

THE ROLE OF TOURISM SUSTAINABILITY IN MOUNTAIN DESTINATIONS

Amalia NIȚĂ

Abstract: *The study aims at highlighting the necessary sustainable use of natural and cultural resources in the mountain regions focusing on a cross-border area located in the Southern part of the Carpathian Mountains namely in Caraș-Severin and Mehedinți counties in Romania and Bor district in Serbia. Due to the great tourism potential of this area in terms of resources, historical and cultural values, there were recorded more and more visitors. Thus the area is prone to unsustainable development and to a short-term activity of tourism sector without an effective guideline on tourism sustainability and products development. An improper use of the existing touristic resources will affect the environment and the income generators of the business sector in the study area.*

Within this context, it is mandatory the introduction of tourism sustainability policies based on one of the main resources in the area- the mountains, taking also into consideration the cross-border approach in order to obtain a better capitalization of natural resources in the three areas of this study.

Keywords: *cross-border areas, local communities, mountain destinations, strategies, tourism sustainability*

Introduction

At a global scale, tourism is considered an economic and social phenomenon because it recorded a sustainable growth and a real diversifications of the products over the years, thus becoming one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world (UNWTO, 2017). The increased number of new destinations that try to find a place on the global tourism market and their development determined a dynamics and a modernization of tourism which is a key driver for the economic and social progress.

Thus the tourism supply plays an important role in the economic well-being of a destination and needs to have a sustainable positioning on national and international markets. The current development and forecast for tourism, globally speaking, highlight a growth of arrivals of 4.6%, namely 1,184 million arrivals in 2016 and UNWTO forecasts 1.8 billion arrivals by 2030 (UNWTO, 2018); 1 of 10 jobs is in the tourism sector; international tourism

generated US\$ 1.4 trillion in export earnings; tourism represents 7% of world's exports and 30% of services exports (UNWTO, 2017).

International tourist arrivals (overnight visitors) grew by 3.9% in 2016, reaching 1,235 million worldwide, an increase of 46 million over 2015. In 2016, it was recorded the 7th consecutive year of growth in international tourism after the 2009 economic crisis.

Various studies show different trends and market segments that can be very well capitalized in a sustainable way. For example, The IPK International (ITB, 2016) even identified a new market niche for tourism, namely a segment of persons born between 1980 and 2000 (aged 18-38), that are technology-savvy and that recorded 1.8 billion worldwide. Their travel behaviour shows that they seek authenticity, want to experience new cultures, have different types of trips, engage with locals and have an *authentic experience* overall, wanting an individualised travel experience. The mountain destinations that want to attract this segment of the market have to offer a mix product of adventure and relaxation, a real experience, using also the technology, where they can receive information and share their experiences and feed-backs.

Some other trends highlighted in the last years (2016/2018) show that the tourist motivations started to change because it was observed that the tourist require more and more the active and intense holiday packages, because they combine events and festivities with learning new skills (like skiing, hiking etc.). They actually search for authentic holiday, when the tourist can live like a local, while their demand for cultural tourism is still maintained on an upward trend by capitalizing the cultural heritage of different destinations. The gastronomic tourism is in many cases mixed with the cultural tourism and even the adventure tourism which include sport activities recorded a notable increase. In most of the cases the internet represents the main source of information and the mobile already acts as a virtual guide. A new approach that each destination should take into consideration is the degree of sustainability and the carrying capacity needed for a proper tourism development.

Ritchie & Crouch, 2003 stated that *"tourism policy seeks to provide high-quality visitors experience that are profitable to destination stakeholders, while ensuring that the destination is not compromised in terms of its environmental, social and cultural integrity"*.

The output of tourism sustainability is mainly the interconnection between the tourism market tendencies and travel motivations, a proper capitalization of tourist resources and economic development in accordance with the environment protection and sustainable approach. Within this

process, the stakeholders play an important role, by engagement in the actions and education at local level towards a sustainable tourism product.

