



THE 17<sup>TH</sup> EDITION OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
EUROPEAN INTEGRATION  
REALITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

## **Ecotourism in Romania**

**Nicoleta Veronica Burlacu<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** Ecotourism, a component of sustainable development, is also known as “green” tourism, “soft” tourism or “gentle” tourism in the sense that this form of tourism, with a wide range of activities, takes place in rural areas (programs, circuits, sports, tourist facilities and equipment, etc.), has the lowest implications in the degradation and pollution of natural ecosystems, natural and national parks, biosphere reserves, nature reserves. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) recommends, in the first instance, the development of this form of tourism in protected areas, and the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Similar Resources (IUCN) stated in 1992 that „ecotourism is the segment of tourism that involves traversing natural areas, relatively undisturbed, to admire the landscape and enjoy the world of plants and wildlife. In a narrower sense, ecotourism is based on nature observation, offering distinct tourism products, specific to the forms of cultural, scientific, tourism research, being practiced in countries with remarkable biodiversity, which have nature reserves, national parks and local communities that kept their customs and traditions unchanged. In ecotourism, the space is viewed in two ways, namely: quantitatively, by the „receiving ability of the territory” that can be natural or man-made and qualitatively, by activity or by the tourist value of the territory, natural or created. Both sides of the approach are part of the global policy of sustainable tourism development. Such a tourism policy aims to ensure an ecological, economic, socio-cultural functioning based on a rational and efficient use of resources.

**Keywords:** green; tourism; nature; resources

### **1. Introduction**

The environment is the “support” and “raw material” for the sustainable development of any economy. Between tourism and the environment is a complex relationship, the connections between them manifesting themselves in both directions. The natural environment and the cultural-historical heritage through their components: water, air, landform, flora, fauna, landscapes, historical monuments and ethno-folkloric traditions represent the basic resources of tourism, and, on the other hand, the touristic activity in its complexity influences the ecological and cultural environment, modifying their components.

Therefore, the development of tourism makes it necessary to pay special attention to the environment through measures to protect and develop its quality and resources in the areas entering the tourist circuit or in the perspective of being capitalized through tourism, as well as to control the consequences of this activity in order to optimally use the tourism potential.

---

<sup>1</sup> Student, Year III, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Specialization Accounting and Management Information Systems, Danubius University of Galati, Romania, Address: 3 Galati Blvd., 800654 Galati, Romania, Corresponding author: veronique1977@yahoo.com.

Starting from the concept that “sustainable, viable and ecologically supported development is considered that development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”, tourism, as an economic activity is part of this scientific endeavor and must collaborate with other industries and economic activities in ensuring the quality of the base resource and its survival.

The elements of the natural environment are the basis of the touristic activity, among which those that have special qualities stand out. Protected natural areas have also entered the tourist circuit, requesting a special management of visitors. Proper capitalization, at the level of the environmental support capacity, allows the harmonious devotion of tourism, while overvaluation seriously affects the environment, and not knowing the right way of development leaves the region out of tourist development.

Tourism, as a social phenomenon, is carried out according to the action of several factors specific to a particular historical period. Genetic factors do not act in isolation, but simultaneously and in interdependence. The main factors that determine the development of tourism are: the quality of the environment, demographic, economic, political, social, psychological factors. The role of each of these factors can become paramount in a certain period, in a certain territory, because tourism is also subject to “fashion”.

The balanced, well-kept environment boosts tourism activity, because it is the main raw material in the tourism industry. The relief, the quality of the waters or the climate, the vegetation, the beautiful landscapes, are all factors that determine the practice of rest, treatment, recreation, fishing and hunting tourism. The degradation of the relief and soils through mining, air and water pollution, the destruction of the vegetal cover determines the regional or local elimination of tourism.

## **2. Ecotourism - Tourism of the Future**

Ecotourism, a component of sustainable development, is also known under the notions of „green” tourism, „soft” tourism or „gentle” tourism in the sense that this form of tourism, with a wide range of activities, has the least implications in the degradation and pollution of natural ecosystems, natural and national parks, biosphere reserves, nature reserves. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) recommends, moreover, to begin with, the development of this form of tourism in protected areas in particular, and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Similar Resources (IUCN) stated in 1992 that „ecotourism is that segment of tourism that involves crossing natural areas, relatively undisturbed, in order to admire the landscape and enjoy the world of their wild plants and animals”.

In a narrower sense, ecotourism is based on observing nature, offering distinct tourism products, specific to forms of cultural, scientific, research tourism, being practiced in countries with remarkable biodiversity, which have natural reservations, national parks and local communities that have preserved their customs and traditions unaltered.

