

A SYNTHETIC PROFILE OF THE RURAL TOURISM CONSUMER

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Abstract

The rural tourism and, in particular, the agritourism have become increasingly popular activities, as a result of the multiple benefits generated. The rural tourism is attractive for visitors with different motivations and different market profiles. This paper aims to find the most common profile of the tourists visiting the rural areas. In order to segment the rural tourism market, a series of customer indicators can be used, such as: reasons, preferences, needs and expected benefits; geographical origin; economic and demographic status; psychographic characteristics and consumer behavior etc. As the consumer needs and expectations regarding the rural tourism products are highly varied, there are several types of tourists, the differences being determined mainly by geographical origin, but also by the different perceptions on the quality of tourism products and services. In general, it can be said that these tourists come mainly from urban areas, are middle-aged or above middle-aged, have a high level of education and training, have above-average incomes and travel in small groups, usually with family and friends.

Keywords: rural tourism, tourist profile, customer indicator

In the last decades, the rural tourism market has experienced a strong expansion, favoured by some demographic trends, such as the aging population, and by changes in travel patterns compared to the traditional ones (Bodescu D. *et al*, 2017; Che D. *et al*, 2006). The main actor of rural tourism is the tourist, being indispensable for carrying out tourist activities in rural areas. Therefore, the knowledge about the tourist and all the issues involved in this process becomes key element (Pop I., 2013).

The success and popularity of the rural tourism is based on obtaining the satisfaction of the consumers who choose the rural tourism products, their expectations from the tourist experience being highly varied. Achieving tourist satisfaction can be done when the reasons for which they choose a certain form of tourism and a certain tourist destination are known, simultaneously with the knowledge on the preferences for certain activities carried out during the stay (Prokopis C., 2010). According to Tsephe N.P. and Eyono Obono S.D. (2013), there are 4 categories of factors that influence the reasons of tourists to purchase rural tourism products: cultural, physical, interpersonal and factors linked with status and prestige.

Understanding the travel behavior of the rural tourists is necessary for achieving success in diversifying the rural economic systems involved in tourism activities. In addition, the demand for

rural tourism is influenced by demographic features and motivational aspects (Marangon F. *et al*, 2013). From the motivational factors point of view, the group of rural tourism consumers is very heterogeneous, their consumption behavior being strongly influenced by individual particularities (Moraru *et al*, 2016). The behavior of the rural tourists is obviously determined by the category of location, the amount of money available for a stay and the type of accommodation chosen (Pop I., 2013). In general terms, this behavior is under the influence of endogenous and external factors (Moraru *et al*, 2016).

The tourist discovery process assumes statistical measurement based on volume (number of trips, number of overnights stays, average length of visit etc.), value (holiday budget, amount of daily money spent per person, amount of money allocated for meals, accommodation, transport etc.) and profile (Cooper D.R. and Schindle PS., 2006). The term “profile” indicates that each individual tourist differs from all other tourists (Bowen D and Clarke J, 2009) and includes both elements related to the tourist (person and personality) and the details of the holiday itself (Cooper D.R. and Schindle PS., 2006).

The development and consolidation of the rural tourism involves, by one hand, to determine the profile of the regular tourist, corresponding to each type of accommodation (Albaladejo P.I.P.

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and Díaz D.M.T., 2005), while facilitating the design, promotion and delivery of rural tourism products, and, by the other hand, to identify those products that are specially adapted to consumers' needs (Park D. and Yoon Y., 2009). By collecting information about the rural tourists, they can be divided into sub-markets, highlighting the different characteristics of these tourist groups, thus contributing to the improvement of planning and marketing approaches. In order to segment the rural tourism market, a series of customer indicators can be used, such as: reasons, preferences, needs and expected benefits; geographical origin; economic and demographic status; psychographic characteristics and consumer behavior etc. (Jindrová A. and Dömeová L., 2011).

