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## BIODIVERSITY AND ITS REVALUATION THROUGH NATURE TOURISM, INCLUDING WETLANDS. STUDY CASE: ROMANIA

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**Abstract.** For more than half a century, there have been constant losses of biodiversity with profound consequences for the natural world and for human well-being. They take place through intensive agricultural production systems, constructions' expansion, quarrying exploitation, overexploitation of the forest fund, oceans and seas, rivers and streams, lakes and soils, invasions by alien species, pollution. But these more active biodiversity losses are due to climate changes. The biodiversity, including wetlands, can be exploited sustainably through certain types of tourism. The capitalization started through ecological tourism or rural tourism,. But their expansion beyond certain limits has led to the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, despite statements of minor impact on nature. In this context, it can be stated that, in the near future, the most recommended will be nature tourism. This type of tourism excludes the construction of tourist structures near or inside all protected areas so as not to damage the integrity of the natural environment and not to degrade the natural capital resources on which economic and social development is based.

**Keywords:** biodiversity, protected areas, nature tourism, wetlands

### 1 INTRODUCTION

In the last four decades, more and more attention has been paid to environmental protection issues. This has been achieved from the perspective of sustainable development, essentially illustrating the equation of economic-social-ecological aspects by considering the importance of the requirements circumscribed to economic sustainability, in general, as well as ecological sustainability, in particular.

From an economic point of view, sustainability expresses an inter-generational approach through which the exploitation of natural resources, the orientation of investments, technological and institutional changes are in harmony and strengthen the current and future potential of satisfying human society. (Bran et al., 1998) In this context, efforts to operationalize the concept of environmental protection, biodiversity conservation and food security will progress to the extent that the integration of the following two objectives will be achieved: maximizing welfare under the constraints imposed by the existing natural capital stock and available technologies, and maintaining the integrity of ecological subsystems considered vital for the stability of the global ecosystem.

The economic value of biodiversity becomes evident through the direct use of its components: non-renewable natural resources – fossil fuels, minerals, etc. and renewable natural resources – plant and animal species used as food or for energy production or for the extraction of substances, such as those used in the pharmaceutical or cosmetic industry.

Equally important is the role of biodiversity in providing services provided by ecological systems, such as regulating pedo-climatic conditions, water purification, mitigating the effects of natural disasters, etc. If in the past nature conservation was equivalent to species protection and most often the measures applied consisted in delimiting protected areas and implementing strict protection for areas where protected species appeared, often in conjunction with banning public access to the area, currently, realizing the benefits offered by natural heritage and taking into account that nature conservation objectives cannot be achieved without

the active involvement of local economies, nature conservation policies have shifted from protecting species to habitat and ecosystem management for the benefit of some areas to support regional and local development.

After 1990, actions were launched to expand the areas allocated to protected areas. Next, after the country's accession, in 2007, to the structures of the European Union, the issue of creating, in Romania, geographical areas that would be part of this vast network was raised. By implementing the Natura 2000 Network on an area depending on the Romanian biodiversity value, the premises of sustainable development based on the resources and services of the natural capital of our country will be ensured. The recognition of a certain area as a Natura 2000 site means its inclusion in the only territorial network of Community interest in Europe, which leads to the promotion and development of the entire region around that site. (Andrei and Vartolomei 2008). Supporting healthy and functional ecosystems in protected areas can increase not only the range of services they provide, but also the ability of ecosystems to withstand and adapt to natural disasters and disturbances (e.g. climate changes) and beyond the site level. Moreover, protected areas can provide additional benefits to the local and regional economy, attracting investment and improving the image and quality of life locally. (Bran et al. 2000)

## **2 METHODS**

The idea of using biodiversity through its assets in carrying out activities beneficial to local and regional economies started after a long experience in the field of research in Romania's tourism. In order to approach this new research topic, we started from the strictly qualitative aspect. Two methods were used for this purpose:

- The method of selective documentation, through which several articles and studies on the issues of attracting biodiversity in the economy were chosen and read, and in this context, we have started from a wide documentation on the existing natural heritage at the level of protected areas. The existing types were briefly addressed, supplemented with the determination of sustainable capitalization characteristics. Then, the legislation on biodiversity in Romania was studied in order to identify the real possibilities of socio-economically capitalizing the protected areas and to determine those that have real tourist values.
- Qualitative research analysis method, which is performed in any phase of studying a problem, its main purpose being to clarify the nature of the problem and to provide qualitative information. Following the identification of all patrimony values, a certain score could be given for each determined value.

