EVALUATING THE DEGREE OF UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONCEPT OF “TOURIST ECO-GUESTHOUSE” AND “GREEN VILLAGE”

NICULA Virgil¹, GLĂVA Vasile ², NEAGU Roxana Elena³
¹Associate Professor Ph.D. “Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu, Romania, Faculty of Economic Sciences, niculavirgil@yahoo.com
²Professor Ph.D., Spiru Haret University, Bucharest, Romania
³Junior teaching assistant “Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu, Romania, Faculty of Economic Sciences

Abstract: The eco-economical principles are essential elements when deciding to transform an agro-tourist pension into an eco-tourist pension. Evaluating the preliminary conditions for accrediting the pensions as eco-pensions is doing by field investigation and surveys. Promoting the concept of eco-pension and the highlighting of the profitability in time of this activity offers the advantages of experiencing a new model of tourist activity.

Evaluating and directing the activities from the field of tourism in relation to the ecotourism criteria will allow the exploitation of local natural and economic resources through the certification of eco-tourist products and that of destinations and accommodation structures, in order to guarantee the eco-tourist quality.

Keywords: ecotourism, rural eco-economy, eco-pension, sustainable development.

JEL classification: Q01, L83

1. Introduction

Developing a rural eco-economy depends on the global vision of the natural resources and on a broad understanding of the restructuring of economic notions and concepts needed to realize this vision. What we suggest in this paper is to harmonize the existing Romanian system with international models in order to adapt the methods and techniques of implementing an eco-pension to the local ecotourism, by taking into account the character and traditions of the Romanian tourist village.

Evaluating the preliminary conditions for accrediting the pensions in Sibiel as eco-pensions is doing by field investigation and surveys. The results obtained are formulating some proposals for issuing a series of methodological norms of classifying the reception structures with the function of tourist accommodation of the type of eco-pensions. What we monitor is the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the eco-tourist potential of the natural capital, clean technologies, ecological agriculture, the exploitation of non-polluting natural resources, the evaluation of the ecological impact and strategic eco-marketing, in order to identify those pensions that have an eco-tourist potential.

Promoting the concept of eco-pension among the administrators of the pensions which are selected as having eco-tourist potential and the highlighting of the profitability in time of this activity offers the advantages of experiencing a new model of tourist activity, the only one viable, and we are counting on the perceptiveness of the administrators of pensions in Sibiel, which will in this way be able to keep Sibiel on the top of rural tourist destinations. Evaluating and directing the activities from the field of tourism in relation to the ecotourism criteria will allow the exploitation of local natural and economic resources through the certification of eco-tourist products and that of destinations and accommodation structures, in order to guarantee the eco-tourist quality.

The eco-economical principles are essential elements when deciding to transform an agro-tourist pension into an eco-tourist pension. European Ecotourism Labelling Standard (EETLS) based on the European and global experience in the field, would assure comparable standards of service to Ecotourism clients across Europe, at least in relation to a core group of baseline quality criteria. EETLS shares all of GSTC as they are all highly applicable to Ecotourism. Currently EETLS is made up of 40 specific criteria divided into the four pillars of sustainable tourism, in line with GSTC: demonstrate effective sustainable management, maximise social and economic benefits to the local community and minimise negative impacts, maximise benefits to cultural heritage and minimise negative impacts, maximise benefits to the environment and minimise negative impacts (Proposal for an International Program for Sustainable Tourism and Ecotourism, Mohonk Agreement, 2006).

The European Ecotourism Labelling Standard shares also the same description of criteria with The Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria. This ensures high compatibility with GSTC; and a clear understanding of what sustainable tourism is. But there are several differences between a sustainable
tourism system and an Ecotourism one, especially when focusing on Romanian ecotourism. The criteria apply to various aspects of the management system of an Ecotourism business in Romania, requiring the implementation of a long-term sustainability management plan and the business’s compliance with all relevant national or local regulations and legislation. Developing a Romanian Ecotourism label mince to create, promote and implement a system of accreditation for ecotourism, for eco-business (touroperators), eco-destinations (protected areas, rural communities) and eco-lodging (rural pensions). This problem determinate many changes like:

- to implement practical mechanisms for nature conservation and sustainable local development (including financial mechanisms) at destinations level;
- to change the mentality of the business sector regarding the environmental protection and local communities;
- to increase the quality of the ecotourism services;
- to promote at the international level only certified tour operators and eco-destinations;
- to increase the number of foreign tourists and to develop rural areas;
- to identify new eco-destinations.