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Starting from the idea that the person's characteristics (psychological structure, socio-economic circumstances, demographic features, etc.) determine the desire to visit a certain tourist destination, this paper aims to outline the most common profile of the rural tourism consumer. This means to highlight the group of tourists with similar requirements and characteristics, which represent the largest part of the market for this form of tourism. In order to be able to answer the question: *Who are those who visit the countryside?* the international and local literature in the field of rural tourism and agritourism was reviewed. For gathering the most relevant information, numerous researches carried out in different geographical areas - characterized by differences regarding the socio-economic conditions and the development stage of the rural tourism - were analyzed. Thus, the results of the studies conducted in several countries spread on four continents (Europe, Asia, North America, Africa) have been taken into account, with the purpose to find a series of common elements on which the rural tourist profile is built.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study of the specialized literature shows that the most common socio-demographic factors used in outlining the profile of tourists are: age, family life cycle, gender, income and level of education (Foot D., 2004; Ma A. *et al*, 2018; Tomić S. *et al*, 2020; Kara N.S. and Mkwizu K.H., 2020;). To these are added certain travel habits such as: the most used type of accommodation and travel vehicle, the length of stay, travel companions, the size and structure of the tourist group, information sources about the tourist destination, travel distance etc.

On account of their leisure time and available income, the seniors seem to be a key market for the rural tourism, but, attributable to the educational activities involved, this form of tourism is attractive to both children and adults, with an increasing trend of multigenerational travel (Rosenberg J., 2000; Gardyn R., 2001).

Due to the existence of several forms of rural tourism, the typology of tourists is very varied. In their study conducted in Canada, Ainley S. and Smale B. (2010) identified, based on the analysis of the sought by tourists benefits, a number of five niche market groups of rural tourism: "heritage tourists", "agritourists", "nature tourists", "adventure tourists", "rural sports tourists". From all domestic Canadian tourists, 17% are represented by the consumers of rural tourism products. Of these, the agritourists are the smallest group (4,7%), representing less than 1% of the entire Canadian tourism market, while most of the rural tourists are sports related enthusiasts (37,8%) and nature lovers (33,5%). Although the most research supports the general opinion that the agritourism is family-oriented (Che *et al.*, 2005, 2006; Jayeff Partners, 2005; Kline *et al.*, 2007; Nickerson *et al.*, 2001; Veeck *et al.*, 2006), the results of this study show that, in terms of the benefits offered by the rural tourism experience, agritourism is not perceived as being different from other types of Canadian rural tourism. Also, Kastenholz E. *et al* (1999) described, according to the benefits sought by tourists in the rural area of Portugal, four main market segments of rural tourists: "environmental ruralists", "want it all ruralists"; "traditional ruralists" and "independent ruralists". Almost similarly, in their research on segmenting agritourists in South Africa according to their preferences and behavioral characteristics, Speirs L.S. (2003) identified four types of consumers of the rural tourism and agritourism products: "agritourists", "general nature tourists"; "visual or soft outdoor adventure tourists" and "hard outdoor adventure tourists". The majority of the South African agritourists has a relatively high income, travel by their own car, are well educated, they are up to the age of 49 years old and frequently accompanied by children on their travels. In the study conducted in Macedonia by Koteski C. *et al*, (2017), other profiles of the rural tourism consumers were mentioned: day-trippers, visitors on a short vacation, elderly travelers, families, special interest tourists and educational groups.

Taking into account the reasons for visiting rural areas in Cyprus, Prokopis C. (2010) established the main categories of agritourists (*table 1*), showing that the facilities and attributes

of the tourist destination, as well as the possibility to practice sports and other outdoor recreational activities (horseback riding, cycling, hiking etc.) are the most important motives for the traveler to choose agritourism and rural tourism.