Protected areas are essential for the conservation of biodiversity. They are the cornerstone of virtually all national and international conservation strategies, being reserved for maintaining the functioning of ecosystems, to serve as refuges for species and to maintain ecological processes that could not survive in most heavily managed terrestrial or marine landscapes. Protected areas act as landmarks through which we can understand human interaction with the natural world. Along these, natural landscapes and green corridors for maintaining the floristic and faunal biodiversity are identified.

At European level, attempts are being made to capitalize on these protected areas through tourism by supporting and diversifying tourism activities. In these protected areas, activities are allowed to promote and develop sustainable tourism, with an emphasis on ecotourism (Smaranda 2008). From this point of view, this article aims to show the long-term Romania's benefits of developing this form of tourism, in order to highlight the natural and anthropic tourist resources present in this network of protected areas.

From a management perspective, a wilderness area is composed of three categories of areas, preferably distributed concentrically: the core area, the buffer area, the transition area. Scientific research and tourism are carried out only under strict regulations, under conditions clearly established by the management plan of each protected area. (Manea, 2000) In many cases, protected species and habitats have emerged and been maintained as a result of human activities for the sustainable exploitation of natural resources. As a result, in most protected sites some economic activities are maintained in the peripheral settlements, but with special emphasis on the conservation of the species and habitats for which they have been declared. (Lozato-Giotart 2006)

## **3 RESULTS**

### **3.1 Types of sustainable tourism**

In the literature on tourism development, in recent decades, the emphasis is increasingly on the sustainable component. While it is true that the three concepts are based on the fundamentals of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental dimensions), ecotourism essentially refers to natural

spaces, while sustainable and responsible tourism are much broader concepts. Gradually, the concerns for ecotourism become the concern of some national associations from different countries, but also international ones.

Among the multiple types of tourism, those that are oriented towards the sustainable aspect of this economic field are the main ones:

- Nature tourism, the least aggressive form for the wildlife, which allows only environmental awareness and visiting activities,
- Ecological tourism which is dedicated to the tourist capitalization of the economic zones from the protected areas with different surfaces;
- Scientific tourism that focuses on the research of wild flora and fauna species and is also dedicated to protected areas;
- Rural tourism and agrotourism with an emphasis on supporting the local economy in communes and villages, especially as a complementary activity to local agriculture and crafts.

Gradually, as research and actions to support sustainable tourism have evolved continuously, other subtypes, dedicated to capitalizing on wildlife responsibly, have emerged. (Mazilu et al., 2015) Thus, the denominations of fair tourism, slow tourism, community tourism, participatory tourism, solidarity tourism or humanitarian tourism have appeared. From the documentation we read, the emphasis was placed on everything that means nature tourism and the creation of ecotourism destinations. A supporting point was also the studies, the articles published by foreign and Romanian researchers dedicated to nature tourism. Its beginnings date back to the eighteenth century and continues to evolve even nowadays.

Sustainable development is concentrated, as analysis and actions, especially after the year 2000. But the concept has its origins in the 1970s. During this period, a very important environmental awareness movement developed. This period remains a key moment in the today's history of sustainable development. Synonymous with ecological tourism, ecotourism is a term often confused with sustainable tourism or responsible tourism.

The first initiatives are due to the WTO through the 1995 Charter for Sustainable Tourism, Lanzarote (Canary Islands), when, globally, the issue of responsible tourism based on environmentally sound criteria is raised. Subsequently, the 2001 Johannesburg Environment Summits brought sustainable tourism to the fore. Then, the 2002 World Ecotourism Summit, held in Quebec, Canada, called for environmental and biodiversity protection requirements to be applied in all countries with a significant tourism sector.

The international dimension of tourism was then absorbed in the 2003 Convention on Biological Diversity, which aims at recommendations that can be integrated into national tourism and biodiversity strategies. Later, through the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), in 2012, which in the final statement focuses on green growth and sustainable tourism.

One of the last international events was the United Nations Climate Change Conference, which took place in Paris, France, in 2015, and which highlighted the danger of climate change and the faster adoption of measures to reduce global pollution.

But the development of this business sector is not without negative consequences for the environment. This is primarily related to the ease of movement from one place to another on the planet. Experts have estimated the share of tourism in greenhouse gas emissions at 5%, due to the increase in low-cost air transport, a condition for the development of tourism in remote destinations.