The scope of developing a standard for Ecotourism practice derives from the need to harmonise existing European ecotourism labelling systems and strengthen the position of labelled businesses in the tourism market. The harmonisation effort is based on an integrated concept of ecotourism, which brings together the different services offered to the tourist, i.e. accommodation, food, travel and nature-based outdoor activities. Each of the service-components of Ecotourism may come under different quality labels. Labelling standard would assure the baseline quality of the tourism product and harmonise existing labels while recognizing their specific experiences and background (Proposal for an International Program for Sustainable Tourism and Ecotourism, Mohonk Agreement, 2006).

Evaluating and directing the activities from the field of tourism in relation to the ecotourism criteria will allow the exploitation of local natural and economic resources through the certification of eco-tourist products. A realistic way for evaluating the degree of understanding of the concept of “tourist eco-guesthouse” and “green village” is the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was distributed in a number of 78 rural agro-tourist or tourist guesthouses from the following villages of Mărginimea Sibiului:

![Figure 1: Rural agro-tourist or tourist guesthouses from the villages of Mărginimea Sibiului](image-url)

Most guesthouses are included in the 2 flowers (daisies) category - 37 of them, then a total of 22 guesthouses have 3 flowers (daisies), and 5 guesthouses are 4 flowers (daisies) ones. A number of 14 are classified as rural tourist guesthouses of 2 or 3 stars.

Of the total surveyed guesthouses, 28 are members of the National Association of Rural, Ecological, and Cultural Tourism (ANTREC - Romanian language), most having no registered employees (i.e. 56.4% from the total number of guesthouses), and a great number of guesthouse...
administrators not being able to understand what the term "employee" refers to, since they hold the guesthouse as a Family Association.

100% of the guesthouses offer accommodation services, 51.3% offer accommodation and food services, and a 53.8% percent provide recreation and animation activities.

It is worth underlining that a great number of the respondents does not mention from the beginning of the questionnaire that they also provide food services for fear of the authorities (many carry out food-related activities without the necessary approvals, as it is difficult to meet the legislation criteria), but then, a bit later, at one of the questions regarding the criteria that they currently meet in terms of being able to fall in the category of "eco-guesthouses" they mention that presently they offer organic menus.

Many guesthouse administrators carry out collateral activities such as: painting on glass, pottery, wood carving, carpentry, and so on.

The graphic from below show that 53.8% of guesthouse administrators are male and 43.2% are female.

Figure 2: Structure of guesthouse administrators according to their sex

![Figure 2](image)

Regarding the degree of professional training (level of their studies), out of all the respondents 44.8% graduated from high school, 10.4% have specialization high school studies, 44.8% graduated from the university, and 55.2% have completed a course of "Guesthouse Administrator" through CCIA Sibiu, or a course in hygiene, cooking, sales.

Regarding the structure by age groups, 2.9% are under the age of 29, 1% are between 30-39, 41.3% are between 40-49, 24.6% are between 50-59, and 2.1% are over 60. The most significant percentage is that of the category of administrators having the age between 40-49.

Figure 3: Structure of the respondent guesthouse administrators by age groups

![Figure 3](image)
When asked "Are you familiar with the concept of eco-guesthouse" 82.8% of respondents said "yes", from mass media, and 6.2% from tourists, while 10.3% have not heard of "eco-guesthouses", and an insignificant percentage 0.7% learned about it from other sources.

Figure 4 : The degree to which the guesthouse administrators are familiar with the concept of "eco-guesthouses"

When asked "Do you think that currently the eco-guesthouse, through the opportunities it offers, represents for your guesthouse: a threat? a variant that is of no interest to you?, a competition?, an opportunity?, " 86.2% of the respondents indicated that this concept represents an opportunity, and only 13.8 % see it as an option that shows little interest, at least for now.