Table 1
The typology of agritourists, based on the motivation to visit the countryside
 (after Prokopis C., 2010)

Categories of agritourists	% of agritourists
"Destination driven": o "authenticity seekers" o "gastronomy seekers" o "archaeology seekers"	29
"Activity driven": o "walkers" o "cyclists" o "sport activity seekers" o "horse riders"	26
"Natural environment driven": o "nature seekers" o "flora seekers" o "fauna seekers" o "bird watchers" o "entomologists"	17
"Tranquility/psychosomatic driven": o "relaxers" o "escapists" o "nostalgia seekers" o "spirituality seekers" o "novel seekers"	16
"Personal attention/Hospitality driven"	10
Agritourists "for other reasons driven" to the countryside	2

A study on the agritourism customers' needs and expectations carried out in Bulgaria, in 2013, pointed out that the rural tourism in this country was practiced mainly by foreign holiday makers from western Europe (88%), who had average incomes, traveled without children and were middle-aged or over middle-aged. The Bulgarian tourists were represented by families with incomes higher than the national average, who usually traveled accompanied by children. The most tourists who visited the Bulgarian countryside were up to 55 years old (82%) and preferred to organize the trip on their own (71%).

According to Roman L. (2012), the specific profile of the consumer of rural tourism and agritourism has the characteristics presented in Table 2.

An important feature of the rural tourists that emerges from a study conducted in Iran by Varmazyari H. *et al.* (2018) consists in the preference to visit the countryside located near the area of residence, the main cause being related to their desire to purchase fresh and natural agricultural products directly from the farm. This fact has been confirmed by other research undertaken in different geographical regions of the world (Gitelson R.J. and Crompton J.L., 1984; Oh J.Y.J. and Schuett M.A., 2010; Tiefenbacher J.P. *et al.*, 2000).

Table 2
Clients profile, motivations and expectations - agritourism versus rural tourism
 (Roman L., 2012)

Category clientele	Agritourism		Rural Tourism	
	MOTIVATION	EXPECTATIONS depending on the profile unit	MOTIVATION	EXPECTATIONS depending on the profile unit
Students on holiday	Teaching purpose. Recreation if the visit is organized	Fun interaction with animals. Fruit collection. Riding. Fishing	Recreation. Educational purposes if the visit is organized by school	Fun. Riding. Fishing
Students on holiday	Recreation. Accumulation of knowledge. Clean air	Acceptable housing conditions. Access agricultural activities. Time for other activities (walking, cycling)	Recreation. Knowledge accumulation. Clean Air	Acceptable housing conditions. Access agricultural activities. Time for other activities (walking, cycling)
Persons employed on vacation	Recreation. Relax and rest in fresh air. Living new experiences	Quality housing conditions. Views and information on farm operation. Performing various activities. Tasting final products of the farm	Recreation. Relax and rest in fresh air. Living new experiences	Quality housing conditions. Performing various activities
Persons employed or students in weekend	Recreation and leisure	Walking in a clean environment and activities that can not practice in urban areas (walks, visits, horseback riding, fishing, hunting, etc.)	Recreation and leisure	Walking in a clean environment and activities that can not practice in urban areas (walks, visits, horseback riding, fishing, hunting, etc.)
Retirees	Recreation. Leisure. Living new experiences	Quality housing conditions. Views and information on farm operation. Attracting performing various activities. Tasting the final product of the farm	Recreation. Leisure. Treatments	Quality housing conditions. Attracting performing various activities
Persons with special financial possibility	Views and information on how to obtain these products	Tasting these products green. Treatment with these products	Fresh air. Leisure. Recreation. Living new experiences	Desire to know the rural traditions, culture, nature
Scientists			Explore some natural areas (caves, nature)	The discovery of "new". Research
Persons with			Recreation. Leisure. Relaxation	Adequate housing conditions of these

Also in the USA, most agritourists come from urban centers located in the vicinity of the visited rural areas. But the agritourism facilities are not usually the main American tourist destination. The agritourism farms are often visited in transit to other tourist attractions, especially by families looking for fun and educational activities in rural areas, by the elderly and groups of children. (Brown D.M. and Reeder R.J., 2007). The most frequent visitors to agritourism farms in Missouri (USA) are senior citizens (73.5%), families with children (73.5%) and couples without children (72.2%) (Tew C. and Barbieri C., 2010). The results obtained in Michigan (USA) by Che D. *et al.*, (2006) showed that, usually, the agritourists are families with children, as well as older or younger couples. Approximately 61.9% of visitors traveled individually or in groups of 2 people (average 2.82 people). The adults represented 70.5% of all tourists, the segment of the population between 35 and 49 years old (35%) being the most interested in agritourism. The teenagers and the young Americans up to the age of 30 are less attracted to this form of tourism (Che D. *et al.*, 2006).

