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Rural tourism and regional development: Case study of development of rural tourism in the region of Gruža, Serbia

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Abstract

Geographical area of Gruža, with its intact natural beauty and important cultural and historical monuments, has significant potential for tourism development. Local government is particularly important to tourism development and promotion in several aspects. Respondents, rural hosts from Gruža region complained of the lack of cooperation on the part of local government. The experimental research comprises three parts; the first part includes a questionnaire that was conducted in regional and local organizations which have a decisive impact on regional economic development and tourism. The second part of the research was focusing on the basic characteristics of rural households owners. The third part includes qualitative research about rural tourist characteristics. Experimental research for this study was performed in the region of Gruža in Central Serbia, including registered rural households that have participated in rural tourism in the last few years. Results indicate that rural home owners involved in rural tourism are members of the Tourist Organization of Knić, predominantly male, from 40 to 60 years old and they hold secondary school diplomas. The results of the research suggest that an average tourist in Gruža is at a higher social and cultural level, with medium income and mostly coming from urban areas. This type of tourist is open to typical rural activities including sports, farm works, as well as to enjoying nature and gastronomy.

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1. Introduction

A research into rural tourism can help the owners of the households involved in rural tourism to improve their offer, by carefully planning and choosing the right marketing and advertising campaigns, as well as to make the right decisions about investment [1]. Beginning in the seventies, the economic turns

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and the crisis in agriculture started to play a very important part in the economic possibilities of rural communities. These changes limited the economic development plans, which in turn made it necessary to take some unconventional steps in order to preserve the rural homes. One of the most popular development strategies of the rural growth was to involve some form of private investment. This was very important in the growth of some rural areas which were economically and socially endangered [2, 3]. The rural areas have a unique opportunity to attract tourists by the means of establishing a connection between rural areas and their cultural, historic, ethnic and geographical roots. It is easier to organize rural tourism than manufacture, for example. It is possible to develop rural tourism locally with the involvement of small and medium-sized companies and with no direct connection to these companies. However, the importance of the rural tourism for rural development is not only measured in terms of money, but also by creation of new jobs which add vitality to a traditionally poor economy. Well-developed and focused rural tourism can become a new source of money and jobs and at the same time it can eliminate social isolation and be an important factor in resettling the country. However, rural tourism also has some negative effects such as (when, for example, we take into consideration the employment) the seasonal character of the rural tourism. But, beside that, the rural tourism is one of the very few economic opportunities that a rural area has [4]. Some studies analyze economic and social influence on home owners and implications on regional planning and tourist marketing, which shifts the focus of the poll from agricultural land on to economic aspects of the rural area as a whole [2, 5, 6]. The significant economic contribution and the scope of tourism in rural areas remain largely unrecognized, manifesting in the continuing bias within national rural policy towards the agricultural sector [7].

Rural tourism is very difficult to define. According to Lane [8], rural tourism should be based in those areas which are rural in all aspects. Lane [8], suggests that rural tourism should include small companies owned by local families, thereby connecting the tourist services to the local agricultural production. The term rural tourism can also be used as a geographical term as well as a term describing cultural activities of rural communities. The term is related to some other terms, e.g. eco-tourism, green tourism, agro tourism, etc. The rural tourism in Serbia is a new phenomenon, in which, similarly to other regions of the world, agricultural workers and people living in rural areas are looking for some alternative sources of income [9]. Rural accommodation is organized according to the type of the rural home. Some rural households are on agricultural land, and the owners, rarely stop their work while involved in rural tourism. The other, more common type, are rural homes not involved in agriculture, as well as small non-agricultural rural settlements, which may suggest that agriculture alone is not a necessary factor in rural tourism growth [10]. Countryside is now being challenged as never before by issues of agricultural restructuring, declining service provision, depopulation and counter-urbanization, communication and infrastructural deficits and by the degradation of the natural environment [11]. In Serbia, rural households developed a strategy for survival of the small rural family homes and are playing an important part in social and cultural development of rural destinations. However, small, independent, and family driven rural households usually have problems with the lack of money for promotion and also have a problem to adjust to the current market situation, which is dominated by means of modern communication and technology [12].