According to WTO (2004) "the *sustainability principles refer to the environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee its long-term sustainability*". Other authors (Eber, 1992, Schorner, 2011) consider that the economic, environmental and socio-cultural principles are the main dimensions of sustainability that are presented in fig. 1.



Figure 1 The main principles of sustainability (adapted after WTO, 2004; Eber, 1992; Schorner, 2011)

Mountain regions are some of the key tourism destinations at international level due to their highly variable and differentiated ecosystems and rich cultural heritage, but, at the same time, are largely areas with fragile rural economies. Mountain areas present typical conditions: high degree of biodiversity and disproportionate share of marginalized human population (Pratt & Shilling, 2003).

According to the World Bank Report, a comprehensive definition of sustainability in the mountains, that should be universally accepted, is not easy to be presented. Pratt & Shilling (2003) state that we should focus on the characteristics and attributes that contribute to the sustainable use of mountain resources:

- sustainability does not mean cessation of all change; change due to human activity does not undermine the ability of mountain regions to sustain the flow of services, insuring that mountain people benefit appropriately from the good and services provided
- sustainability covers very different time frames, the mountain ecosystems are fragile, and can degrade rapidly in certain circumstances
- sustainability means finding ways to manage mountain resources and systems so that they can provide their critical goods and services indefinitely into the future, i.e. protecting the long-term capacity of mountains to continue to provide such goods and services.

Methodology

The first step of the methodology relates to understanding the baseline information about tourism and its dynamics at the global level, highlighting also the concept of sustainable tourism development with a focus on the mountain tourism. It was necessary to have such a context in order to assess the current tourist situation in the cross-border area under study, which represents the second stage of the methodology.

Based on the statistical data processing, a clear image of the cross-border destination was outlined and some tourism supply, dimensions and principles in terms of sustainability and competitiveness were elaborated, focusing on some areas of interventions: regulation of mountain tourism activity, creating and maintaining good conditions for tourism infrastructure and services, ensuring quality standards, also involving the local community.

The sustainable mountain tourism is created primarily on the nature-based product, being thus subject to certain changes and challenges caused by different factors, thus the policies proposed in the cross-border area aim to bring an efficient and profitable development and promotion in a sustainable manner.

Facts and findings

The study area is represented by three counties in two countries – Mehedinți County and Caraș-Severin County in Romania (located in the

south-western part of the country) and Bor District/County in Serbia (situated in eastern part of Serbia).

The study took into consideration only the settlements located above 500 m that are shown in the map below (fig. 2) and include 41 administrative units in Caraș-Severin with a population of 205 414 inhabitants, 14 administrative units in Mehedinți with 24 302 inhabitants and 35 administrative units with 69 979 inhabitants in Bor.

One of the main tourism resources in the area is represented by the relief, the Carpathians playing a crucial role in the positioning of Romania, while in Serbia, they are among the must see destinations (the level of hypsometry is presented in fig. 2).

The relief is formed of mountains, hills, plateaus and plains and it has the shape of a natural amphitheatre with steps in Mehedinți county, while 67% of Caraș-Severin county's surface are mountains including Banat Mountains (Semenic, Locvei, Almăjului), Poiana Ruscă and Southern Carpathians formed of the Cernei, Godeanu, Tarcu Mountains. The mountain areas in Bor are located in the western part: mountains of Kucaj, Deli Jovan, Stol, Mali Krs, Veliki Krs, Crni vrh, Miroc, Tilva Njaga and Tilva Mika.

In terms of natural resources, the study area includes 4 national parks (Cheile Nerei-Beușnița, Domogled-Valea Cernei, Semenice-Cheile Carașului), 15 reservations, 55 marked trails, several biking tours under development, 14 ski facilities in Caraș Severin-Mehedinți and 1 national park (Djerdap), 9 reservations, 29 hiking trails, Eurovelo 6 biking path and 1 ski facility in Bor.