Ecotourism involves the management, organization and development of tourism activity in order not to disturb or destroy the natural balance, the environment with natural tourism resources and cultural-historical or technical-economic values and to achieve a sustainable exploitation of them.

Through the notion of ecotourism, space is regarded under a double hypostasis, namely: quantitatively, through the „receiving capacity of the territory” that can be natural or created by man and on the qualitative level, through the activity or the touristic value of the territory, natural or created. Both sides of the approach are part of the global policy of sustainable development of tourism. Such a tourist policy

aims to ensure an ecological, economic, social-cultural functioning based on a rational and efficient use of resources.

Ecotourism is a form of tourism in which the main motivation of the tourist is to observe and appreciate the nature and local traditions related to nature and which must meet the following conditions:

- nature conservation and protection;
- the use of local human resources;
- to have an educational character, respect for nature and to raise awareness among tourists and local communities;
- have a minimal negative impact on the natural and socio-cultural environment.

There are common confusions between sustainable tourism and ecotourism, but the latter, although respecting the principles of sustainable development, refers to tourism generally practiced in protected natural areas, with small groups, capitalizing on both the natural and cultural heritage, bringing benefits to local communities.

The objectives, principles, requirements of sustainable tourism development are found in different forms of tourism such as ecotourism, rural tourism or cultural tourism. These forms are the expression of the desire for tourism to represent a positive and dynamic factor of development and a practical solution for keeping the environment unaltered. Not all forms of tourism that have as their main motivation the visitation of nature are included in ecotourism, just as not all touristic activities that take place in nature belong to this category. Ecotourism involves in addition to these other forms of tourism the preservation of nature and bringing benefits to local communities.

On the international tourism market ecotourism began to develop in 1980. Since the '90s ecotourism has seen an annual increase of 20% to 34%. The UN Environment Program (UNEP) also said that the fastest increase in tourist flows is achieved within and near natural areas.

Under the pressure of the European Union's legislative provisions, many tourism companies have begun to initiate ecotourism activities in Europe, such as:

- Offering ecological tourism packages – rural tourism, tourism combined with ecological programs, tourism with organized conferences on ecological topics.
- Offering touristic packages in off-season at convenient prices, accompanied by various other means of attraction, in order to decongest the tourist areas in full season and implicitly to reduce the negative effect on the environment produced by excessive tourism at these times of the year.

The main countries emitting tourists are those developed due, on the one hand, to the high standard of living that allows them to pay the rather high costs of such tourism programs, and on the other hand due to the rather limited or even non-existent local offer.

Important ecotourism destinations on the international market are: Australia, Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, Guatemala, Cuba, Brazil, Bolivia, Kenya, Ghana, South Africa, Madagascar, Indonesia, Nepal. The most powerful tourist agencies and tour operators in the field are especially those from the tourist issuing states: UK, USA, Germany, Holland, France, Austria, Switzerland, but also those from the receiving states: South Africa, Australia, Kenya, Mexico, Canada. At the level of the European continent, the established ecotourism destinations are very few, especially in Central and Eastern Europe.

At present, ecotourism is the form of tourism with one of the highest growth rates internationally, especially as a result of the fact that it does not submit to as much as other forms of tourism to the conventional rules of economic development. Therefore, the development of ecotourism products implies primarily the existence of natural resources and biodiversity of the natural environment, while tourism infrastructure does not require such large investments as in the case of classical tourism. It has made it possible to implement this form of tourism also in developing countries or third world countries. In fact, among the most famous destinations for practicing ecotourism, there are a number of developing countries such as: Kenya, Costa Rica, Nepal, Madagascar.

Due to the increase in international attention paid to sustainable development in the economic, cultural and social fields, governments, trade associations, academic institutions as well as non-governmental organizations have realized that no real progress can be achieved, which would benefit all the parties involved, without an ecological approach. Sustainable development can solve the problem of poverty or the degradation and reduction of natural resources. In this context, the tourism sector cannot remain indifferent and must follow the path of sustainable development, all the more so because tourism resources are so vulnerable.

The development of ecotourism at local level must be done with the support of the local authorities, which must bear in mind that, in addition to the positive effects, tourism also generates a number of negative effects. Through careful planning and intelligent management, benefits can be maximized and problems minimized. Thus, the sustainable development of the tourism sector can be achieved by protecting the environment and the local culture.