2. Methodology

With its capacity of about 200 rural households in 34 municipalities and some 2500 beds on offer, rural tourism in Serbia is still in its infancy. This is very poor indeed, with only few areas showing some progress. In Gruža area there are 180 beds on rural tourist offer. The area of interest for research is located in Central Serbia. Gruža is a micro region of Šumadija. It is a smaller geographical area covering the central and southern part of Šumadija. It is difficult to distinguish between various areas of Šumadija

in a tectonic and morphological sense, but Gruža is probably the most distinct part inside its macro region. Gruža slopes down towards Zapadna Morava basin and it is actually an old lake basin, now succeeded by the Gruža river, whose name it bears.

The research consists of three parts. The first part of the study was of a quantitative character and for this part of the research we used a questionnaire with items based on the Likert's scale of 1 to 5. The questionnaire has seven items, based on literature review of rural tourism and it is adapted for this type of research [13]. The questionnaire consisted of seven items related to organizations responsible for development of rural tourism, providing their employees with an opportunity to give answers ranging from 1 to 5 (i.e., where 1 and 5 signify 'not important at all' / 'not true at all', and 'very important' / 'true'). The research method was a goal-based procedure to find an answer to a question or solution to a problem. The poll was done with convenience sample of 20 respondents and it was distributed and conducted among employees of regional organizations responsible for rural tourism development throughout the region. They also coordinate economic activity of the Šumadija and Pomoravlje region, with Gruža as a micro region. The sample includes geographically and administratively larger area than the micro-region of Gruža, because the centers of political and economical power that determine economic development are concentrated in major cities in the wider area of Šumadija and Pomoravlje, and particularly in the city of Kragujevac. Small sample ($n = 20$) was the consequence of the small number of organizations taking part in the promotion and development of rural tourism: The Tourist organization of Knić, Knić municipality, Regional chamber of commerce in Kragujevac, Šumadija District in Kragujevac, Regional agency for economic development of Šumadija and Pomoravlje and Caritas. The second part of the research is qualitative, consisting of open and combined-type questionnaire with twenty questions. The sample was relatively small, it comprised 13 rural hosts who were respondents to the questionnaire. This kind of questionnaire and small sample allow for only qualitative analysis in which we tried to group the various statements in several segments based on similarities [14]. This methodology was used to obtain in-depth information describing the attitudes and perceptions of the rural hosts about rural tourism development. The third part is a questionnaire among tourists (domestic and foreign), who were guests in the rural households during the research in Gruža. The questionnaire consisted of twenty questions with a sample of 30 rural tourists out of whom 20 were domestic and 10 were foreign. Symbiosis of the two mentioned approaches, combining qualitative and quantitative research, increases its strength and can produce robust results of high quality [15]. In order to come to a realistic understanding of the situation in rural tourism, an opinion poll was conducted in the rural homes with a significant number of visitors. It was essential to make this poll representative, so the poll was conducted in the following villages: Žunje, Bare, Grabovac, Guberevac, Borač, Dragušnica and Knić. The poll was made in order to establish an understanding of the basic characteristics of rural home owners in the Gruža region, as well as to try to define the profile of the tourists participating in rural tourism in this region.

Since the vast majority of settlements in Gruža belong to the Knić municipality (which is the administrative seat of the micro region), and since Knić is the only a part of the micro region with relatively developed rural tourism, the paper focuses mainly on the examination of the villages in this municipality. The survey was self-administered and distributed in a door-to-door method, using geographic sampling procedures during the spring of 2011. Data were collected from families involved in rural tourism throughout the region of Gruža, in Central Serbia, from seven villages with relatively developed rural tourism: Borač (1 home), Bare (1 home), Dragušica (1 home), Grabovac (1 home), Guberevac (1 home), Knić (2 homes) and Žunje (6 homes). The study made use of the tourist organization of the Knić municipality membership list. After dismissing incorrect addresses, deceased members, and those no longer involved in rural tourism from the list, we got a total of 13 rural households and 30 tourists, as a sample for the study.