Poorly managed at the country level, it puts significant pressure on natural resources and energy consumption in the reception areas. It produces a large mass of waste that is difficult to dispose of in emerging countries that lack the treatment infrastructure and contributes to air, soil and marine pollution in regions of the world that are under-equipped to deal with these problems, such as less developed countries, whose tourism is a significant part of the GDP.

According to The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), since the 8th decade of the last century, ecotourism is a type of tourism that consists of visiting relatively intact or slightly disturbed natural areas to study and admire the landscape, the plants and wildlife it houses, as well as any cultural event (past and present) observable in these areas.

A decade later, The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) developed a definition that today serves as a landmark, namely – travel responsibly in natural places, while preserving the environment and the well-being of local peoples.

We discover the fauna and flora, but also the inhabitants of the visited region, which differentiate ecotourism from adventure or nature tourism. The last two are just part of the equation. Adventure tourism suggests the existence of a risk and requires physical effort. Rafting and kayaking are the most popular adventure sports.

Nature tourism consists in discovering the flora and fauna of a natural space, without any other form of commitment. (Honey, 2008) The big difference between the three is the commitment to sustainable development, a key concept for ecotourism that is completely absent from the other two concepts. In 2015, visitors' interpretation and awareness, as well as those of the host populations, regarding the environment conservation, have occupied a central place in defining TIES.

### 3.2 The situation of protected areas in Romania

In the last decades, new documents have been drawn up, called the Charter on Natural Areas around the World, to guaranty a behaviour friendly to the environment, the conservation of flora and fauna and the built heritage: European Charter of Protected Areas, Charter for Sustainable Development for Green Resorts, Charter for Natural Parks and Mountain Communities, Blue Flag for European Beaches, etc. In addition, many labels have been created to promote the eco-responsible approach of tourism stakeholders: Green Key, Panda lodges and eco-lodges, the European eco-label, Green Globe 21, etc.

These actions were accompanied by limiting the number of visitors and tourists by setting quotas in most of the national and natural parks, in the Biosphere's Reservations, in the natural reservations, Natura 2000 network, regulating tourist flows by limiting access roads or parking a certain number of private vehicles, numerus clausus, mandatory reservations in advance, with balanced distribution for a year, for most very fragile natural areas.

In addition to conserving natural capital, these sites offer important opportunities for sustainable economic development, both through the possibility of attracting funds and through efficient economic management for the benefit of people and nature.

Romania is a medium-sized country that has focused, on a not very large geographical area, all the variety of relief from the mountain area, to the plain and delta, a rich hydrographic network, a great wealth of mineral waters, a rich and varied plant and fauna world. Culturally and historically, in the long coexistence in these lands, our country managed to stand out through monuments, goods and cultural values of great uniqueness, originality and artistic importance, which demonstrated the belonging to the great European culture. Its first major component, the natural tourist heritage, has always added and assimilated other components of the natural environment to be included in the tourist capitalization, and its structure includes all the components of the geographical environment.

Romania is one of the EU countries with the highest biodiversity. We are the only one in the EU with 5 biogeographical regions. In the last three decades, our country has transposed most of the international and European Conventions on environmental and biodiversity issues into its own legislation.

On Romania's territory, there are 3 biosphere reservations, 13 National Parks, 16 Natural Parks, 4 Geoparks, 32 scientific reservations, 916 natural reservations and natural monuments, 606 reservations part of the Natura 2000 network (SCI-435, SPA-171). The total area of the protected natural areas in Romania is about 20% of Romania's total area. Since 2018, there is a National Agency for Protected Areas but which does not have a positive impact on the conservation of protected areas. (Petrișor and Andrei 2019)

The responsibility for the protected areas and the manner of their administration are established by law. The legislative act in force at the date of this paper's elaboration, respectively Emergency Ordinance no. 57 of 2007, assigns the responsibility of the administration to the:

- National Agency for Protected Areas (ANAP) for all protected areas of national interest;
- Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Administration for this biosphere reserve, due to its size as territory and its importance as wild nature;
- Local public authorities for protected areas declared as such thought their decisions.

