

The 7th International Conference on Economics and Social Sciences
**Exploring Global Perspectives:
The Future of Economics and Social Sciences**
June 13-14, 2024
Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

**Ecotourism in Romania: Exploring Potential
and Promoting Responsible Tourism**

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DOI: 10.24818/ICESS/2024/007

Abstract

In Romania, ecotourism has become an important tool for nature conservation and the sustainable development of local communities. It promotes not only environmental protection, but also cultural values and local traditions. The Ecotourism Certification System was developed in collaboration with authorities and organisations in the field and is an important tool to achieve environmental protection objectives. The Romanian Ecotourism Association through the statistical data provided show a significant increase a economic impact of ecotourism in Romania, highlighting his potential. The present study investigates consumer perceptions and behaviours regarding ecotourism in Romania, in the situation where environmental protection is gaining proportions day by day, and sustainable development is an increasingly important topic. This article aims to show the importance of promoting ecotourism in Romania and how necessary a tourism offers to protect first and to satisfy tourists' preferences for responsible and sustainable vacations.

Keywords: ecotourism, sustainability, consumer perceptions and behaviour, Romania.

JEL Classification: Q010, Q200.

1. Introduction

After the end of World War II, society's perception has headed more and more toward understanding the finitude of our planet's resources. In addition, ecotourism has become a symbol of this awareness. Due to advances in transportation and information technology, several areas of the plant that were previously isolated have led to a rapid increase in natural area tourism. We are facing climate change,

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with global temperatures rising, and now we are forced to bear the consequences of our own behavioural mistakes towards the planet that hosts us. The contributions of the tourism sector to these climate changes through air travel or personal vehicle use, deforestation, construction, water consumption, etc., essentially represent a self-destructive manifestation since they affect the very foundations on which tourism relies (Cornish, 2004; Constantinescu, 2012; Holden et al., 2022).

It has to be underlined that preserving the sustainable development in some business activity requires a permanent broadening of offered services and products contrary to growing human needs and desires, setting up the tourism within the mentioned mechanism (Jeločnik et al., 2020).

Therefore, the need for change in tourism has become evident, aiming to attract more attention from governments and partners in the private and public sectors, based on principles of sustainable development. The principles presented include: a) The environment has an intrinsic value and must be recognised, this principle is very important for tourism and must be kept forever; b) Tourism must be considered an activity that does not harm the environment, and local communities can benefit; c) A relation between environment and tourism where the support tourism activities in the long term, the condition being that tourism does not affect the environment; d) It is necessary to respect the ecological, social, economic and cultural characteristics of the geographical area related to tourist activities; e) It is desired to maintain a balance between the needs of tourists, destinations and host communities (Maziliu, 2004).

At the beginning, sustainable tourism was intended to be a business opportunity driven by concern for the environment. Although these two concerns may seem incompatible at first glance, a sustainable tourism business can thrive in the long run if managed responsibly, adhering to both market standards and sustainable development principles (Guja, 2023; Milojković et al., 2023).

2. Literature Review

According to Zaharia and Cofas (2012), sustainable tourism involves the ability of tourist destinations to remain competitive in the face of all challenges, attract visitors, retain them over time, maintain a distinct cultural identity and uphold a constant balance with the surrounding environment. So, it considers prudent mutual linking of tourism, ecology and economic interests (Puška et al., 2022). Ecotourism is a specific form of sustainable tourism that emphasises the exploration and conservation of nature and the surrounding environment (Chandel and Mishra, 2016). The primary motivation of ecotourists is to experience and learn about biodiversity and unique ecosystems, thereby contributing to their conservation. Also, ecotourism involves many aspects, such as visits in protected areas, interaction with the local communities, and supporting environmental conservation efforts. It is more nature-focused and has specific objectives regarding conservation and environmental education (Wearing and Neil, 2009).

Ecotourism differs from other forms of tourism by involving more direct and intimate interactions with the natural and cultural environment. It is primarily a development initiative in the form of an active partnership between tourists, tour operators, travel

agencies, local communities, protected area administrators, environmental organisations, and experts in the field (Vdovicenco and Aşevschi, 2015). Nowadays, when more and more countries are facing the issues of socio-economic development of rural space and rural communities (Ivolga and Shakhramanian, 2019), preserving the traditional Romanian village and utilising its resources, including exploring its non-agricultural potential, are development directions that should be tailored to local needs (Dinu et al., 2020).