3. Results

The first part of the research is the quantitative analysis on the basis of arithmetic mean values. For most of the statements in the category ‘CORRECT’, these mean values were very close to the corresponding values in the category ‘IMPORTANT’. The results show that the respondents consider rural tourism to be important when it comes to increasing incomes and preserving cultural and national identity, while they feel it has little impact on organic food production. In the ‘importance’ category, the subjects deemed the preservation of cultural and national identity as the most important, and the development of organic food production as the least important effect of rural tourism. In other words, the subjects made little differentiation between what they consider correct and what they consider important for the development of rural tourism (Table 1).

Table 1. The results of the poll on rural tourism in the Gruža region

<i>CORRECT</i>	<i>IMPORTANT</i>
The development of rural tourism increases the income in the villages	
4.6	4.4
The development of rural tourism decreases the migration into cities	
3.6	4.0
The development of rural tourism increases employment in the villages	
4.2	4.2
The development of rural tourism increases the organic food production	
3.2	3.8
The development of rural tourism benefits cultural life in villages	
4.2	4.2
The development of rural tourism benefits ecological issues	
4.2	4.2
The development of rural tourism benefits national and cultural identity	
4.6	4.6

entrepreneur: a farm worker, with no knowledge of tourist and management skills [16, 6, 17]. As such, he is in stark contrast to his potential customers, who are mostly educated, which causes the gap between them to widen. Their main reason for dabbling in rural tourism is usually loss of employment in the city, or poor income from farming. Other reasons are keeping the rural homes alive, a lot of spare time and a wish to show the beauty and values of rural surroundings to other people.

Table 2. General characteristics of household owners involved in rural tourism

Variables	%
Gender (n=13)	
Male	92.3
Female	7.7
Age group	
15-40	-
40-60	76.92
>60	23.08
Education	
Elementary school	30.76
High school	69.24
College degree	-
Graduate degree	-

Authenticity of the rural ambient is preserved as well as the charm of the Šumadija architecture, but on the other hand, the accommodation offer is unsatisfactory. Most rural home owners would like to increase their accommodation capacities. However, few of them plan significant investments into new buildings which would meet the modern tourists’ demands.

Owners of rural households quote that lack of new accommodation capacities is the fact because it

is very hard to obtain a loan for some significant investment in rural tourism. The position of Knić municipality itself is a big drawback, as it is regarded to be in a passive region, which results in stricter conditions for obtaining credit lines.

The key point of the research is the fact that the rural home owners are satisfied, regardless of adverse circumstances, and they would like to invest in rural tourism, but the lack of funds is a major setback. The most significant sign of their satisfaction is the fact that they do not want to make huge changes in their business, except that they want to invest more in the accommodation capacities.

Another important issue is the support of the local government, which is vital in order to secure the rural tourism growth. However, this help is often lacking, or is mainly covering only a small portion of the real needs. The Tourist Organization of Knić is a major subject in tourist development, but unfortunately it is not capable of helping rural tourism financially.

There are two additional contents to rural tourism of Gruža. The first one is organized by tourist organization of Knić municipality, which includes visits to famous nearby cultural-historic and natural sites and the second one is organized by the home owners themselves, mostly focused on farm land and nearby sites. Organization of vacations by the tourist organization is the only correct way to fully realize the potential of the entire tourist region of Gruža, because it is essential that it be done by educated people who can provide additional information as well as English speaking tourist guides.

The language barrier is very often an obvious obstacle in communication between guests and home owners, so the education of rural hosts must provide the answer to this problem. The guests often want to do ordinary chores around the farm, which makes them useful and helpful, so this kind of activity often involves taking part in lawn mowing, plum gathering, preparing of rakija (brandy) and pickling. This kind of activity influences home owners and tourists to strengthen their bonds and establish long-term friendships.

The prices in rural tourism of Knić are mostly standardized for the entire municipality, with a few exceptions. The prices vary according to the quality of accommodation on offer and the home owners' demands. Tourists most often take all-inclusive deals or bed only, depending on the tourist type. Fishermen and hunters usually take a bed only, while the rowers have a bed, breakfast and lunch. The prices are in accord with the quality of service and cannot be compared to hotel prices.

