

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN RODNA MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK: THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, A KEY STAKEHOLDER

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Abstract

The research paper approaches the sustainable tourism topic, which is discussed at national level and has a significant impact upon the economic development and the international image of Romania. Its objectives are to minimize the negative effects on the environment, to protect the cultural heritage and also to offer learning opportunities, including benefits for the local economy and contributing to the structural development of local communities. The case study is focused on Rodna commune. The research methods used are secondary data analysis, comparisons, analogies and syntheses, primary qualitative research (induction and deduction methods). It aims at identifying: the current situation of Rodna commune, the community's point of view regarding tourism development and, also, identifying opportunities for sustainable tourism development. The research results show that both the local administration and the owners are aware of the poor condition of local tourism, but they have also shown optimism about the future possibilities of restoring the initial economic well-being of the mining period. In this regard, predictions are that tourist arrivals will increase due to the rehabilitation of tourist spots, the future improvement of infrastructure and the increasing quality of accommodation services.

Key words: *Rodnei Mountains National Park, Rodna Commune, public administration, tourism, sustainability, qualitative research.*

JEL Classification: *Q01*

I. INTRODUCTION

Established in 1932, Rodnei Mountains National Park is the second largest national park in Romania, with an area of 46,399 ha. Located in the North of the Eastern Carpathians, the national park overlaps most of the Rodna Mountains, within the Bistrița-Năsăud and Maramureș counties. The highest peaks of the Oriental Carpathians (Pietrosu Mare peak 2,303m and Ineu peak 2,279m) are located on the territory of the park.

In the villages near the Rodna Mountains National Park, mining has been practiced since Antiquity. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, ferrous deposits were rediscovered, which led to considerable demographic growth. "The sources of the great fortunes that have been accumulated in Bistrița in the 15th and 16th Centuries were neither the crafts nor the agricultural exploitation of the city, but the intense exploitation of the Rodna mines" (Păiuș, 2003: 200). In 1997 Rodna Mining Exploitation started the closing procedures, where more than 2,200 people worked, and it lasted 10 years. (Păiuș, 2003: 223).

Rodna commune (formerly Rodna Veche), in

Bistrița-Năsăud County, has a majority of Romanian population, currently rising to 6,313 inhabitants. The main minorities are Hungarians (about 6%) and Gypsy (about 7%). In 1910, the population was about 4,500. In the context of the development of mining in the communist period, the commune developed from a demographic point of view. Thus, in 1992 there were 6037 inhabitants, reaching today a higher value, which indicates a positive demographic increase, atypical for the rural areas of contemporary Romania.

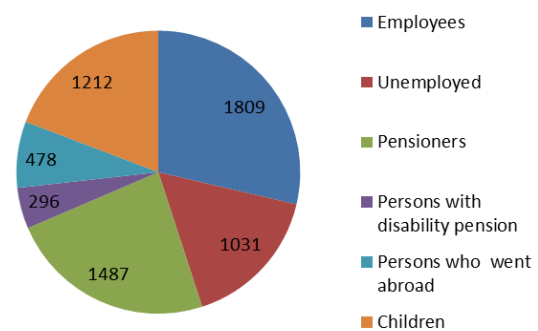


Figure 1 – Population structure in 2016

The current situation of the 6,313 inhabitants is as follows (Table 1): locals have a difficult task, in that

less than 30% of the population has to support the entire dependent population (especially retired elderly and children, to which is added a significant percentage of unemployed - resulting from mine closure, as well as

relatively many people with disabilities). Moreover, the aging trend of the population is another real problem faced by the location.

Table 1. Elements to analyze the economic and tourism development potential of Rodna commune

Potential / Development Level	Very Low	Reduced	Medium	Medium to High	High
Elements					
The intrinsic motivation index of the population				x	
Chances of rejuvenating the population in the medium and long term	x				
Critical mass of population for production				x	
Population capacity to support economic development			x		
The ability to prepare on their own applications for funding development projects	x				
Critical mass of active population				x	
Critical mass of qualified population				x	
Migration of active population abroad			x		
Land available for sale in agriculture	x				
Land available for sale in tourism					x
Land available for industry	x				
Existence of available buildings for developing agricultural activities		x			
Existence of available buildings for developing tourism activities		x			
Existence of available buildings for developing small industries		x			
Availability of primary materials (wood, wicker, stone) in construction and crafts			x		
Primary livestock production (wool, meat, milk)					x
Primary food (fruits, berries, vegetables)			x		
Infrastructure for water supply and sewage				x	
Infrastructure for gas supply	x				
Communication Infrastructure				x	
Road Infrastructure				x	
Health services				x	
Educational Infrastructure				x	
Infrastructure for culture		x			
Infrastructure for sports			x		
Industry (all types of units)				x	
Industry (without primary wood processing)	x				
Primary wood processing industry					x
Units with agricultural profile	x				
Infrastructure for tourism	x				
Network of urban and rural poles			x		
Risk of avalanches, fires, snowflakes					x