Regarding the cultural heritage in the cross-border area, the man-made resources investigation show a relevant amount of landmarks in the study area, such as: 5 historical monuments, 3 archaeological vestiges, 5 museums, 8 monasteries/churches and the railway of Oravita-Anina, the water mills-Rudaria-Eftimie Murgu, Biniș Village with ceramics in Caraș Severin-Mehedinți and 2 historical monuments, 2 archaeological vestiges, 2 museums, 1 monastery and Zoo Bor, Rajac and Rogljevo stone houses/wine cellars-Negotin in Bor district.

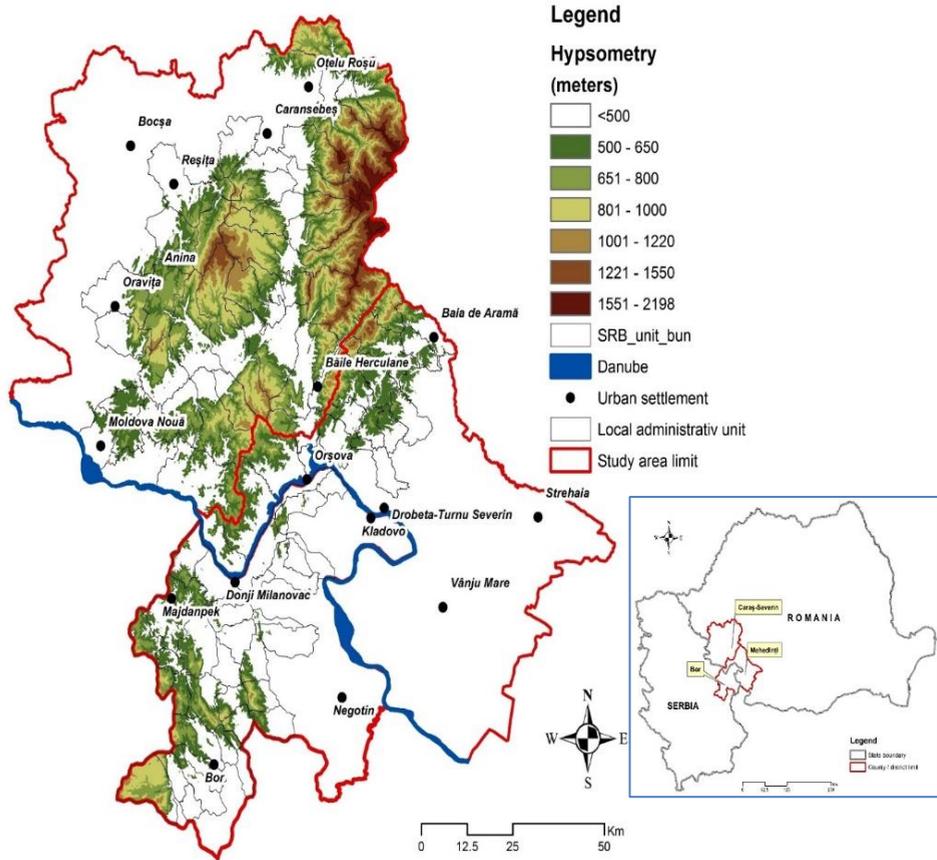


Figure 2 The studied cross-border area: counties of Caraş-Severin and Mehedinţi (RO) and Bor district (SER)

Currently, according to the official statistical data, there are more than 220 accommodation units within the mountainous area (exceeding 500 m altitude) with a dominance of hotels and B&B structures (fig. 3). Almost three quarters of them are located within Caras-Severin county, since it is the largest county and mountains cover much of it, while Mehedinti and Bor counties have much lower number. Out of the total of 226 accommodation facilities, 93 are rural households and another 93 B&B structures, most of them family-owned business, which is a good thing for the local communities.