Food is prepared in a traditional way, using only organic fertilizers and no chemicals at all. This is also done in order to protect the environment, underground waters, etc. Great care is taken in garbage collecting, pre-arranging big dumps in small garbage collection points.

The third part of the research is also qualitative, based on the questionnaire aiming to gather data and define a unique profile of rural tourists. Since the number of foreign tourists at the time of research was unsatisfactory, certain conclusions were drawn with the suggestions of the rural hosts.

The annual number of tourists is between 35 and 400 people, mostly domestic tourists, with around 20-100 foreign tourists, depending on the season. The domestic tourists are mostly rowers, fishermen, hunters and artists related to the painting colony in Žunje. The foreign tourists are from great variety of different countries, usually coming from the countries which have a significant Serbian emigration, who come in order to relive their memories and show their children how they used to live before. These are tourists from Germany, Switzerland, Austria, France, as well as from far away countries like the U.S.A., Canada, and Australia. The other group comprised the "real" foreign tourists coming from former Yugoslav republics (Yugo-nostalgia), but also tourists from Spain, Russia, Greece and other countries.

In order to establish the profile of the tourists visiting the villages of Gruža region, it is necessary to differentiate between domestic and foreign tourists because of the major discrepancies between them. A domestic tourist involved in rural tourism is a middle-aged person (65%), or even an elderly person (25%), and sometimes a young person (10%). He/She is coming alone (70%) or with family and his/her spouse (30%). These are people who have well-paid jobs and they are coming to a village in order to get

some stress-free rest. The other group of tourists consists of fishermen, hunters, rowers and artists, coming to the rural areas to enjoy their hobbies, sports or simply to enjoy the natural beauty of Gruža. The domestic tourist is most often a lawyer, manager, politician or a doctor, however, some other professions can be noticed as well. The profile of a foreign tourist is not so different from the domestic one, with the largest number of them also being middle-aged (50%) or elderly (30%), but also with a significant number of young people (20%), up to 30 years old, who want to meet new people and become familiar with Serbian culture and customs. Tourists usually come individually (66%), but they also come through a tourist organization or tourist agencies as well (33%). Self organizing (individual) trip is more specific for domestic tourists with some experience in rural tourism, while foreign tourists come organized. This group of foreign tourist does not include Serbian people living abroad, who also like to visit rural regions individually. Tourists are not to be separated by gender, but around 80% of them are male tourists, probably because the fishing, hunting and rowing are predominantly male activities. The male tourists come mainly individually, while females join their family members or their husbands.

The tourists prefer healthy food, rest, peace and quiet, pristine nature, and hospitality. They are satisfied with the service, with a small number of complaints mainly related to the quality of accommodation in the rural homes.

4. Discussion

4.1. Rural tourism and regional development

Rural tourism in Gruža region has a long tradition, but it has just recently become an important part in comprehensive economic development. Likewise, rural tourism plays an important part in the preservation of Gruža identity both economically-wise and politically-wise, and also in attempts to prevent young people from leaving rural areas.

The economic situation in the region is very poor, since this region is considered to be one of the poorest in Serbia. The Municipality of Knić has a large percentage of elderly residents, poor economic situation leads to migration - especially of young and educated people - toward Kragujevac and other near-by towns and cities. Rural tourism in the Knić municipality can also play an important part in agriculture, trade, traffic, construction, etc. The connection between agriculture and tourism is obvious, for these two branches have a common interest, which can lead to the increase in organic food production, which represents a basis of eco-tourism. The multifunctional countryside is conceived as producing not only food but also sustaining rural landscapes, protecting biodiversity, generating employment and contributing to the advancement of rural areas [18].