When asked "Which of the following criteria do you consider as being closer to the concept of eco-guesthouse?", 58.6.% of the questioned administrators answered: "A guesthouse where the menu consists of organic products", 48.2% "A guesthouse where the environmental pollution is reduced", 24.1% "A guesthouse in which heating is based on clean technologies", 31% "A guesthouse in which the construction materials are ecological ones", 34.5% "A guesthouse in which waste is sorted and recycled", 31% "A guesthouse that meets at least half of the criteria listed above", and 41.4% "A guesthouse that meets all the criteria listed above".

When asked "Are you familiar with the concept of "green village"? ", 37.9% of the respondents said "yes, but I would like to know more", 17.2% answered "yes, to a large extent", while 31% replied with "no, but I would be interested to learn more".

When asked if they are interested to participate in a workshop in the village of Sibiel, in Sibiu county, in order to learn more about the possibility of shifting from an agro-tourist guesthouse to an eco-guesthouse and about the concept of "green tourism", 72.4% said "yes, to the extent that this is possible", 16.3% said "no, because I do not think that these concepts can be successful in Romania". Interestingly enough, the administrators from Gura Râului, but also from other villages, would like it for this meeting to take place in their village, and not in Sibiel, considering that many see in the village of Sibiel a competitor in attracting tourists.

2. The eco-touristic activity

Evaluating the preliminary conditions for accrediting the pensions in Mărginimea Sibiului as eco-pensions was doing by field investigation and surveys. The results obtained were allow formulating some proposals for issuing a series of methodological norms of classifying the reception structures with the function of tourist accommodation of the type of eco-pensions.

What we are monitories were the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the eco-tourist potential of the natural capital, clean technologies, ecological agriculture, the exploitation of non-polluting natural resources, evaluation of the ecological impact and strategic eco-marketing, in order to identify those pensions that have an eco-tourist potential. A great importance have that the administrators of pensions from Mărginimea Sibiului aware of the advantages offered by ecotourism, which is more compatible with the traditional way of living than the other forms of tourism.
The history proving that the sustainable development is the only solution unanimously accepted which leads to the promoting of the market economy elements in a democratic background through keeping the high demands and ecological criteria.

It is important to underline that finding optimal alternatives between economy and environmental protection depends on the decision-makers’ ability to choose and use the financial-economic instrument adequately to an effective promotion of the actions for environmental protection. The financial instruments that can be used, whose efficiency has been verified in other countries are: taxes that can be promoted as tax differentiation; subsidies to encourage the change of attitude and to grant funds for stopping pollution, deposit redemption. Of course, it is the results’ problem and the economic consequences of sustainable development. From this point of view there is no long term experience in the enforcement of the concept. Such consequences can be understood without having a certain level of certainty and without being finished: improvement service quality, evolution of large sectors of consumer energy and resources towards “cleaner” technologies and less resource users; the development of new types of approaches, jobs, activities; cutting down the resources and environment emergencies and mostly of their outcomes (Bran Florina, 2002).

3. The concept of durable tourism and the eco-pension

Tourism, more than any other domain, relies on the environment; this represents its “raw material”, its object and domain of activity and tourism deployment being its main frame carrying the resources. Tourism is being carried out through the environment and its quality can favor or on contrary, touristic activities. By enforcing such a type of development means more powerful ecologic prices which overlaps the global financial-economic crisis. The ecological challenges mostly regarding the principles, the economic system works, shapes the dimension of the efforts which are being asked by this new way.

In a world in which the economy demands are forcing the limits of the natural systems to rely on the distorted signals of the market to guide the decisions on the investments is a certain way to disaster. Converting the economy into an eco-economy is a major challenge. Building an eco-economy will affect “every corner of our life” (Brown L., 2001).

Four general factors determine and influence directly the touristic activity: the quantitative and qualitative value of touristic resources; the general economic growth, which mostly influences jobs and incomes; the exchange rate, which determines the evolution of the purchase power of residents and non-residents; the reparation which determines the purchasing power of clients. All touristic activities determine in time and space potential effects on the environment, health or social system. These influences together are being expressed through the notion of impact.