The administrations of protected areas and the custodians of protected areas are currently subordinated to: a) the central public authority for the environment (Ministry of Environment) – Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Administration; b) National Forest Administration; c) some autonomous administrations, companies and commercial societies; d) local public authorities – county councils and town halls; e) scientific research and education institutions in the public and private sector; f) museums; g) non-governmental organizations; and h) natural persons.

The Romanian Ecotourism Association, in partnership with the central public authority with responsibilities in the field of tourism, developed the "National Network of Ecotourism Destinations – Instrument for Sustainable Development" project, funded through 2009-2014 EEA grants, within the NGO Fund in Romania.

The project provided technical support for 10 micro-regions that want to evolve in accordance with the concept of ecotourism destination. The 10 areas that entered this project were: Tusnad and its surroundings;

Mara – Cosău – Creasta Cocoşului; The hills of Transylvania; Țara Dornelor; Retezat – Țara Hațegului; Craiului Forest; The Danube Delta; Bison Land; Zărnești – Piatra Craiului; Mărginimea Sibiului. It should be noted that only half of these destinations have a major protected natural area on their territory (national park / natural park / biosphere reservation), the rest being located around nature reservations or some Natura 2000 sites.

Recently (2020), the initiative to launch the trademark “Produced in a protected natural area from Romania” was commenced, and the Minister of Public Works, Development and Administration, Ion Ștefan, accompanied the delegation of the National Agency for Protected Natural Areas (ANANP), the initiator of the project, at the meeting organized in Vrancea county with mayors and local producers, future beneficiaries of the project’s implementation in Cheilor Tișitei natural reserve.

But protected areas have a different status, that of environmental conservation and not of economic production. Local entrepreneurs on the outskirts of protected areas or economic areas of the protected area may use the name of the protected area as a distinctive brand at local and regional level. The same also is available for the Natura 2000 network, where there are some exploitation limits of existing natural resources.

All national parks, natural parks, natural reservations and Natura 2000 sites are managed by the winners of the tenders organized by the Ministry of Environment and following which these protected natural areas are given into administration or custody based on contracts concluded for a period of 10 years. Through these contracts, the administrator or custodian promises to administer, on behalf of the Romanian state, the values of the natural heritage for which the contracted protected natural area was established, committing itself to ensure all the necessary resources for this activity.

The management situation of these protected areas is not finalized. Thus, about 60% of the protected areas in Romania do not have any administrator, and the state wants to reduce the activity of existing custodians. By adopting the Emergency Ordinance no. 75/2018, published in the Official Gazette, the state eliminates the notion of custody of protected areas, but also the NGOs from the list of entities that can manage any naturally protected area.

Instead, commercial companies and administrations that profit from the exploitation of protected area resources, as well as town halls and county councils eager to develop large projects in those areas are still free to manage protected areas, although in many cases they have proven to carry out activities that are contrary to biodiversity protection.

From the explanatory memorandum of GEO no. 75/2018 it is clear what the problem for the Romanian state is: the approval of economic projects in protected areas. Many NGOs have specialized in nature conservation and, not being politically controlled, they mess up the calculations of those who want direct investments in the protected areas, forgetting that these custodians were invested by the Romanian state precisely to take care of the natural heritage.

In most situations, the administrations of the protected areas do not have their own budget that they can manage depending on the priorities required for the management of the protected areas. The amounts necessary for the management of the protected areas are allocated, in the vast majority of cases, in proportion of 100%, from the budget of the institution or organization that took them over in administration. The state budget supports the management of protected areas only in a few isolated situations, providing co-financing for activities related to certain projects. Romania is the only country in Europe where the state does not allocate resources for the management of protected areas of national interest. (Figure 1).