A brief presentation of the current situation of the commune allows us to identify tourism as the most likely domain to offer viable solutions for the economic development of the area. According to the Special Planning of the National Territory (SPNT), Rodna commune is among the administrative-territorial units with a very large concentration of natural and tourist resources, but with serious tourism infrastructure problems. Obviously, mountain relief and the presence of protected natural areas favor the development of mountain and rural tourism. Of course, the issue of tourism sustainability remains unsolved. Through the joint work of IUNC (International Union for Nature Conservation), WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature), EFNNP (European Federation of National and Natural Parks), sustainable tourism has been defined as "the development of all forms of tourism, tourism management and marketing that respect the natural, social and economic integrity of the environment, ensuring the exploitation of natural and cultural

resources and for future generations" (Istrate, Bran and Roşu, 1996). An observation on this definition is that any type of tourism, even green tourism, rural tourism or motoring tourism, must respect the principles of sustainable development. The impact of tourism on the environment can be determined by analyzing the tourist-tourism resource-tourism product. Since its appearance in 1987, the concept of sustainable development has been found in all economic and social areas: from sustainable agriculture to sustainable transport and sustainable tourism.

Regarding the development of sustainable tourism, Cucculelli and Goffi (2016) state in their paper that although there is no exact definition in the literature, because each destination has its specific attributes, it is well known that the development of sustainable tourism is a long-term goal and a dynamic, ever changing concept. The objectives of this development are to minimize negative impacts on the environment, protect cultural heritage, and at the same

time provide learning opportunities, including positive benefits to the local economy and contributing to the enhancement of local community structures.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper discusses some of the results of the research undertaken using two types of methods:

- • first of all, the analysis of secondary data by treating different statistics, guides, brochures, specialized sites, comparisons, analogies and syntheses, as well as contacting and interviewing local officials, business managers of accommodation units in the area of the Rodna Mountains National Park, participation in conferences on rural tourism issues and the elaboration of questionnaires that take into account the reasons for the tourists to visit the Rodna Mountains National Park;

- • combining quantitative research, based on questionnaires with qualitative research, based on interviews;

- • induction and deduction, which are interdependent and which contribute considerably to the interpretation of the current situation of the disadvantaged communities and to the identification of the possible future situation if the tourism supply would develop both quantitatively and qualitatively.

As a qualitative research method, the interview has several advantages that have determined its usage. The most important of these is that the way of implementation allows the researcher to capture the opinions of some people directly involved in the research problem.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Many years ago, Rodna commune enjoyed a relatively strong economy, thanks to the mines exploited in the area. Along with their closure, the standard of living has begun to decline, now reaching the "spot step", according to the current mayor. In this research, different locals had been interviewed, from different categories. The interviews are mainly focused on aspects regarding the role of public administration in capitalizing on the tourist offer in Rodna and the surrounding areas.

From the administrative level of the commune, it was chosen to interview the current mayor (VG), mr. Vasile Grapini, who presented the positive and negative aspects of the commune related to the sustainable development of Rodna. The mayor states that: "Last year, we invested two million Euros through the National Local Development Program, distributed as follows: 500,000 euro for asphalt (16 streets), and 2 projects through NRDP. With one project we are in the auction stage. We formed an IDA [Intercommunity Development Association] with Măgura and we are opening the Rodna-Măgura road, which benefits the

local population and streamlines the traffic between the two communes."

This action solves a major infrastructure problem, which is currently poor. By starting the rehabilitation of the roads, we can also talk about a better chance of improving tourism in the area. "The Rodna Mountains National Park is a strong point for us" but the mayor is aware of the "lack of a vision and of projects and of investments made."

