

# ECOTOURISM FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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## ***Abstract***

*The concept of ecotourism is widely misunderstood and it is often used as a marketing instrument in order to promote tourism businesses related to nature. It is well-known that from all sub-sectors of the tourism industry the ecotourism has experienced the fastest growth in the recent years, but we have to see beyond the appealing and fashionable “eco” label and “green-washing” of the travel industry. The true ecotourism represents only “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of the local people” (TIES, 1990). This paper clarifies the definition of the ecotourism concept versus related concepts as “sustainable tourism”, “responsible tourism”, “nature based travel” or “green travel”, presents the principles and benefits of ecotourism, the relation between ecotourism and sustainable development, and the challenges for Romania as an ecotourism destination at international level.*

**Key-words:** *ecotourism, business biodiversity, sustainable development*

**JEL Classification:** Q01, Q26, Q57

## **1. Ecotourism – conceptual framework**

The International Ecotourism Society (2009) defines ecotourism as *responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people*. (TIES definition from 1990). Considering its logo *uniting conservation, communities and sustainable travel*, The International Ecotourism Society (2009) states the following ecotourism principles:

- Minimize impact.
- Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect.
- Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts.
- Provide direct financial benefits for conservation.
- Provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people.
- Raise sensitivity to host countries’ political, environmental, and social climate.

Another definition of ecotourism and ecotourist is that of Ziffer, K.A. (1989): “A form of tourism inspired primarily by the natural history of an area, including its indigenous cultures. The ecotourist visits relatively undeveloped areas in the spirit of appreciation, participation and sensitivity. The ecotourist practices a non-consumptive

use of wildlife and natural resources and contributes to the visited area through labour or financial means aimed at directly benefiting the conservation of the site and the economic well-being of the local residents. The visit should strengthen the ecotourist's appreciation and dedication to conservation issues in general, and to the specific needs of the locale. Ecotourism also implies a managed approach by the host country or region which commits itself to establishing and maintaining the sites with the participation of local residents, marketing them appropriately, enforcing regulations, and using the proceeds of the enterprise to fund the area's land management as well as community development.”

*Honey, M. (2008)* defined ecotourism as travel to fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas that strives to be low impact and (often) small scale. It helps educate the traveler; provides funds for conservation; directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and fosters respect for different cultures and for human rights.

Efforts for conceptual framework of ecotourism were also made by our country, where Association of Ecotourism in Romania (2009) adopted and promoted the following ecotourism definition: *Ecotourism is a form of tourism in which the main motivation for the tourist is the observation and appreciation of nature and local tradition in natural areas, and which must fulfill the following conditions:*

1. *contributes to nature conservation and protection;*
2. *supports the well being of local people, stressing local ownership, as well as business opportunities for local people (especially in rural areas);*
3. *has an educational component that creates awareness about nature conservation, both for tourists and local communities;*
4. *requires the lowest possible negative impact on the environment and on the socio-cultural component.*

Untamed Path (2009) focuses over the main characteristic of ecotourism: *the trip will help “conserve and improve” the places the tourist visits.* Also, Untamed Path (2009), trying to define the experience of ecotourism, presents on its web-site the definitions of other related concepts: sustainable tourism, responsible tourism, nature-based tourism and green-tourism. In its view:

- *Sustainable tourism* represents any form of tourism that does not reduce the availability of resources and does not inhibit future travelers from enjoying the same experience. For example, if the presence of large numbers of tourists disturbs an animal's mating patterns so that there are fewer of that species in the future, then that visit was not sustainable.
- *Responsible tourism* represents tourism which operates in such a way as to minimize negative impacts on the environment.
- *Nature-based tourism* is a more generic term for any activity or travel experience with a focus on nature. These types of trips may or may be not environmentally sustainable or responsible.
- *Green tourism* is a term often used inter-changeably with eco-tourism and sustainable tourism but more accurately described as “any activity or facility operating in an environmentally friendly fashion”. The core of this concept is

where resources are coming from and where wastes are going, solar powered lighting etc.