The tourism-environment relationship has a special meaning, the development and protection of the environment representing a sine qua non condition of tourism, any alteration of it can cause damages also to the touristic potential by diminishing or even canceling its resources. The touristic potential as part of the environment, the existence and development, on its quality, therefore considered a possible quality index for its environment, in other words, a barometer of its quality; it is intensively used in those areas in which the adequate requirements are met and it is diminished and gradually removed in those areas in which, for various reasons, a certain component of the environment, such as the scenery, air, or water is degrading. The economic effects of tourism – estimate income, jobs – are easily emphasized while ecological effects cannot be qualitatively measured rather than quantitatively. Besides the fact that it is a source of income and jobs, tourism is also a source of satisfaction, for people inhabiting touristic areas.

The concept of durable tourism has become increasingly popular at a microeconomic level through the promotion of green tourism. The actors of the industry of hospitality and travel have become increasingly sensitive to environmental issues. Few are those who support the idea the economic activity does not influence the environment. On the other hand, more and more managers and employers in tourism admit that natural resources have a great economic, actual and potential value if they are adequately handled (Glăvan V., 2003).

Developing a rural eco-economy depends on the global vision of the natural resources and on a broad understanding of the restructuring of economic notions and concepts needed to realize this vision. Promoting the concept of eco-pension among the administrators of the pensions selected as having eco-tourist potential and the highlighting of the profitability in time of this activity, evaluating and directing the activities from the field of tourism in relation to the ecotourism criteria will allow the exploitation of local natural and economic resources through the certification of eco-tourist products and that of destinations and accommodation structures, in order to guarantee the eco-tourist quality.
4. Conclusions

The eco-economical principles are essential elements when deciding to transform an agro-tourist pension into an eco-tourist pension. Ecotourism creates jobs, sustainable development alternatives, and a well defined image that can be used in marketing the local, regional, or national products. By implementing adequate marketing strategies, on could promote, together with the interested tourism agencies, a realistic and attractive tourist product. In the same time, we shall elaborate a guide which will contain short studies, destined for the administrators of pensions, useful for implementing the eco-pensions in the Romanian rural tourism. Alongside norms regarding the use of ecological building materials, of unconventional sources of energy, the use of biotechnologies, the conservation of biodiversity, the guide will also include menus, traditional recipes for valorising the ecological food products, and leisure activities in protected natural areas.

Ecotourism is the best practice for tourism in a sustainable environment. Adopting ecological technologies requires a systematic effort in formulating eco-economic policies, especially for restructuring the traditional agricultural activity. Eco-certification is more and more present in many of the fields of economy, including for identifying products with high ecological potential. The tourist product offered by eco-pensions can be a promoter of green tourism. The systematic construction of public support for changing the mentality implies an intelligent and concerted effort, developed with the help of well informed citizens. Ecotourism contributes to preserving the environment and to supporting the well being of the local population. Eco-pensions will represent a green model, focused on the strategy of the four R’s (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, and Re-examine), by using eco-economic systems, procedures, and strategies.

Transforming the agro-tourist pensions from the village of Sibiel into eco-pensions, thus making Sibiel the first green village in Romania, and training the administrators of pensions and other key members of the tourist business into forming an eco-economic view of the sustainable development actively contributes to preserving the natural and cultural heritage, includes local communities in the sequential planning, development, and operating processes contributing to their well being.

The eco-pension is an important link in the chain ecological agriculture – ecological food – conservation of biodiversity bio and eco-economic development. Ecotourism is a tourism which directly or indirectly promotes and supports sustainable economic development. Ecotourism can generate financial support for the formation, management and protection of natural areas.

The geographical and climatic conditions of Mărginimea Sibiului are to favour the development of tourism in an ecological environment. Therefore, Mărginimea Sibiului should follow the example of other regions with very rich natural and ecological reserves such as alpine region on Austria or Swiss, for which ecotourism has become an important source of income.

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