In 1986, Mexican architect Héctor Ceballos-Lascuráin, Director General of Standards and General Technology at SEDUE and founding member of the Mexican organisation PRONATURA, formulated one of the earliest definitions of ecotourism (Lama, 2021). According to him, ecotourism is a form of tourism that is environmentally responsible. In his conception, ecotourism involves visiting national parks and protected areas with the primary objective of admiring and studying the surrounding environment, including landscapes and wild plant and animal species (Bekele et al., 2017). Ceballos-Lascuráin emphasises the importance of cultural aspects that promote nature conservation and reduce negative impacts on the environment in this sphere. In addition, he shows the social and economic benefits for the local communities related to ecotourism.

In 1991, the International Ecotourism Society (TIES) created a definition of ecotourism, described as a form of responsible travel in natural environments, the purpose being to preserve the environment and support the well-being of local communities (Barna et al., 2011).

The World Tourism Organisation chose to use the term "ecotourism" to describe "all types of tourism in which the primary motivation of the tourist is the observation and appreciation of nature, contributing to its conservation and generating minimal impacts on the surrounding environment and cultural traditions" (Carvache Franco et al., 2021).

Experts in ecotourism from the Department of Tourism and Geography at the Faculty of Business and Tourism of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, members of the Academic Centre for Tourism-Service Research (CACTUS), propose a comprehensive definition of ecotourism, considering it as a form of tourism conducted in natural environments with the primary goal of knowing and appreciating nature and local culture (Nistoreanu et al., 2003). This definition emphasises that ecotourism brings benefits to the population and requires measures for nature conservation. Synthesising the mentioned definitions, ecotourism can be understood as a responsible form of tourism that involves conserving and protecting nature with human support, and also having an educational role in promoting respect for the environment and local communities. It is a way to act carefully to minimise negative impacts on nature, culture, and local traditions during eco-tourism activities.

Romania marked a historic moment in 2012, becoming the first country in Europe to implement a system for recognizing ecotourism destinations according to criteria developed by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) and European Ecotourism Standards (EETLS), (Dragan et al., 2014; Mazilu et al., 2017).

The purpose of the Ecotourism Certification System is to guarantee environmental conservation and promote sustainable development of local communities through tourism (Dragomir et al., 2018).

The Romanian Ecotourism Association (AER) brings together, through an innovative approach, both the public and private sectors in a partnership dedicated to nature conservation and tourism promotion. This partnership involves tourist associations, nongovernmental organizations active in sustainable development and nature conservation, as well as tourism service providers (Barna et al., 2011).

The association's mission is to promote the concept and development of ecotourism, with the aim of supporting nature conservation, the sustainable development of local communities in regions with natural values, and improving the quality of ecotourism-related services. Additionally, the association seeks to promote nature as a fundamental element of Romania's tourism image (Tudorache et al., 2016).

Another argument in favour of expanding this type of tourism is presented by the statistical data provided by the Romanian Ecotourism Association (AER). According to this information, the economic impact generated by ecotourism programmes organised by AER member tour operators in our country has shown a significant increase, rising from approximately 1.6 million euros in 2008 to 3 million euros in 2014 and more than 5 million euros in 2017 (Ilie, 2019). This upward trend is driven by the growing number of AER members who conduct ecotourism programmes, as well as the increasing number of tourists who participate in these programmes. Particularly remarkable is the fact that the local impact significantly exceeds the average of traditional tourism. In the case of AER member operators, more than 50% of the expenses incurred by tourists remain in the communities where the tourist programmes take place, especially in rural areas (Ilie, 2019).

3. Research Methodology and the Research Objectives

This study aims to analyse consumers' perception of the ecotourism market.

To achieve the research goal, an empirical approach was chosen, the research method being a survey, the instrument used being a questionnaire. The questionnaire comprises 10 closed questions, including 4 demographic questions, with multiple-choice answers.