It is very important to mention that ecotourism can be (but it is not automatically) a form of sustainable tourism. Achieving sustainable ecotourism involves a balance between economic, environmental and social goals, and ethical values and principles. The principles of a real sustainable tourism are: using resources sustainably, reducing over-consumption and waste, maintain diversity, integrating tourism into planning, supporting local economies, involving local communities, consulting stakeholders and the public, training staff, marketing tourism responsibly, undertaking research and monitoring the industry.

The *global importance of ecotourism* is highlighted by several international agreements including: The UN Commission on Sustainable Development, 7<sup>th</sup> Session 1999; the UN World Tourism Organization Code of Ethics (1999); The Guidelines on Biodiversity and Tourism Development issued by the CBD (2003); The Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism (2002); and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002). Guidelines and standards relating to sustainable/responsible tourism (including specific reference to biodiversity) are also being developed by the Tour Operators' Initiative for Sustainable Development which has created environmental guidelines for hotels, resorts and tourist attractions.

## **2. Ecotourism – a successful Business Biodiversity model**

We can define Business Biodiversity concept as *commercial enterprise that generates profits through production processes which conserve biodiversity, use biological resources sustainably and share the benefits arising out of this use equitably* (Building Biodiversity Report 2008). The business case for biodiversity is easy to make when a company depends directly on biodiversity to operate (the case of nature-based tourism), but examples can be found in other business sectors too, where greater biodiversity is associated with lower costs, increased productivity and higher profits. The concept of Business Biodiversity is related with *Potsdam Initiative – Biological Diversity 2010* (G8 Environment Ministers Meeting, Potsdam, 15-17 March, 2007), when it was initiated the process of analyzing the global economic benefit of biological diversity.

Also United States Agency for International Development (1995), in Synthesis Report Stemming the Loss of Biological Diversity: An Assessment of USAID Support for Protected-Area Management) identified ecotourism as an enterprise with potential positive contributions to the conservation of endangered biological resources. Ecotourism is seen as a win-win solution and its contributions include the raising of local awareness about the value of biological resources, the increasing of local participation in the benefits of biodiversity conservation, and the generation of revenues towards the conservation of biologically rich areas.

The Building Biodiversity Report 2008, analyzing the business biodiversity landscape, considers ecotourism a sector of potential business opportunities, together with other sectors as 'biodiversity-friendly' agriculture, sustainable forestry, business with non-timber forest products, sustainable fisheries and aquaculture, carbon

sequestration in biomass, watershed protection, bioprospecting, biodiversity offsets, biodiversity management services, recreational hunting and sport fishing<sup>5</sup>. Ecotourism, as a biodiversity business model, has already begun to have success in European economy.

Ecotourism is promoted as a means of achieving community development and preservation of natural environments. An ideal model of ecotourism is an integration of conservation and development, in which entrepreneurs, government and tourists create sustainable development while improving the welfare of local people. There are a lot of examples of how ecotourism is making direct, significant contributions to biodiversity conservation. One approach is through revenue generated to support protected areas. Some protected areas generate significant revenue from visitor fees collected at the point of entry or as user fees applied as, for example, part of an overall package cost (South Africa). In addition to the payment of fees, financial contributions may be generated through the sale of licenses, concessions and leases. Public authorities often delegate responsibility for managing tourism operations in protected areas to private businesses, NGOs, individuals or local communities (Indonesia). Many countries also impose indirect taxes on tourists and tourism facilities, with a proportion of the revenues earmarked for conservation (Belize, Caicos Islands).

