourism has the advantages of experiencing a new model of tourist activity, the only one viable, and we are counting on the perceptiveness of the administrators of pensions in Sibiel, which will in this way be able to keep Sibiel on the top of rural tourist destinations. Evaluating and directing the activities from the field of tourism in relation to the ecotourism criteria will allow the exploitation of local natural and economic resources through the certification of eco-tourist products and that of destinations and accommodation structures, in order to guarantee the eco-

tourist quality. The food products obtained in the household through ecological farming and stock raising activities could be valorized as traditional products and ecologically certified, in accordance with the effective legislation. The eco-economical principles are essential elements when deciding to transform an agro-tourist pension into an eco-tourist pension. Ecotourism creates jobs, sustainable development alternatives, and a well defined image that can be used in marketing the local, regional, or national products. By implementing adequate marketing strategies, we can promote a realistic and attractive tourist product.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Evaluating the preliminary conditions for accrediting the pensions of Sibiel as eco-pensions was done through field enquiry and survey. The survey comprise data useful in the quantitative and qualitative analysis regarding the evaluation of the natural capital, clean technologies, ecological agriculture, economy of natural resources, the evaluation of the ecological impact and strategic eco-marketing, in order to identify the pensions with eco-tourist potential. We aim to make the administrators of pensions from Sibiel aware of the advantages that ecotourism has to offer, by being more compatible with the traditional way of life than other forms of tourism.

While terms like “mountain tourism”, “nature tourism” and “cultural tourism” are describing specific tourist market segments, the term “ecotourism” refers to a set of desirable outcomes that chime in with the principles of environmental, socio-cultural and economic sustainability. One of the first definitions of “Ecotourism” was formulated by the International Ecotourism Society in 1991: “Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserve the environment and sustains the well-being of local people”.

The socio-economic and conservation-related goals of an ecotourism concept are corresponding with the following key objectives:

- To mitigate environmental impacts;
- To contribute financially to protected area management and conservation;
- To create environmental awareness;
- To generate job opportunities and benefits to local communities;
- To ensure social and cultural compatibility and political empowerment.

Depending of the destination’s context and its stage of tourism, priority is given to one or the other objective. With its strong weighting of environmental goals ecotourism is a tool of protected area management. In this context its overall goal is “to protect and maintain the biological diversity and ensure sustainable utilization of natural resources.” Still, for

the management of ecotourism it is a balancing act and big challenge to mediate between the different stakeholders and to comply with the (contradictive) outcomes within a destination.

Adopting ecological technologies requires a systematic effort in formulating eco-economic policies, especially for restructuring the traditional agricultural activity. Sibiel has been chosen as location for this project because it has an old tradition (before 1989) and, more recently, holds the “Golden Apple” trophy for the hospitality of the people and the well established agro-tourism. This project benefit from the support of local authorities and that of “ Mărginimea Sibiului ” Association.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results obtained gives the possibility to formulating some proposals for issuing a series of methodological norms of classifying the reception structures with the function of tourist accommodation of the type of eco-pensions, in collaboration with ANTREC and other professional associations of the kind. What we monitor is the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the eco-tourist potential of the natural capital, clean technologies, ecological agriculture, the exploitation of non-polluting natural resources, the evaluation of the ecological impact and strategic eco-marketing, in order to identify those pensions that have an eco-tourist potential. The use of the expertise and results of the research from the projects promoted by the postdoctoral school will enable the implementation of food biotechnologies, the preservation of biodiversity, and the development of eco-friendly economic activities, including ecological agro-tourism.