The survey questions were created in order to determine the level of awareness that the population has about ecotourism, the experiences tourists have had with ecotourism, financial preferences for one night's accommodation, reasons for choosing ecotourism, and the average number of nights preferable for an ecotourism accommodation.

320 people responded to the questionnaire and it was distributed between March 12 and April 10 online via Google Forms.

The objectives of this study are determined by the importance of understanding the reasons behind choosing eco-tourism accommodation, the amounts of money allocated, the average number of nights stayed, etc.

4. Results and Discussions

Regarding demographic data, the proportion of women to men is nearly equal (49% men and 51% women), (Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents' gender distribution

Variable	Absolute (persons)	Relative (per cent)
Male	158	49%
Female	162	51%

Source: Self-conceptualisation based on the questionnaire.

Regarding the level of net income, the distribution is as follows: more than 57% of respondents earn between 4001 and 5000 lei per month, 20% of them earn between 5001 and 6000 lei per month, 13% earn over 6001 lei per month, 4% earn less than 3000 lei per month, while 6% of them earn between 3001 and 4000 lei per month (Table 2.).

Table 2. Respondents' income

Variable	Absolute (persons)	Relative (percent)
< 3000 lei (under 600 euros)	13	4%
3001 - 4000 lei (600 - 800 euros)	19	6%
4001 - 5000 (800 - 1000 euros)	182	57%
5001 - 6000 (1000 - 1200 euros)	64	20%
> 6001 lei (over 1200 euros)	42	13%

Source: Self-conceptualisation based on the questionnaire.

Table 3. Age of respondents

Age		
Variable	Absolute (persons)	Relative (per cent)
18 - 24 years	70	22%
25 - 35 years	76	24%
36 - 45 years	141	44%
46 - 65 years	17	5%
Over 65 years	16	5%

Source: Self-conceptualisation based on the questionnaire.

According to age of respondents, the most of them are between 36 and 45 years old, specifically 44%, while 22% are between 18 and 24 years old, 24% between 25 and 35 years old, 5% between 46 and 65 years old, and 5% are over 65 years old (Table 3.).

Around 67% of the respondents have completed university studies, 23% have completed postgraduate studies, while 10% of them have completed high school (Table 4).

Table 4. Highest education completed

completed studies		
Variable	Absolute (persons)	Relative (percent)
High School	32	10%
University	214	67%
Postgraduate	74	23%

Source: Self-conceptualisation based on the questionnaire.

Table 5 shows that 60% of respondents have heard about ecotourism, this fact indicating a high level of awareness of this concept. This number also suggests that ecotourism has become a familiar topic for more people. Thus, this number also shows a growing interest in environmental protection and concern for the negative impact that some trips have.

Table 5. Ecotourism awareness

Have you heard of ecotourism before?		
Variable	Absolute (persons)	Relative (percent)
Yes	192	60%
No	128	40%

Source: Self-conceptualisation based on the questionnaire.

Knowing that the purpose of ecotourism is to promote responsible and sustainable travel, it is good thing that a significant part of the sample is familiar with this concept. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is potential to increase sustainable travel and adopting sustainable tourism behaviour.

Table 6. Accommodation in an ecotourism guesthouse

Have you stayed in an ecotourism guesthouse up to now?		
Variable	Absolute (persons)	Relative (percent)
Yes	67	21%
No	253	79%

Source: Self-conceptualisation based on the questionnaire.

Table 7 provides valuable information regarding the amount of money respondents would be willing to allocate for one night's accommodation in an ecotourism guesthouse, in the context of the definition of ecotourism and travel trends previously expressed.

It can be observed that the largest share, 45% of respondents, would be willing to allocate between 200 and 300 lei per night for accommodation in an ecotourism guesthouse. This figure reflects a concern for a balance between affordable pricing and the benefits of an ecotourism experience, suggesting that many travellers are willing to invest in an accommodation option that promotes environmental conservation but within the limits of a reasonable budget for them.