The benefits of rural tourism lie in the preservation of the environment and of the cultural heritage, as well as in the economic benefit for the local population, which would, in turn, motivate the population to continue living in rural areas. The main benefits of rural tourism are: economic effects, prevention of migration from villages into cities- especially in passive regions (like mountain regions), transfer of ideas from urban into rural regions, diversification of the rural economy (connecting it to other sectors like naive art, local craftsmanship, etc.) improvements in local infrastructure (making the rural sector more sustainable). However not all the authors are convinced that the benefits outweigh the costs. Reeder and Brown [19] argue that in many cases concerns emerge not only about the quality of the jobs created but also how tourism development affects rural wellbeing.

A proper use of the advantages of natural surroundings and cultural heritage requires education of the rural population which is planning to be involved in rural tourism. Serbian state has just began such a campaign, with enormous efforts from participants (who expect the rural tourism to be a main generator for economy) to obtain the maximum benefit. Education of residents will be primarily influential in

changing residents' attitude towards development of rural tourism, because many residents want to protect their community from negative impacts and often work to redirect tourism development to minimize such impacts [20].

Rural areas provide opportunities for the promotion of countries of Central and South-East Europe to upgrade themselves as tourist destinations through portrayals of bucolic timelessness synonymous with sustainability [21]. Hall [22] suggested tourism could provide a key component for integrating post-socialist European countries. Not only state owned organizations, but also the European institutions and NGO's are interested in the development of tourism in Gruža region. In rural tourism, they seem to see an opportunity to redistribute the population with the pre-planned de-urbanization from cities to villages, a trend previously marginalized by the growth of industry.

For the proper development of rural tourism, however, it is necessary to invest a significant amount of money in infrastructure, in order to make all advantages of rural tourism easily accessible, especially for foreign tourists. The Municipality of Knić does not have the funds required for such large-scale investments in infrastructure; it is therefore necessary to get the funds from the state or from the EU. However, while developing infrastructure, it is also of great necessity to take care of the environment in order to protect uncontrolled urbanization.

Modern technology should be included in each part of promotion and distribution, including the Internet and other electronic means of communication. Sales can be done in two ways: by means of the tourist organization of Knić municipality, but also with the help of tourist agencies, providing additional activities. The problem is, however, that tourist agencies are not very interested in promoting rural tourism, because of very meager royalties.

4.2. Future development plans for rural tourism in Gruža region

The number of tourists participating in rural tourism in the region of Gruža, or in the municipality of Knić where we have all rural households engaged in rural tourism, from year to year increases (Table 3).

Table 3: The number of tourists and the number of nights they spent in rural households in the Knić municipality

<i>Year</i>	<i>Tourists</i>	<i>Nights</i>
1997	35	216
1998	47	354
1999	79	710
2000	107	846
2001	147	1175
2002	213	2167
2003	105	1023
2004	48	465
2005	92	828
2006	86	724
2007	138	853
2008	138	878
2009	162	659
2010	95	724
2011 (untill 30.09)	340	1498

It is obvious that tourist growth, although often described by governing officials as the most important, is not the most important when it comes to money. Nevertheless tourist organization still plays very important role in providing education of people involved in rural tourism. Organization is essential since just two households offer their services through the Internet or with the help of tourist agencies. There is also a legal issue with the agreements between rural households and the tourist organization, which define the rights and obligations of each other. The tourist organization of Knić is one of the very few in Serbia, which strictly follows the rules of payment (only account paying allowed), obligatory guest-books, etc. It is necessary to introduce some minimum standards of quality of accommodation in rural tourism for the entire Gruža region, as well as a standardized price-list. Poor economic situation influenced the lack of new accommodation facilities, with

family households adapted for tourism. The special needs of tourists, for example sport fields, swimming pools, walking and running paths, must also be considered in the future. It is of crucial importance for rural tourism that rural households should make long-term friendships with their guests, in order to establish a positive image of Serbia in the eyes of foreign tourists. Also, traditional hospitality alone often is not enough, so there is a need for the implementation of standards of behavior by meeting specific demands. This professional approach allows guests to feel welcome all the time. It can only be done by developing a friendly attitude, but not too friendly at the cost of the guests' privacy. Modern tourists are becoming more fastidious, and impose strict demands in terms of the quality and price of service; therefore, rural tourism of Gruža should follow the world-wide recognized trends and try as much as possible to provide a specific service for money invested. There is also a trend of meeting the demands of tourists with specific needs, and rural home owners should try to adapt to these special interests of their guests. The rural tourism offer must be much more than just nature, culture and history. For rural tourism, the pristine nature and peace and quietness it brings is still the most important factor, but there is also a need to change something in the everyday monotony of rural life. These additional activities should be organized by the tourist organization of the Knić municipality, because they have both the experience and the expertise needed.