### **3. Ecotourism in Romania**

Taking into account the current trends on the international market regarding the demand for tourism products carried out in nature, the natural tourism potential can become the competitive advantage of Romania as a tourist destination, if it is capitalized through sustainable development policies. The development of ecotourism in our country can be the chance to capitalize on the natural tourism potential in a sustainable way so that we can benefit in the long term from the increase of tourism resources. Ecotourism can bring funds for nature conservation but also new opportunities for the development of local communities within or near protected areas.

Romania has about 800 protected areas, which currently cover around 5% of the country's territory. Most of the ecotourism destinations are located inside or in the immediate vicinity of these protected areas, such as: the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, the „bird's paradise”; communities in the northern area of Piatra Craiului National Park with ecotourism programs focused on large carnivores (bears, wolves and linx); Retezat National Park, the oldest park in Romania, entered into the PanPark network and the Apuseni Natural Park with the ancestral traditions related to nature. It should also be pointed out that in our country there are still unfragmented forests, and over a third of the bear, wolf and linx population in Europe, the unique bird paradise in the Danube Delta, over 12 000 caves and, last but not least, local traditions full of authenticity.

Within the nature reserves there are several species of plants and animals declared endemic or natural monuments. Also, Romania still preserves in the natural environment specimens of flora and fauna, which in other countries have disappeared or can only be viewed in captivity. On the other hand, the sustainable development in some areas of the classical forms of tourism has led to the preservation of the natural environment in order to develop ecotourism.

Romania can become an important destination for ecotourism. The arguments in favor of this premise are:

- the existence of wild areas, unaffected by human intervention and large areas of forest;
- rich fauna and flora with species and ecosystems unique in Europe;
- diversity of natural tourism resources: fauna, flora, geological, speleological, etc.;
- access infrastructure in tourist areas where ecotourism is practiced;
- the existence of touristic units that address the segments of customers interested in rural tourism and agrotourism;
- the growing demand for ecotourism;
- the existence of the legal framework that provides both the delimitation of natural and national parks, of protected natural areas, as well as the conditions necessary for the training of the administration for protected areas, in order to initiate their management.

In the perception of the Romanian Ecotourism Association, the main „eco-attractions” of Romania are: the Danube Delta - unique in Europe, large carnivores: wolves, bears and lynx, the Carpathian Mountains, picturesque mountain landscape, forests in natural state, the rural area - everyday life (for example: carts, traditional agriculture), sheep breeding, caves.

According to a study conducted among foreign tour operators, tourists are looking in Romania, first of all, for nature untouched by man and traditional Romanian customs. After traditional customs, in the top of interest are the Danube Delta and the population of large carnivores, which is on the second place in Europe in terms of herd, after Russia. Another element loved by foreign tourists is the Romanian hospitality. One of the competitive advantages that Romania benefits from, compared to the established tourist destinations, is the preservation in certain areas of a natural environment untainted by the presence and activities of man.

The first ecotourism programs in Romania began to appear in 2000, initiated by several National and Natural Parks: Retezat, Piatra Craiului, Vânători Neamț, beneficiaries of a grant offered by the Global Environment Facility. There followed nature conservation projects that also had an ecotourism component: the Great Carnivores Project in the Carpathians – Zărnești, which developed programs focused on the observation of animals: bears, wolves, lynx and local traditions and the project „Combined actions for the protection and valorization of the natural heritage of the Apuseni Mountains”, implemented by the Romanian Federation of Speleology, which has developed ecotourism programs focused on capitalizing on local traditions and karst potential.

Currently, ecotourism programs in Romania are concentrated in the following areas:

- Danube Delta and Dobrogea: bird watching, boat rides;
- Piatra Craiului National Park: programs based especially on the observation of large carnivores: wolf, bear, lynx, but also of specific plant species, equestrian tourism, bicycles, snowshoe ride, etc.;
- Apuseni Mountains: speleotourism, thematic hikes, cultural programs, touring skiing, equestrian tourism, bicycles;
- Transylvania: discovering the Saxon and Székely culture, horseback riding, thematic hikes etc.;
- Maramures: cultural programs, discovery of nature: fauna and flora, traditional occupations, architecture, horseback riding, cycling, etc.;

- Bucovina: cultural and religious tourism, combined with nature observation: flora and fauna, thematic hikes, etc.;

- other areas of the Carpathian Mountains: numerous protected natural areas (some with the status of national or natural park) with programs focused on: equestrian tourism, cycling, thematic hiking, touring skiing, snowshoe ride, etc.