Table 7. Allocated amount

Ecotourism is a form of tourism that primarily aims to conserve the environment and emphasizes educating tourists about environmental protection. Therefore, what amount of money would you be willing to allocate for such accommodation per night?		
Variable	Absolute (persons)	Relative (percent)
Under 200 lei per person per night (Under 40 euros)	48	15%
Between 200 and 300 lei per person per night (40 - 60 euros)	144	45%
Between 300 and 400 lei per person per night (60 - 80 euros)	96	30%
Between 400 and 500 lei per person per night (80 - 100 euros)	16	5%
Over 500 lei per person per night (Over 100 euros)	16	5%

Source: Self-conceptualisation based on the questionnaire.

Table 8 provides insights into respondents' preferences regarding the duration of their stay in an ecotourism accommodation. Taking into account the previous data and the context of ecotourism, we can interpret these figures in a broader perspective of traveller behaviour and attitudes. The most common preference is for 2 or 3 night stay, reflected by 40% of respondents. This choice may indicate a desire to spend enough time at a destination to enjoy the ecotourism experience and explore the surrounding environment and activities, without committing to an extended stay.

Table 8. Number of nights respondents would allocate to an ecotourism guesthouse

For how many nights would you be willing to stay in an ecotourism accommodation?		
Variable	Absolute (persons)	Relative (percent)
1 night	96	30%
Between 2 - 3 nights	128	40%
Between 3 - 4 nights	64	20%
Between 4 - 5 nights	16	5%
Between 5 - 6 nights	16	5%
Over 6 nights	0	0%

Source: Self-conceptualisation based on the questionnaire.

Table 9 provides an overview of the main motivations of respondents to practice ecotourism for the first time or again. These reasons reflect the varied concerns and interests of travellers regarding their ecotourism experiences. The most common motivation, identified by 40% of the respondents, is relaxation. This indicates that many travellers see ecotourism as an opportunity to relieve stress and enjoy the tranquillity and beauty of nature.

Table 9. Reasons

If you were to try ecotourism for the first time (or again), what would be the reasons you would do so?		
Variable	Absolute (persons)	Relative (percent)
Hiking in nature	48	15%
Traditions and customs	48	15%
Nature education/awareness	19	6%
Relaxation	128	40%
Observing nature in protected areas	70	22%
Minimising the negative impact on nature caused by mass tourism	7	2%

Source: Self-conceptualisation based on the questionnaire.

Observing nature in protected areas is the next main motivation, mentioned by 22% of respondents. This shows that many travellers are interested in exploring and enjoying the biodiversity and natural landscapes of protected areas, suggesting an appreciation for the beauty and importance of conserving these ecosystems. For 6% of the respondents, education and awareness are the main motivations to practice ecotourism. This shows that there is a growing interest in understanding the environment within ecotourism experiences, indicating that in efforts to preserve the environment, education plays a primary role.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, to achieve a balance between the environment and society, a change in the behaviour is used to is necessary. Ecotourism helps change the usual tourism experiences into environmentally friendly ones. This study analyses consumer perception of sustainable tourism and highlights important aspects related to tourists' experiences, awareness, and preferences regarding sustainable travel. Regarding the current level of knowledge of ecotourism, 60% of respondents, and regarding people who have stayed in sustainable accommodation, this number is even lower. Most travellers prefer trips with only 2-3 nights of accommodation, indicating a trend toward short and affordable getaways. But there is also a smaller segment that prefers longer stays. Most of the respondents are willing to spend between 200 and 300 lei / night in ecotourism accommodation. At the same time, there is less interest in premium accommodation, but also in the most affordable ones. Regarding the motivations for practicing ecotourism, the most common reasons are relaxation and observation of nature in protected areas.

There is also a relatively small interest in environmental education and appreciation of local traditions.

These findings underscore the diversity of interests and needs among travellers in ecotourism. Promoting varied and customised ecotourism experiences can contribute to greater awareness and participation in responsible and sustainable travel practices.

Acknowledgment

This research was partially conducted as a result of the Erasmus+ mobility of Simona Roxana Pătărlăgeanu and Alina Florentina Gheorghe at the INSTITUTE OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS BELGRADE, Serbia. The mobility took place from April 21, 2024, to April 27, 2024.

The research study was supported by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia (Grants no. 451-03-66/2024-03/200009).

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