In Building Biodiversity Report 2008 are identified the following investment opportunities in ecotourism:

- Invest in ecotourism companies that can then take on the management of tourism concessions in national parks. These companies could also create or invest in private ecotourism facilities in areas of important biodiversity. Such investments could range from joint partnerships with existing ecotourism or hotel management companies to the creation of new companies. Any tourism facilities/operations would need to be certified according to credible standards.
- Investment in joint ventures (public–private partnerships), particularly between communities and the private sector (and government), based on participatory and equitable negotiations.
- A variation on this theme would be to invest in and/or create a ‘chain’ of ecotourism hotels and related operations – with well-designed facilities, professional management, centralized ‘back office’ operations, and a common promotional strategy – to create a brand that is synonymous with the highest ecotourism standards. This goal could also be achieved by buying a number of leading ecotourism operations.
- Invest in existing eco-funds, and/or create new investment funds, that include ecotourism in their portfolios.
- In the generation of sustainable livelihoods via businesses that value biodiversity there are opportunities to improve marketing (from product development to distribution); performance indicators to measure conservation results and poverty reduction; improved procedures for knowledge transfer between different projects, and investment in small/community-based operators whose services and products can be integrated in the mainstream tourism industry.

### 3. Commodification and ecotourism – implications for local cultures and people

Generally, “commodification is the process of changing a cultural element, such as a household craft, or a natural object such as a native plant or animal community, into a commodity that can be exchanged in a monetary market: in essence, taking something that was not marketed and turning it into something that it is.” (King, D., Stewart, W., 1996). Commodification of local culture and environment is a widely reported social impact of ecotourism with implications over indigenous people, too. *Ecotourism can have both positive and negative effects on indigenous people.* Indigenous people are considered the descendents of original inhabitants, distinct in language, culture or religion from the dominant population, who see themselves partly in terms of their habitat, who have a subsistence economy involving direct dependence on their habitat, and who manage resources collectively, often by a consensus of elders.

The negative impact of ecotourism is determined by the injection of the contrasting, external cultural influences and by the commodification that accompanies ecotourism development. The commodification of nature implies a change in the meaning of indigenous people environment, from a source of direct sustenance with a use value to a commodity with an exchange value. (King, D., Stewart, W., 1996). This represents a shifting in the relationship between the indigenous people and their environment: now they are working for tourism, not for land anymore, what is in fact a shifting from traditional, life-sustaining activities to service activities. The process of commodification is facilitated by concepts as “national park”, “protected area”, “endangered species”, “virgin forest”, “intact ecosystem” that have become artifacts for the ecotourists of the developed world. The problem is that the ecotourism industry can produce contrasts in values of the local cultures, because not only does the indigenous people’s environment become commodified, but also their work: their lifestyle turns to serving the tourists, so, in consequence, the authentic aspects of their lifestyle become blurred.

Positive implications of ecotourism are likely to be the greatest when the indigenous culture is already in a state of decline as a result of natural resource scarcity. In such situations, the local people may realize that change is needed and may be prepared for it. Negative cultural impact of ecotourism can be reduced if indigenous people become decision-makers regarding the amount, location, timing and nature of tourist visitation to protected areas. In this way local people are empowered to control the direction of cultural change, and the commodification of some cultural events and places may be viewed as desirable. It is very important to be understood the fact that ecotourism does not represent a panacea, an instrument for financing the protected areas. It requires cooperation and even partnerships between government and indigenous people, and managers really involved in understanding the cultural issues that could arise from establishing protected areas.

The key of a successful ecotourism is the incorporation of local cultures and populations into the industry. In this way is reduced the local resentment to being cut-off from the benefits of ecotourism. (For example, there are well-known the cases of the Galapagos Islands of Ecuador, which suffered considerable socio-cultural conflict due to the fact that most of the tourism labor force was brought from mainland

Ecuador, and of Maasai nomadic pastoralists who considered inadequate the compensation paid to them for their displacement from traditional lands because of the establishment of national parks and killed the wildlife in protest.)

As conclusion, we can summarize the outstanding issues regarding ecotourism: risk (unregulated, ecotourism can damage the environment and corrode local cultures), distribution of benefits (the local economic impact may be reduced), perceptions (developing countries fear that their parks and protected areas will become playgrounds for tourists and their land will not be available for farming, to feed and employ their indigenous population), lack of information (more and better information is need about the actual and potential economic contributions of ecotourism enterprises and practices).