Thus, he initiated a series of ongoing projects to improve both living standards and tourism development, showing that: "I have undertaken some European projects for 2018: a 200,000 euro funding for the rehabilitation of the cave Schneider's Bath, a path from Schneider's Bath to Daffodils' Meadow and a tourist information center, all linked to this 200,000 euro project."

Another project among those initiated by the City Hall is the road and sewerage project: "More specifically, with regard to forestry roads, there is a project of 1.5 million euros which will be selected for funding and another measure regarding water and sewerage from the Valea Vinului village, water catchment and water supply, 1.5 million euros project will surely be funded thanks to a very good score "(VG).

The mayor also states that: "From the point of view of economic development, investment in tourism is a priority", thus emphasizing the fact that the administration is aware of the importance of tourism development, which will contribute considerably to economic development and living standards in Rodna.

Moreover, when asked what plans are related to tourism development in the future, he says: "We will start this year to make the necessary documentation for Valea Vinului village as a tourist resort of local interest and to turn it into a tourist resort of national interest in the next 10 years as well as the rehabilitation of the catacombs that are unique in Eastern Europe and of the Greek Catholic Church, and also the opening of a visiting center of the Rodna Mountains National Park".

He is convinced that after the start of these activities, "the tourist flow will be considerable." He also presents one of the objectives pursued by these projects, namely "a minimum of two coaches per day".

In order to implement these plans, the public administration has accessed and will continue to access European funds by developing several projects.

Bearing in mind the advantage of the existence of the Rodna Mountains National Park, he was asked how he thinks, together with the park administration, to exploit this advantage. The answer was a convincing one: "We have set up a tourist promotion and rescue service that we will make available to tourists starting this year"(VG). This will create new jobs. In addition, he presented a well-structured plan: "Here we aim to create tourist routes, with the support of the rescue service, which will accompany those who want to take

organized hikes in the mountains. We also want to develop equestrian tourism. This year we started to make maps of the approved tourist routes but also including the ones we want to approve. We created mountain bike trails which will reach all the beauties of the National Park. This year, for the first time, Festivalul Narciselor will take place in May and will involve a multitude of tourist activities, shows, campfires and will last for three days."

Another question in the interview was related to the specific traditions and habits of the area, more precisely how they can be promoted to the tourists. The answer indicated the need for the villagers to be united by living together in the same place and not just on the basis of ethnic considerations. "We want to be able to participate in these events, all Romanians, Hungarians, Gypsy and other nationalities, in order not to create different events generated by ethnic differences. I wish we were all together at all events"(VG).

The mayor also presents the cultural objectives of the commune, namely: "... we have a very beautiful museum. Through a Norwegian project, we want to make a mining museum. We also want to open Muzeul Țăranului [a museum of the Rodna peasant] by purchasing a very old traditional house." Certainly, all of these aspects are beneficial to the development of tourism in the area. They also want to have some social evenings: "We want every month to have at least one show or concert in this location"(VG). Tourists will be able to attend this, as a pleasant activity after a day of walking through nature. It is believed that, by simply trying to keep the community united, traditions will be transmitted outside the boundaries of this area and will impress in a pleasant way all tourists arriving at the destination.

Asked about the challenges of the commune aspects, the mayor explains that he faces a number of major issues, two of which are more important for tourism development: "Another problem is the lack of sanitation, which is not so acute but the system is creating this problem". And also greening "is a problem for us, because all the major calamities on the rivers arise because of these reasons. There are very large amounts of wood waste on the water courses". The public administration can not intervene in the latter problem, as, according to the mayor, the waters belong to Romanian Waters (Apele Române, the state institution in charge of water management).

Another negative aspect is generated by the lack of restaurants in this area, but this is due to the lack of a tourist accommodation supply capable of capitalizing on the generous potential of the area, the demand being not high enough to justify the costs of opening several bars and restaurants. The mayor tells us: "I think that with the development of tourism there will be more places with better quality services." By default, this will also improve the community well-being, lowering the unemployment rate and offering the opportunity to

spend free time in some other ways.

Besides the public administration, it is necessary to ask the tourism entrepreneurs for their opinion about the tourism development potential of this area and about the current situation and the role played by the local public administration in the development of tourism. In this regard, 5 accommodation owners, out of a total of 6 working in the area, were interviewed.