## **4 DISCUSSION**

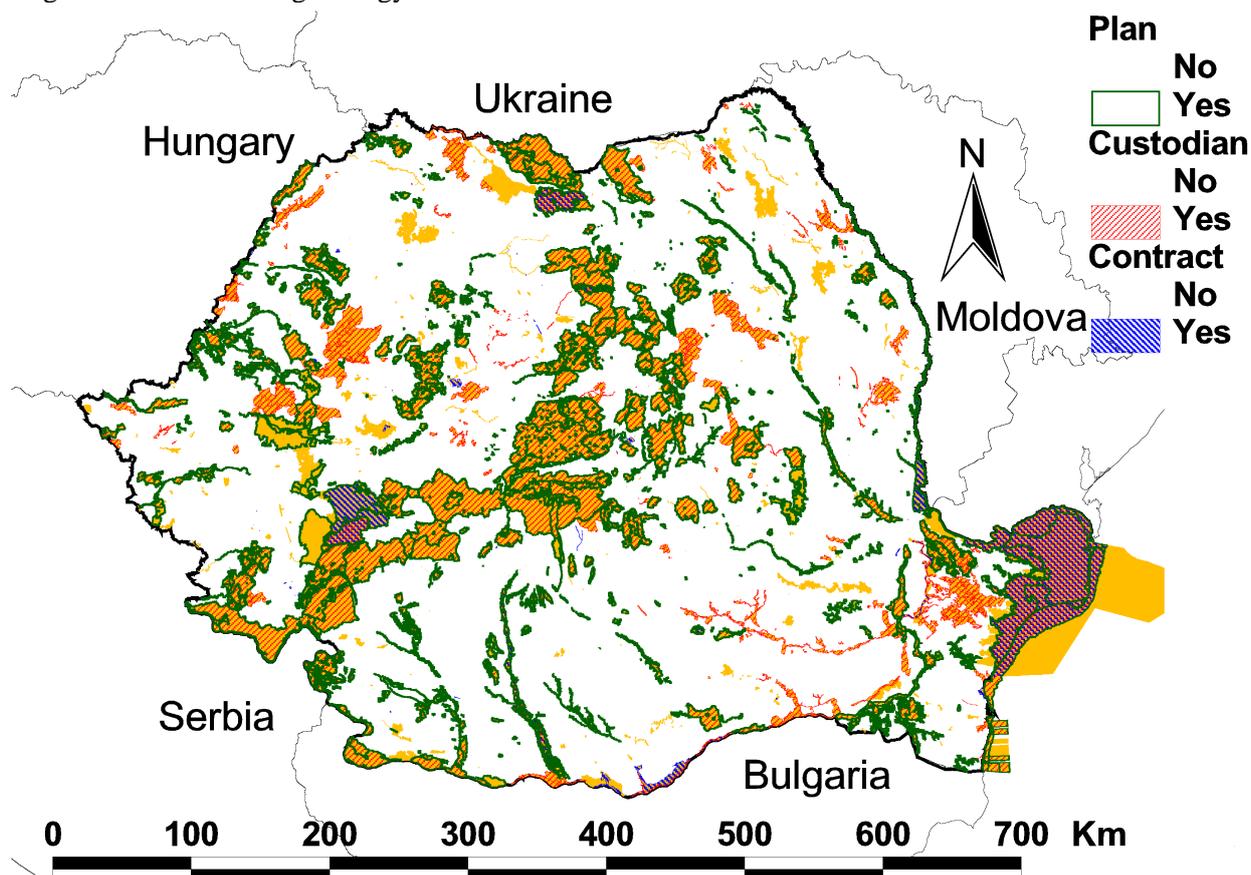
### **4.1 The problem of ecotourism in Romania**

The concept of Ecotourism Destination appeared for the first time in the 2009 version of the *National Strategy for ecotourism development* and was absorbed in the version of the Strategy approved by Government Decision in 2019 (GD no. 358/2019).

Based on that first document, the central public authority for tourism, together with nationally representative institutions and organizations (Ministry of Environment, Waters and Forests, National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism and The Romanian Ecotourism Association), developed the evaluation system of the ecotourism destinations in Romania, a system based on the Global Criteria for Sustainable Tourism (GSTC) and the European Ecotourism Standard (EETLS).

An ecotourism destination includes a micro-region with special natural and cultural resources, which can be economically exploited through sustainable tourism. Such a geographical area offers visitors and tourists unique and authentic experiences, but with a minimal impact on the environment, all focused on a

network of complementary ecotourism services. All these requirements are part of a unitary, homogeneous management and marketing strategy.



**Figure 1.** Spatial distribution of the Romanian natural protected areas with an assigned custodian, who has or not a management contract for his activity, and a management plan. The yellow background indicates a natural protected area (Petrișor and Andrei 2019)

In order to receive the ecotourism destination status, the applicant area must meet the criteria for designating ecotourism destinations in Romania, provided in the Annex to Government Decision no. 358/2019 on the approval of the National Ecotourism Development Strategy – context, vision and objectives – 2019-2029. The ecotourism status can be obtained for a maximum period of three years, which can be extended at the request of the applicant.