#### **4. Romania's Case: discover *Eco-Romania***

*Association of Ecotourism in Romania* (AER) has the initiative to pave the way forward in ecotourism sub-sector, of course, together with Ministry of Tourism and all business stakeholders. This is facilitated by the fact that in 2009 the ecotourism area Marginimea Sibiului and the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve have got the Golden Apple Award for tourism in 2009. Golden Apple is awarded every year by the World Federation of Travel Journalists and Writers. Since it was set up in 1970, Golden Apple went to 41 destinations, so, Romania having at present 4 trophies (1975 – Moldovița Monastery and an award for an air company this year) could be considered a tourism destination.

The Association of Ecotourism in Romania has achieved a partnership for nature conservation and tourism development among tourism associations, non-governmental associations acting in local development and nature conservation, nature conservation projects and travel agencies. Therefore, the innovative idea promoted by AER is to bring together the public and the private sector in a partnership for nature conservation and sustainable tourism development. Its main objectives are: the creation and promotion of a well-defined image of Romania as an Ecotourism Destination, at an international level, the development of ecotourism services and infrastructure at the level of the proposes Eco-Destinations in Romania, and nature conservation and sustainable development in Romania. AER adopted and promoted principles based on two international models: Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program, developed by the Ecotourism Association of Australia, and Nature's Best, the certification system of the Swedish Ecotourism Association. AER's approach is that these principles should be put into practice by those who offer ecotourism products as well as by those who plan the ecotourism-based development of an area. These principles are:

- ecotourism takes place in natural areas;
- ecotourism contributes to a better understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of discovering and protecting nature and traditional local culture;
- ecotourism offers the best tourism practices from the point of view of nature protection and sustainable development;
- ecotourism contributes actively to the protection of natural areas;

- ecotourism contributes to the development of local communities in natural areas; ecotourism must ensure the reduction of the negative impact on the local community and contribute to the conservation of local culture and traditions;
- ecotourism must respond to the tourists' expectations. Potential eco-tourists have a high level of education and expectations, so the degree of satisfaction in terms of the ecotourism product is essential;
- ecotourism marketing offers visitors complete and responsible information which leads to an increase in their respect for the natural and cultural environment of the areas visited.

AER considered of critical importance to create the *Ecotourism Certification System* as a mechanism for putting into practice the basic principles of ecotourism, in order to ensure nature conservation and sustainable development of local communities through tourism. This is an important step in the wider context given that since March 2003 the World Tourism Organization has recommended governments to support the initiatives that promote the certification in sustainable tourism. The Ecotourism Certification System developed by AER has adapted the international experience to the Romanian context. It is based on the *Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Programme* promoted by the Australian Ecotourism Association (NEAP is the first accreditation system in ecotourism) and on *Nature's Best* developed by the Swedish Ecotourism Association (the first accreditation system in ecotourism in the northern hemisphere). The Ecotourism Certification System addresses three different categories of applicants: ecotourism programmes/tours provided by tour-operators or guides (i.e. eco-tours of maximum 15 participants), small-scale accommodation structures in rural and natural areas (eco-lodges and guesthouses of maximum 25 rooms), eco-destinations (one or several communities within natural areas). The Ecotourism Certification System has been developed in partnership with Green Cross Romania and co-funded by the Environmental Partnership Foundation.

It is remarkable the involvement of the *Environmental Partnership Foundation*, which was established as an independent foundation in 1998 and is member of Environmental Partnership. From its programmes and projects, we can mention (EPF 2009, selection from the web-site):

- *Strengthening partnerships for Nature Conservation and Tourism in Romania* – a grant-making and capacity building program that stimulates the development and promotion of ecotourism in Romania, through supporting sustainable initiatives. The goal of the program is to promote the concept and the development of ecotourism, in order to support nature conservation and local communities. The program has a grant-making component that aims to support pilot projects in the following counties of Romania: Alba, Arges, Bacău, Bihor, Bistrița Năsăud, Braşov, Buzău, Caraş-Severin, Cluj, Covasna, Dâmbovița, Gorj, Harghita, Hunedoara, Maramureş, Mureş, Mehedinți, Neamț, Prahova, Sălaj, Satu Mare, Sibiu, Suceava, Vâlcea and Vrancea and a capacity building component through training, technical assistance, information and support for the beneficiary and potential beneficiaries of the funds.