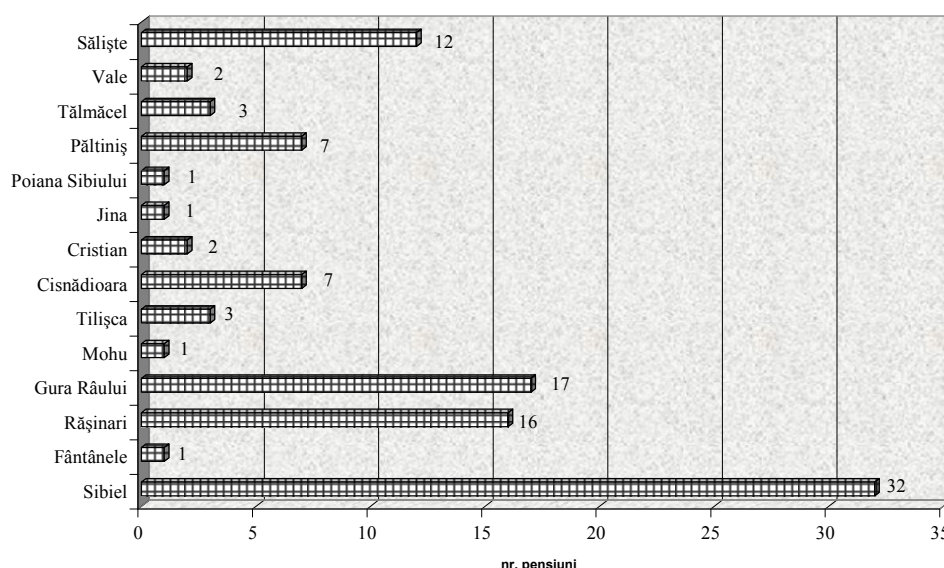
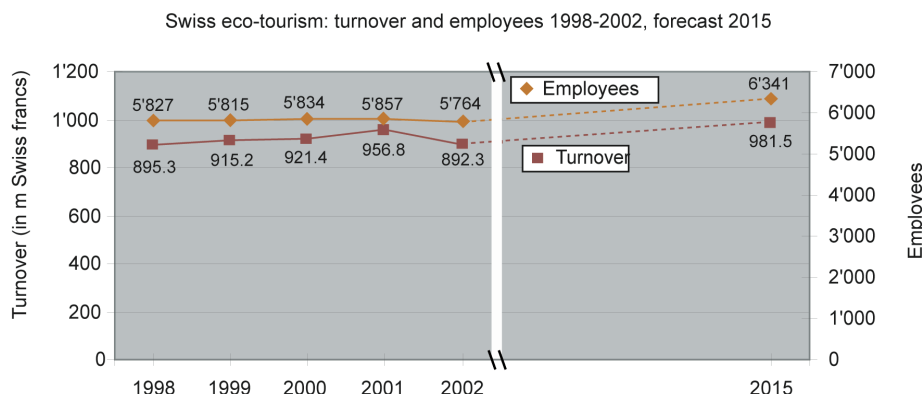


Fig. 1 Number of agro-touristical pensions in Marginimea Sibiului

The marketing of ecological tourist services (accommodation, food, and leisure) that blend tradition and environmental protection will allow the sustainable development of the area. Ecotourism is the best practice for tourism in a sustainable environment.

Eco-tourism comprises the accommodation and catering sector which operates with environmental standards as well as the management of national and regional nature reserves and biosphere reserves.

In Switzerland, for example, eco-tourism amounts to about 5 to 8% of the total tourism according to the University of Applied Sciences Rapperswil and the Research Institute for Leisure and Tourism. The present evaluations are based on an eco-industrial portion of 6.5%. The eco-tourism turnover was slightly negative between 1998 and 2002 because the total turnover of the accommodation and catering sector was slightly negative. The intended fostering of national and regional reserves will additionally boost eco-tourism.



Source: Environmental Markets in Switzerland, WWF Education Centre, Berne, 2005

Eco-certification is more and more present in many of the fields of economy, including for identifying products with high ecological potential. The tourist product offered by eco-pensions can be a promoter of green tourism. The systematic construction of public support for changing the mentality implies an intelligent and concerted effort, developed with the help of well informed citizens. Ecotourism contributes to preserving the environment and to supporting the well being of the local population. Eco-pensions will represent a green model, focused on the strategy of the four R's (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, and Reexamine), by using eco-economic systems, procedures, and strategies. This project actively contributes to preserving the natural and cultural heritage, includes local communities in

the sequential planning, development, and operating processes contributing to their well being.

The challenge launched by this project is to put together in a traditional agro-ecosystem as many pieces of sustainable development as possible, based on the principles of eco-economy. Once certified, the eco-tourist pensions in Sibiel can become polarization centers for the rural tourism activity. Obtaining the eco-classification and some commercial brands and innovative products of food biodiversity will generate the development of new projects. Taking part in fairs organized by ANTREC and ANAT (tourism scholarships) with our own stand dedicated to the eco-pension, and promoting the image of the eco-pension through leaflets, specialized catalogues and website, will ensure the coherence of the sustainable development.