The criteria system was developed based on the Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program (NEAP), the first accreditation system in ecotourism, promoted by the Australian Ecotourism Association and the Swedish Ecotourism Association’s Nature’s Best (the first accreditation system in ecotourism in the northern hemisphere). The European Ecotourism Certification Standard developed based on the international criteria for sustainable tourism adopted by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council was also taken into account.

The development of ecotourism destinations in Romania is an integrated program, developed together with the Partnership Foundation (coordinator and strategic partner) and the Romanian Ecotourism Association (technical assistance partner), which were joined by other expert partners in various fields. The documentation for the designation/re-evaluation of ecotourism destinations in Romania is sent to the General Directorate of Tourism, the Investment, Forms and Tourist Destinations Service within the Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Tourism.

In 2012, Romania was the first European country that, through the contribution of the Ecotourism Association, developed a national methodology to evaluate and designate ecotourism destinations. Currently, there are five such designated areas: Zărnești-Piatra Craiului, Mara-Cosău-Creasta Cocoșului, Țara Hațegului-Retezat, Vânători-Neamț and Țara Dornelor.

In Romania, ecotourism programs have a relatively recent history. The first such tourist packages were created around 2000, when a series of initiatives appeared in the area of national or natural parks (Retezat, Piatra Craiului, Vânători Neamț, Apuseni). The oldest project, called Carnivore Mari from the

Carpathians, managed to launch ecotourism programs based on the attractiveness of the population of wolves, bears and lynxes in the northern area of Piatra Craiului. But it has also created a refuge for this biologically endangered species.

A special place is reserved to the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, as a very special wetland, ecotourism destination and space for nature tourism. (Andrei et al., 2016)

But this national system of applying certain criteria is not enough to grant the status of ecotourism destination. (Charbonneau 2008) It needs to be doubled for each indicator by performance indicators that would more clearly attest to this status. Many criteria overlap and others can be analysed together, with the same end goal. (Ribière 2013) The whole developed system is a start-up but can be much improved and restructured. It may include in each major criterion a few sub-criteria, with certain relevant indicators. At the first review of this multicriteria system, we can say that it is a descriptive one and does not place much emphasis on the local economy and workforce. (Lahaye 2007)

**For the first group A**, called destination management, clarifications can be made about the lack of evaluation indicators and scoring.

Accessibility can be assessed by the number of national, county or local roads that converge towards an ecotourism destination, the number of pedestrian access roads (paths), the number of barriers and control points. The access of people with disabilities must also be noted under this criterion and not under design and location, and as an indicator it must state how many paths or access slopes, toilets in the visitors and tourists' centres exist for such people.

The existence of the protected area management plan does not imply the realization of a strategy for the development of ecological tourism, given the fact that this plan also includes such a distinct chapter, but also details about the visiting conditions. In reality, there is an overlap of ideas. The strategy is necessary only if the ecotourism destination is outside a protected area.

An important indicator is given by the existence of a plan for all the localities surrounding the protected area elaborated by the County Inspectorate for Emergency Situations, given the fact that many natural risks affect the dwellings and the local population. The existence of such a plan can lead to a high score.

The management plan of a protected area also takes into account the observance of the legislation by all economic operators and important is the number of economic operators operating within such an ecotourism destination. The important indicator is given by the number of companies and societies created by the local population that generate jobs and bring income to the local budget.

The management of such a destination is not solved simply by partnership but by associations that include all the factors interested in the existence and functioning of an ecotourism destination. There may be local entrepreneurs associations, along with local town halls, other associations of pupils and students. The number of such associations and their effective functioning count as an indicator. In also counts the number of programs dedicated to informing and educating tourists but also the local population.

This management criterion does not specify the existence of a quantitative and qualitative assessment of existing resources (natural, demographic, economic, environmental, climate change, etc.), every 3 years. The visit plan and the regulation can be approached together because they are part of the action meant to maintain a moderate flow of visitors and tourists.

The design and location criterion is indicated by the number of buildings and infrastructure facilities built each year. The limitation of these constructions is, in fact, necessary. Another indicator is the existence of a specialized guide for the application of some constructive solutions in harmony with the local landscape and architecture. Also related to the design is the number of existing tourist (essential indicator) and thematic trails, their signalling.

The interpretation criterion is based on information and visiting centres, and the indicator is their number and the number of specialized people, permanently employed. Presentation materials are currently required to be in at least two foreign languages, if not even three foreign languages.