Tabel 2. Entrepreneurs interviewed

Accommodation Name	Acronym
Cabana Bradul	IS
Pensiunea Doris	DC
Pensiunea TransAmericanul	CM
Pensiunea Suzy	SG
Pensiunea Floare de Colt	LM

The first question raised concerns the quota of the foreign tourist arrivals in the total arrivals registered by accommodation facilities. They provided the following answers:

IS: "On average, 10-15%"

DC: "Somewhere around 10%"

CM: "Approximately 10%"

SG: "In general, most are foreigners"

LM: "Tourists from abroad account for around 20%".

According to these 5 answers, one may note that the number of foreign tourists is not very high, probably because they are not aware of the existence of this beautiful destination and because of the poor infrastructure that makes it difficult for them to access this area.

Through the next question, we aimed at finding out where the foreign tourists come from. The responses of the entrepreneurs were formulated as follows:

IS: "In general, Europeans. A greater weight is represented by Hungarian tourists. "

DC: "Generally from Hungary, Austria, Germany and France."

CM: "There are French tourists who come for an exchange of experience in the high school, and most Czechs, Slovaks and Hungarians come again."

SG: "Hungary, Germany, Sweden, Poland, Czech Republic but most of them are from Hungary."

LM: "Germany, the Republic of Moldova, the Netherlands. Until now, we did not have Hungarian tourists."

From these responses, the variety is quite large, which is a very good thing and the share of foreign tourists in the total arrivals respects the proportions registered at national level, but still remains rather low at the local level. Hungarians and Moldavians generate most foreign arrivals at national level, too.

In order to assess the tourist demand related to the activities they can undertake during their stay, a question has been asked, which has generated the following answers:

IS: "For what is offered in the area, most tourists come for hiking. Regarding mountain biking, there are no trails. There are some who come with their bikes, but we have no trails, so there are very few tourists who practice mountain biking. In the winter, people want to ride the carriage. We have a neighbor who has a horse and he offers those services."

DC: "Mainly tourists prefer hiking and hunting."

CM: "First of all, they go hiking; the preferred area is Ineu peak. The French tourists who come for 3 months have different educational activities in the Rodna Mountains National Park. "

SG: "Hiking is the favorite activity."

LM: "In particular hiking, walking or cycling. For those who want carriage rides, we have neighbors who offer these services."

From the responses from entrepreneurs, the main activity is the walk in nature, besides which one can also observe a specific aspect of sustainable tourism, as that some locals offer carriage rides. As a matter of fact, this highlights the potential of community development by generating business opportunities for other locals (e.g. peasants who provide cooking lessons or knitting and needling workshops).

Looking to find out what are the main attractions for tourists at the moment, without sustainable development and with the poor infrastructure of the area, they have detailed us the following:

IS: "The charm of the place and the return in time for several decades. Here you can find peace, which you cannot find in many tourist areas. Whoever comes for relaxation, even finds it. There is no comparison with Prahova Valley, which is already suffocated, or with the Moeciu area, where there are many hostels next to each other. There, one does not feel the charm of their holiday anymore. There are many young people who prefer entertainment, but the middle-aged ones prefer more quiet places. We generally have families who stay for one week in the summer or one night or two on weekends. "

DC: "I think it is especially the fact that we are near the Rodna Mountains National Park."

CM: "We have interesting landmarks in the area, such as Ineu peak, Lala Lake, the Alpia Blazna recreational area, Daffodils' Meadow, the ruins of the catacombs."

SG: "Tourists are delighted with the charm of nature, especially since nature is still wild, untouched, except for the foolish deforestation made by bodies interested in selling the green deposit."

LM: "The mountain area, the landscape and especially the quiet places are those that attract people here."

To conclude, tourists are attracted by the quietness of the destination, the charm it has, and the tourist attractions that can be visited in this area and, in particular, its natural resources.

Another question addressed to entrepreneurs was aimed at identifying differences in behavior and expectations among Romanian and foreign tourists.

IS: "There is no difference. Everyone has certain claims and expectations, whether they are Romanian or foreign. International tourists want traditional, specific food, in order to see how we live here. Many people prefer traditional food. You cannot offer seafood in the mountains."

DC: "No, there are no significant differences."

CM: "Romanians are more demanding than foreigners. The French prefer to eat soups because our type of soups is new to them."

SG: "Foreigners are generally very satisfied."

LM: "There are no significant differences."

A final issue that raises the interest is the way in which the tourist offer can be developed to increase the number of visitors and at the same time to capitalize on the potential of the area. The following responses were received, focusing mainly on infrastructure issues and on the need for strategic planning within the destination. The need for strict mountain tourism regulation in the reservation has also been highlighted.