The tourist mapping, marking, and signaling are victims of negligence in the entire country, but these play a very important part in rural tourism, especially with regards to foreign tourists. Putting up road signs and marking walking paths is very important when it comes to cultural and historic monuments, but also offers the possibility to organize walking and horse-riding tours.

In order to make proper use of these advantageous natural and cultural resources, it is of great importance to educate home owners involved in rural tourism. Low level of education specified in the questionnaire means that the home owners are not educated in tourism. Changing education profiles of people involved in rural tourism can be done by means of lectures focusing on standards. It can also be done with some help from the more experienced tourist regions in Serbia and abroad, which have a longer tradition in this type of tourism. The food in rural homes should meet the demands of the tourists, based on day-by-day agreement. The food must be organic, with all the necessary standards fulfilled, which guarantees the basic quality of rural tourism with a motto: „back to nature“. In order to assure the guest in the quality of the food, it is possible to introduce guests with the food production, giving them an opportunity to smell, gather, taste and see the difference between the food in the city and in the village.

The drive towards a multifunctional countryside is gaining pace and sustainable rural tourism is seen as a key component of rural development [23, 24, 25]. Sustainability is found at the heart of rural policy with the ideal of achieving sustainable rural development which is a key dimension of the EU, national, regional and local policy in the recent years [26].

4.3. Limitations and future directions of the research

This work has some weaknesses. Because of the small sample there is no possibility to apply complex statistical methods. Whereas the research gives a reasonably complete view of the benefits of rural tourism, it falls short of providing such a complete view of the negative side-effects of it. In Serbia, and especially in Gruža region, rural tourism is still in its early stages; so the small number of rural households and tourists caused the use of descriptive qualitative research with combine-type questions to recognize specific innovations in its development. A future research can include newly introduced variables for owners of rural households as “live in community as a child” [27]. Future research can be built on the results of the present study including research of new areas and new village hosts, promoting the quality of rural tourism beyond the context of Gruža region. During the spring of 2011, a poll was conducted in order to ascertain the number of homes willing to participate in rural tourism. The results

showed that some 180 rural households are interested in rural tourism. This is a positive signal as to the potential increase in capacity as well as in quality of service. On the other hand, this could also be merely a declarative number, and the true number of rural households willing to take part in rural tourism could be much lower. Nevertheless it's a good starting point for a future research in this field.

5. Conclusion

Gruža region has a significant geographical potential for rural tourism, with its immaculate natural surroundings (Gruža Lake), well known cultural and historic monuments. The most important part of tourism should be the rural tourism, because it has the best resources, including traditional architecture, healthy food, outdoor activities, and vacation on the Gruža Lake, fishing, gathering of mushrooms and medical herbs. The Knić municipality, which is the most important municipality for the rural tourism in Gruža region, is one of the least developed municipalities in Serbia, so there are no funds needed for the development of tourism and for the purposes of its promotion. Development of rural tourism owns capacity to provide a changed image of economic despair so specific to this area. This research can help the owners of rural households involved in rural tourism to make more efficient use of the available rural tourism resources, as well as help them to make essential changes in the quality of rural tourism products—all with a view to the increasing tourist satisfaction. An important practical implication of the research lies in its promotion of a new way of thinking and adopting of a new business philosophy adjusted to the world-wide recognized trends which introduces new standards to the future economic development of Gruža. Rural tourism, as one of the important potential factors in the economic development of Gruža, is rather a mere potential than it is a real economic activity. Successful realization of this potential is largely dependent on the regional economic development policy of the Republic of Serbia.

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