Mountain regions are belonging to the few natural spaces of the world that offer a unique blend of breathtaking natural beauty. They are characterized by wildness and a rich biological diversity (including lot of endemics) at the one hand side and by a high variety of human cultures, traditions, history and lifestyles at the other side. Therefore nature protection and regional economical development are the challenges of mountain region development.

With the Alpine Convention of 1991 a process of regional mountain development was initiated. A platform for regional exchange and negotiations in the Alps was set up and the significance and experiences of sustainable development in mountain regions was discussed. The Alpine experience – as an approach for other mountain regions were the basis of lessons learned for a number of conferences in the beginning of these century. During these conferences the role of ecotourism for integrated mountain development was discussed: the ecological importance of mountain ecosystems, the potentials and constraints of mountain tourism and about ecotourism as a concept of sustainable mountain tourism.

Mountain ecosystems are among the world's most vulnerable biological and geographical domains. They are embossed by habitats with specific biodiversity, including a high range of endemic flora and fauna. Plants and animals are well-adapted to the particular altitude and climate of their location. But, as a matter of high altitude, growth and recovery of flora, fauna or soil proceed very slowly. A sustainable utilization of natural resources and the minimization of disturbance or destruction of the biological diversity is therefore a key issue in mountainous regions. Therefore a rising number of unique mountain areas are designated as protected areas.

There are quite a few anthropogenic factors that endanger mountain ecosystems: climate change, over use (unsustainable grazing, deforestation,

tourism etc.), pollution and population growth. Negative impacts as desertification, loss of biodiversity, water pollution, erosion, landslides, avalanches, rock falls, etc. are the consequences. Rural mountain population might designate from their traditional way of land use and emigrate from the countryside, if there are no alternative opportunities for livelihood.

Historically, all over the world mountain areas have been attracting people: naturalists, explorers, and, in recent years, mountaineers, trekkers and cultural tourists from near and far-off. Features that attract tourists are the pure, original nature, natural monuments and the healthy climate. In many western mountain destinations, like the European Alps tourism became a mass-phenomena. Tourist infrastructure like mountain railways, ski runs and big scale tourist centers were set up. In these countries tourism especially means foreign visitors. However, regardless of its stage and expansion tourism helps to diversify mountain economies and provides alternative livelihood opportunities for mountain people. Because traditions and life-styles of rural mountain populations are of rising interest, old habits (special handicrafts, way of cooking, patterns of constructing houses or traditional folk dances/music) are revitalized.

But tourism development also creates environmental problems and poses new challenges. Several negative environmental impacts can be observed, either in areas of high tourist concentration (mainly caused through infrastructure) as well as in areas with a wide dispersion (mainly induced through tourist activities). While areas of high tourist appearance particularly suffer from enormous traffic, noise, urban development and disturbance of sceneries, in other far-flung areas major affected environmental topics are deforestation, erosions or loss of (endemic) biodiversity. Other negative impacts are environmental pollution due to garbage and littering along trekking routes and on camp sites and pollution of creeks, rivers and lakes.

On top of the negative impacts traveling, respectively to far-away countries, causes emissions and contributes to global warming up. Of course, future climate changes will also affect mountain regions. For example natural water reserves will be endangered and mountain habitats of flora and fauna might be destroyed. Mountain destination will have to deal with new circumstances and will have to find solutions for a sustainable mountain development in future.

CONCLUSIONS

Ecotourism is usually taking place in nature surroundings, often related to protected areas and conservation. Therefore mountains are predestinated destinations of ecotourism activities. In lot of mountain

regions there is an urgent need for activities, which help diversifying income sources, providing alternative livelihood opportunities for mountain people and, simultaneously, which help promoting environmental care and gaining benefits for nature protection. In this connection ecotourism offers considerable potentials, because it addresses the twin problems of rural mountain areas: “poverty reduction” and “minimizing environmental degradation”. It makes mountain tourism being an important sector in integrated mountain development.

In developing countries with a low stage of tourism development the negative environmental impact of tourism, as outlined in the chapter before, are often not a key issue yet. But aside from the negative impacts ecotourism can positively affect environmental awareness and conservation within a less-developed destination. Eco tourists often demand higher environmental care-taking (regarding waste management, water purification, etc.), than the local population does. Interest in wild faun and flora and in ecosystems rise awareness and respect towards the regions nature assets. Because mountain eco tourism offers alternative income for mountain communities, unsustainable use of nature resources like over.

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