Romania has a unique natural and cultural heritage that can become an interesting destination for world tourism, given the fact that it manifests itself as a trend, the search for destinations with unique natural potential, unaffected by mass tourism. Romania must preserve the natural capital at its disposal in order to be able to benefit in the long term by establishing strategies and policies for the development of ecotourism at local, regional and national level.

The development and promotion of ecotourism in Romania is a tool for nature conservation that can act by:

1. direct funding for nature conservation projects;
2. creating alternative sources of income for local communities, increasing their capacity to develop high-quality services to reduce pressure on nature;
3. encouraging the sustainable development at local level of rural communities in protected areas (e.g., land-use planning measures that take into account nature conservation and protected areas);
4. promoting the best environmental practices of tour operators and guesthouses;
5. raising the awareness of local people and tourists about nature conservation, low energy consumption and the adoption of ecological waste collection measures.

Ecotourism programs in Romania are offered to tourists through local tour operators who usually collaborate with tour operators from abroad.

The most important Romanian tour operators who currently sell ecotourism programs are: Daksa, Carpathian Nature Tours, Roving Romania, Absolute Nature, Colin Shaw, Delta Travel, Equus Silvania, InterPares, Stefan cel Mare etc. Also, the big travel agencies in Romania that have developed in recent years tourism programs in nature are: Țiriac Travel, Paralela 45, J'info Tours, Perfect Tour, Transilvania Tour etc.

The development of ecotourism in our country is primarily due to the efforts of the Romanian Ecotourism Association (AER). This is an umbrella organization under which there are tour operators, non-governmental organizations of local development and nature conservation and tourism associations, which are trying to develop successful ecotourism programs meant to reinvigorate the Romanian tourism. Internationally successfully applied models are: the Strategy for the Development of Ecotourism in Australia and the Nature and Ecotourism Accreditedion Programs and the Accreditation Program in Ecotourism, applied in Sweden ("Nature's Best"), the first accreditation system in ecotourism in the Northern Hemisphere.

The mission of the association is to promote the concept of ecotourism and the development of ecotourism in order to support nature conservation, the sustainable development of local communities in areas with natural values, to increase the quality of services related to ecotourism and to promote nature as an essential element of Romania's touristic image. The establishment of this association was determined by the fact that Romania has a unique natural and cultural heritage, which can become a special attraction for world tourism. Given the current tendencies of tourists to look for destinations with

unique natural potential, unaffected by mass tourism, this natural capital must be preserved in order to benefit from it in the long term.

The objectives of the Romanian Ecotourism Association are:

- promoting the concept and principles of ecotourism at local, regional and national level;
- promoting ecotourism as a tool for nature conservation;
- promoting natural and traditional values that respect nature and their preservation;
- involvement of local communities in the development of ecotourism infrastructure and services;
- promoting ecotourism as a tool through which local populations can earn income;
- encouraging the use of local resources by ecotourism product providers;
- creating and maintaining a system of quality services in ecotourism;
- creating and implementing a system of certification in ecotourism.

The main ecotourism activities proposed by AER are: birdwatching, wildlife watching; hiking, horseback riding, visiting caves („caving”), bike rides, touring on cross-country skis or raquettes, wagon rides.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Taking into account the existing situation on the European tourism market, as well as the strengths that Romania has in its competition with the other possible destinations in the Central and Eastern Europe region, ecotourism can represent a solution for reviving the Romanian tourism.

The integration of Romania into the European Union creates the possibility of developing the ecotourism side of the Romanian touristic production, which, by its specificity, has the possibility of entering the European community market. The development of ecotourism offers an opportunity for survival for small and medium-sized enterprises in the hospitality industry, as well as for the relaunch of economic activities within rural communities.

Their orientation towards the ecotourism product, respectively towards agrotourism and rural tourism activities, which would capitalize both the natural landscape and the Romanian traditions, is a possibility of resizing and repositioning the Romanian touristic offer.

#### **References:**

\*\*\* *Asociației de Ecoturism din România*. [www.eco-romania.ro](http://www.eco-romania.ro).

Baltaretu, A. M. (2007). *Ecotourism and sustainable development*. Bucharest: Pro Universitaria Publishing House.

Blumer, A. (9-10 September, 2008). *Visitor Management Plan in Protected Areas, Visitor Management Training Seminar in and around Protected Areas – in support of local development, Nușoara - Retezat National Park*.

Bran, F.; Nistoreanu, P. & Simon, T. (2000). *Ecotourism*. Bucharest: Economica Publishing House.,

Fennell, D. (2003). *Ecotourism, an introduction*. Londra Routledge.

Nistoreanu, P. (2006). *Ecotourism and rural tourism*. Bucharest: ASE Publishing House.