Not only a simple protected area management plan is needed, but it also needs to be approved in order for a higher score to be awarded. More than half of the protected areas in Romania do not have the management plans approved by the National Agency for Protected Areas or by the Ministry of Environment.

**Criterion group B** aims to maximize the social and economic benefits for local communities through tourism but also to minimize the negative effects generated by the development of the destination.

Into the wild sites, traditional agricultural activities may be allowed, some of which are necessary for maintaining landscapes (e.g. mountain meadows), growing and obtaining organic products – vegetables,

fruits, dairy products, meat, fruit juices, hunting and fishing activities and provided that the sites retain their conservation status.

The local development is identified by the number of micro-production and service companies existing at the level of the existing localities within the ecotourism destination or at its periphery. The headquarters of these companies should be found at the level of localities in a 2/3 proportion and not just 50% as stipulated in the existing criteria system. Also, another indicator is the production of organic products or the existence of processing units for raw materials from the local agriculture or those with a protected geographical name, or with eco-labelling.

An essential role is also played by the number of associations of agricultural producers at the local level in the neighbouring localities or within the ecodestination that jointly capitalize and promote their agricultural products as raw materials or processed products.

Another relevant criterion is the number of craft and handicraft workshops that capitalize on the full range of local resources, as well as the number of training centres for young people. This one is missing from the current system of criteria. The selling and promotion of local products is based on the number of small shops supported by local entrepreneurs and the creation of a unique site to promote them.

The field of tourism must contain certain limits to increase the number of accommodation, food, and leisure units, the number of tourists depending on the environmental support capacity of the ecotourism destination. Otherwise, the consumption pressure on energy, water, gas resources will be high. The basic indicator is the existence of a real calculation on this support capacity, its lack decreases the attractiveness of the destination, thought the congestion and depletion of existing resources.

An important aspect is given by the number of appreciations received (gathered through questionnaires applied to visitors and tourists) regarding the quality of tourist services and the issue of biodiversity protection during one year, or in the three years of operating as an ecotourism destination.

**Criteria group C** focuses on maximizing the benefits for cultural heritage and minimizing the negative effects. The basic indicator is the number of monuments enrolled in the category of those of international, national and local interest. Then it comes the number of local museums and memorial houses, and permanent exhibitions with local products.

Another relevant indicator is the value of financial resources from local budgets, as a percentage from the local GDP for the conservation and protection of existing monuments, number of local cultural and educational associations, number of permanent cultural events (artistic, sports, gastronomic), but also temporary ones.

Next is the number of natural and cultural landscapes identified at ecodestination's level. This indicator does not fall under environmental problems, but under cultural and natural patrimony of the local communities within the tourist ecodestination.

The establishment of a certain number of accommodation places was wrongly included in this group of criteria on cultural issues, because it has nothing to do with the field of cultural heritage. Relevant is the number of renovated traditional houses that receive tourists constantly. Any ecodestination must capitalise the traditional houses and not build a large number of tourist or agritourism guesthouses.

**Criteria group D, the last one**, is based on maximizing the benefits and minimizing the negative impact of tourism activities on the environment.

The key indicator is given by the existence of a multi-annual pollution reduction plan in all its forms. Another key indicator is the selective waste collection, through the existence of primary processing centres. Another indicator is the number of households that use solar and wind energy, and gas instead of burning wood and coal briquettes.

Also an indicator is the number of workshops and local centres for reconditioning clothes, shoes, furniture, toys, objects made of different metals, other objects from local households, etc.

The existence of measuring instruments for water, gas, electricity consumption by metering households, companies, public institutions to reduce waste and environmental footprint is another indicator. It is not the measures that are relevant but the number of such households and public and private units that are fully metered. Another indicator is given by the existence of wastewater collection and treatment plants.

Also important is the number of actions carried out by the custodians of the protected area during a year to inform the local population about the reduction of the quantities of chemicals used in agriculture and in their own households.

Biodiversity protection is achieved through the existence of local flora and fauna research centres. The important indicator is the number of actions for the observation and conservation of the flora and fauna of the ecodestination and the number of participants from the local population, the number of activities carried out

with school students from all localities of the ecodestination that participate in biodiversity protection activities.

In the current criteria system, activities for harvesting flora and fauna species are mentioned, activities which are not actually indicated. The number of hunting and fishing activities per year within the ecodestination is relevant as an indicator. The number of arranged fishing grounds is as well relevant. Only wildlife rescue and temporary care centres may have visiting programs, but zoological and botanical gardens/parks are not indicated.