The American agritourists are day-trippers with moderate incomes, who generally have a high level of education and training. The older tourists show increased interest in agritourism and are accompanied by children or grandchildren, while the middle-aged tourists are passionate about outdoor activities and usually travel without children (Brown D.M. and Reeder R.J., 2007).

Regarding the most used type of accommodation, studies on rural tourism in Romania show the preference for agritourism guesthouses (Arion F. and Muresan I., 2007; Vlad I.M. and Stoian E., 2014) and chalets (Porutiu A. *et al.*, 2021). In other countries, also, the tourists choose to stay most often at the chalet, highlighting the preference for a less organized and cheaper vacation (Ghadban S. *et al.*, 2017; Jindrová A. and Dömeová L., 2011). In the Czech Republic, the typical rural tourist stays in the guest house, uses a car to travel and spend 2-3 days in the rural tourist destination (Peruthová A., 2017).

The choice of rural accommodation is largely influenced by age, companionship, occupation, tourist experience, education, marital status, gender and consumer loyalty, and less by income and travel distance (Arion F. and Muresan I., 2007).

The culture specific to each country is an important factor in rural tourism that influences the size and composition of the travel group. Thus, while in Romania the rural tourists prefer small groups (2-5 people), choosing to travel with family and friends (Porutiu A. *et al.*, 2021), in Lebanon

the rural areas are visited by larger groups (5-10 people), usually consisting of members from the same family, traditionally for Lebanon being the existence of families with many members (Abyad A., 2001; Ghadban S. *et al.*, 2017).

Đenadić *et al.* (2016) concludes that the majority of rural tourism consumers in Serbia are primarily families with children and couples, followed by groups of friends and young people. Almost similar results are found by research conducted in Croatia (Serđarušić M. and Tustonjic M., 2017): 41.9% of the rural tourists travel with their partner and 26.0% spend free time in rural areas with family (including children); only 16.3% travel with a group of friends. The tourists visiting the Croatian countryside have a high level of education (73,3% have at least an university degree), organize their vacation on their own, travel by car/mobile home (60,5%) and stay on average 1-2 days at hotel/guesthouse (46,%) or on holiday apartment (30,2%). More than half of them (53%) are between 25 and 44 years old.

Most research has revealed that, among the consumers of rural tourism products, the women are predominated (Ainley S. and Smale B., 2010; Prokopis C., 2010; Marangon F. *et al.*, 2013; Serđarušić M. and Tustonjic M., 2017).

As sources of information for planning visits to particular tourist destinations, the rural tourists have most often used the recommendations of friends and relatives (Speirs L.S., 2003; Che *et al.*, 2005; Che D. *et al.*, 2006; Tew C. and Barbieri C., 2010; Đenadić *et al.*, 2016). Usually, the rural tourists choose to organize their trip on their own, in fewer cases preferring to make online reservations or turn to a tour agency (Speirs L.S., 2003; Bowen D. and Clarke J. 2009; Ainley S. and Smale B., 2010; Koteski C. *et al.*, 2017).

CONCLUSIONS

The rural tourism market comprises many different customers, the groups of rural tourists varying according to geographical areas. The typical rural tourists come from the urban environment, are well educated, organize their trip on their own, travel by car at distances not far from the place of residence and prefer to stay 1-2 days in the guesthouses or chalets. They are middle-aged or older, have above average income and travel mostly in small groups, usually with family and friends. When choosing a rural tourist destination, the word of mouth advertising is the most important information source for this group of tourists.

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