IS: "Normally, this is a very good ski area. We have snow in abundance for a long time. This year (2016), there was snow since December and I think it will be until April. It would be very good if we did not depend so much on seasonality, so we could handle the winter time much better, because summer is a short period. If we were occupied both in the summer and in the winter, it would be such a big difference. As far as New Year's Eve is concerned, in the last 2 years we have rented the cottage."

DC: "First of all, the issue of infrastructure should be resolved, and secondly, the authorities should organize as many events as possible with the aim of highlighting the traditional customs and all the traditions in this area."

CM: "There is much to be done, but it has to start from somewhere above (namely at administration level). There could be some plans and some well-thought-out strategies to benefit the landlord, and the tourist would be pleased. Some entry rules could be implemented in the Park, including a certain access fee. If you want to visit, I find it normal for you to pay. Daffodils' Meadow is a unique place. When I was on holiday abroad, I visited a trivial cascade. During the winter there was no fee, because there were very few tourists, but in the summer we paid the road to the cascade 9 euros and the access was another 10 euros. For us, as Romanians, the tariff was quite high."

SG: "First of all, local authorities should fix the road, introduce the coaxial cable for the Internet, place signs from Rodna Commune to Valea Vinului, things that are lacking. The Rodna Mountains National Park Administration should mark tourist routes on visible places. For example, from Curățel Peak to Ineu Peak, there is a bifurcation that is not marked properly and

many tourists go the wrong way. Local authorities could create tourist maps, views from the area, possibly providing transport for the tourists from Rodna Commune to Valea Vinului village."

LM: "First of all, the roads should be modernized, because their current state is very poor. And more accommodation units and more boarding houses should be opened."

Basically, there are no significant differences between Romanian and foreign visitors, both categories expecting more or less authentic experiences.

From the perspective of local people, conf. Dr. Mircea-Leontin Mureșianu (Director of the Bistrita extension of the Faculty of Geography at UBB) says that the public administration should get involved and support large-scale projects in the field of tourism, because "tourism could be tomorrow for the citizens". Father Lazar Nechita (priest at the Rodna Orthodox Parish) is aware of the poor condition of the roads, a problem which he proposes to be solved, along with the construction of a wood warehouse. He also proposes the construction of tourist shelters for the Rodna Mountains National Park's visitors, which they can use in case of bad weather, a project that could be supported both by the town hall and by the park administration. Family physician, Delia Ureche, believes that tourism has a positive impact on the community as it can stimulate the development of related services, such as handicrafts, public catering and travel guide services. She suggests the Park's administration to intensify the communication with the local population in the sense of increasing their awareness regarding the importance and role of the Park in community life, as well as the activity of tourism promotion.

From the preliminary results of the quantitative research carried out in several waves during the year 2017, the following results can be summarized:

- Romanian tourists focus on mountain destinations, especially during the summer, preferring them to the national seaside, the percentage remains high among those who choose these destinations in the winter;
- more than half of respondents choose

national mountain destinations at least twice a year;

- for the majority of the respondents, the average length of stay is between 2 and 5 nights (cumulative 67%);

- although tourists do not consciously choose national parks, about a fifth of the respondents opted at least once for the Rodna Mountains National Park;

- their favorite activities include mountain hikes, trails in adventure parks/flying-fox rides, bird watching, climbing, downhill slope skiing, mountain biking and more.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Taking into consideration the discussions with the public administration and the entrepreneurs, the current study highlights an incomplete development, namely a very high unemployment rate, low living standards, a poorly developed infrastructure and a poor valorization of tourist areas, but also an improvement in progress of this situation.

Among the solutions proposed by the entrepreneurs were the development of a sustainable infrastructure, followed by the encouragement and intensification of tourism in the winter season and the implementation of some rules and fees for visiting certain areas and marking mountain trails. Entrepreneurs are aware of the potential of Rodna commune, of the surrounding areas and of the economic well-being that could result from the undertaking of these actions.

At the Town Hall there is a development strategy with high potential for job growth, adequate capitalization of tourist areas and places to visit, improvement of infrastructure and attraction of new investors in the area.

Considering that foreign tourists are mainly oriented towards active mountain tourism in the Rodna Mountains National Park area, it is clear that it is also opportune and necessary to encourage and support the development of this form of tourism in Rodna commune, but to also provide authentic experiences.

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