- *Green Spaces* – a grant-making program of the Environmental Partnership Foundation and MOL Romania which has a new component with the goal to promote the protected areas of Romania in order to increase the acceptance level of them through the involvement of NGOs, schools, local communities and administrators of the protected areas. Through this component there will be funded projects that intend to run the following type of activities: Junior Rangers, Day of Protected Areas, Biodiversity Day, Educational Trail development in protected areas, Permanent exhibition development in the visitors' center of the protected areas.
- *Living Heritage* – a grant and capacity development programme aimed at enabling local community development in Southern Europe through the promotion of sustainable culture and heritage initiatives. In Romania, the Living Heritage programme is implemented by the Environmental Partnership Foundation (Miercurea-Ciuc) and the Romanian Carpathian Foundation in partnership with the King Baudouin Foundation from Belgium. The programme's aim is the long-term support of local development through community involvement in the identification, conservation and sustainable use of heritage related resources.
- *Greenways* are successful and well recognized initiatives in Western European countries and in the United States. Greenways are routes, trails and natural corridors that are used in harmony with their ecological function and offer the opportunity for sports, tourism and recreation. Greenways offer plenty of benefits for our environment, improvement of the quality of life and presently an opportunity for sustainable economic activities for the local population in towns and the countryside. The "*Mineral Water Trail*" Greenway is one of the first initiatives of this kind in Romania. This trail was created in Harghita County in central Romania. The Romanian Environmental Partnership Foundation and the Csík County Environmental and Nature Protection Association took the first steps in 2000 in order to make this initiative a reality
- *Eco-Business* – a program which contributes to the sustainable economic regeneration in Romania. The method is to establish a framework for assisting Romanian small and medium size enterprises that wish to improve their environmental practices by promoting public/private sector partnerships. Romania will need to earmark larger financial resources in order to protect the environment, develop the administrative capacity required to implement the necessary measures, and to achieve proper legislation in accordance with EU regulations. The Eco-Business program can play a significant role in achieving the above-mentioned goals by increasing the environmental knowledge of SME's located in Harghita County, Romania. The success of the program will impact SME's attitudes towards the environment and at the same time increase their profits, therefore making it a win-win situation.
- *Transylvania Authentica* seeks to protect the region's unique natural and cultural heritage by promoting and developing sustainable livelihoods. The Transylvania Authentica project is seeking to establish ways in which to ensure the survival of



Transylvania's incredibly rich agrarian culture and its traditional foods and agricultural products, by bringing together the regions smaller producers and manufacturers. Transylvania Authentica is a joint project of the Romanian Environmental Partnership Foundation and The Prince's Charities Foundation.

## Conclusions

Maybe the most suitable conclusion of this paper is the presentation of two eco-destinations, which can guarantee the success of Romanian ecotourism in the future. It is about two wonderful places of Romania: Retezat National Park and The Hațeg Country. *Retezat National Park* – “It is maybe the over 80 alpine lakes reflecting the beautiful blue sky like in the innocent eyes of a child... or the deep green of the superb forests covering the mountain sides... or maybe the peace you find when staying in this wonderful place that make Retezat special. It is here that you can find yourself, in that state of innocence from the beginning of time, and you can revel in the purity of nature, charging yourself with the positive energies released by this magic land.” (AER, 2009). The *Hațeg Country*, sometimes named “a small-scale representation of Transylvania” is another remarkable eco-destination of Romania. “To describe Hațeg Country best, try to picture mountains with high pastures grazed by flocks of sheep, beech and oak forests that cover the hills, with patches of orchards and valleys that host fields and small villages.” (AER, 2009). These examples, and also the unique ecosystems of Danube Delta, The National Park Nerei Gorges – Beusnita which is protecting the longest karstic mountains from Romania, Apuseni Nature Park, Putna – Vrancea Nature Park, Touristic Area of Natural Reservation Iron Gates and other nature wonders means eco-Romania: a huge potential for ecotourism in the context of sustainable development, with unique traditions and cultural heritage in the European context.

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