An important indicator is the number of temporary bans on land use, capitalization of medicinal fruits and herbs, mushrooms, etc. hunting and fishing for the restoration of biological potential and natural landscapes. Protection of the environment is emphasised by the number of actions organized annually to reduce emissions of pollutants into the atmosphere, noise, soil contamination, reduction of excessive artificial lighting, ecological restoration.

All these indicators can receive scores from 1-5 for a better differentiation of the ecodestinations in terms of attractiveness, importance and biodiversity conservation.

## 5 CONCLUSION SECTIONS

The hospitality capacity of a tourist destination may depend on the vulnerability of their natural environment, their ability to ensure their protection, while promoting the development of ecotourism. This type of tourism can generate jobs and direct (taxes, fees) and indirect (accommodation, transport, selling points for local artisanal products, guide schools, etc.) resources. (Eagles et al., 2002)

The tourist ecodestination evaluation system with a certain number of criteria cannot be based on existing plans and reports, and field visits, but on a set of well-defined indicators, easy to identify and apply. The result of this is the fact that one no longer has to carry out an ample study or a very large file, all in favour of a form that can also be completed digitally. Not the analysis of a custodian's contract, of the existing maps and plans, the analysis of documents of different categories but their existence is the important aspect. This is because, beyond some standard aspects, some details from all existing documents can be different from one ecotourism destination to another.

The existence of programs allocated to an ecotourism destination is not relevant, but the existence of a regular information program and of a regular training program for staff in the administrative apparatus and staff in the field of tourism services is. Also it is relevant the analysis of the media; the analysis of the training program addressed to public institutions and the private sector, the list of actions to support producers of traditional and / or ecological local goods and services and how many actions have been carried out in a concrete way. On paper, any plan can be wonderful, but what matters is what has actually been achieved from one year to another, or during the three years of operating as a tourist destination.

It is not the existence of certain types of commitment that defines the proper functioning of an ecotourism ecodestination but a plan with a number of activities carried out or in progress. The higher the number, the better the ecodestination is managed.

All these components of the natural environment are dispersed or concentrated on larger or smaller pieces of land, being components of great durability and stability in time and space of a natural ecosystem. Changes due to man in all historical stages of social and economic evolution can be considered beneficial insofar as they are rationally and balanced exploited and capitalized.

Each of these components plays a major role in supporting the tourism industry. As far as we know today, none of the techniques for assessing the costs and benefits resulting from the integration of nature in the tourism production chain are satisfactory. It is therefore difficult to show the benefits that can be obtained from nature's protection and, therefore, to define who should deal with this protection and who should bear the costs among producers, consumers, private or public investors.

It appears, from the foreign speciality literature, that any evaluation system must comply with 7 essential pillars that are stated as basic principles. These pillars consist of:

- Very brief assessment of the entire natural, economic, demographic and environmental potential (file form) and the optimal exploitation of all resources; each economic field should have a maximum of 5-7 criteria but with the related indicators;
- Determining all types of support capacities of the natural, social and cultural environment, in order to establish limits for the exploitation of resources; presentation of each type of capacity with specific indicators;
- Respect for originality and socio-cultural authenticity existing at the level of the local communities; criteria belonging to the field of identity culture and their indicators;

- Long-term, non-temporary, viable economic activities that can be passed down from generation to generation; traditional occupations, crafts and handcrafts, criteria with specific indicators;
- The way in which all the actors in the territory take part in supporting the local economy, including the tourism and the ecotouristic destination; criteria that justify the actions and that can be quantified through indicators;
- Establishing the degree of local population's satisfaction, but also that of visitors and tourists through the existence of the ecotouristic destination; criteria that show the conduct of sociological surveys and evaluated using indicators;
- Establishing all preventive and corrective measures on multiple levels (economic, social, architectural heritage and urbanism, environmental and pollution reduction and overexploitation of existing resources); criteria related to field-specific indicators.

In essence, tourism at the level of an eco-destination must be a community-type kind of tourism. The most recommended is nature tourism, minimal in terms of investments and tourist facilities. This type of tourism must first contribute to the conservation of cultural and/or natural resources and to the support of the local economy, so as to increase the incomes and other benefits that the participating communities, but also the local entrepreneurs benefit directly from.

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