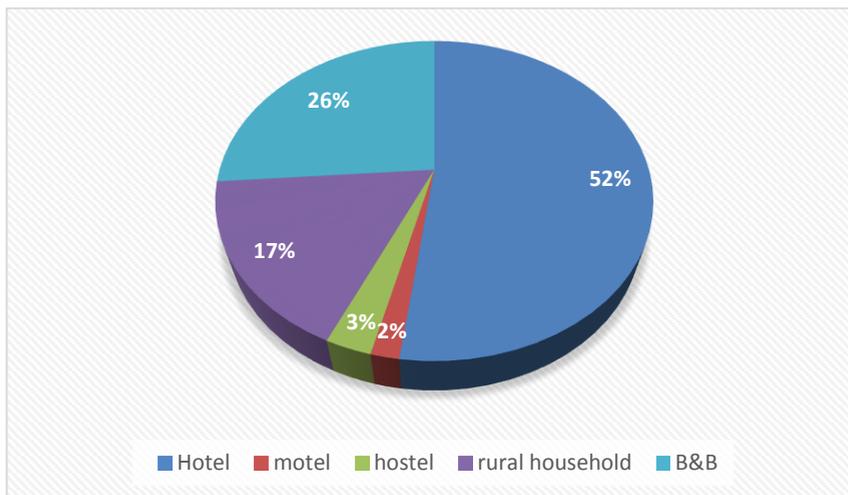


Figure 3 The accommodation capacity in Caraș-Severin, Mehedinți and Bor, 2017

The tourist flows multiplied continuously during the last 5 years within the target area. Currently, there are more than 340,000 arrivals within the mountainous area (exceeding 500 m altitude). More than half of them are within Caras-Severin county, since it is the largest county, while Mehedinți and Bor counties have much lower number (70,000-90,000) (fig. 4).

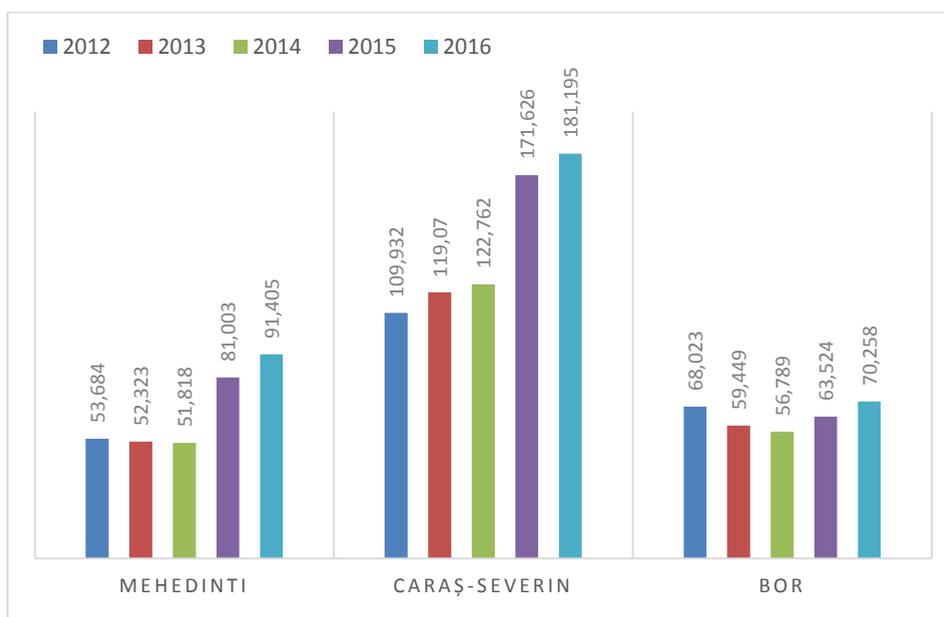


Figure 4 The tourist arrivals (total) in Mehedinți, Caraș-Severin and Bor in the 2012-2016 period

Regarding the current situation of the mountain tourism product in the study area, some issues can be summarized as following:

- skiing in several slopes of the study area is possible with new developments and with low involvement of sustainable skiing (safety issues, code of ethics and educational programs)
- rural tourism is a basic product of the mountain region presenting the authentic culture and the agriculture of the rural life as a tourist product. It assures economic benefits and connected to gastronomy-local food and sustainable agriculture represents an important development aspect
- the cultural heritage of the area is very rich, with heritage sites and useful information on several websites, but the thematic mountain trails are missing
- adventure tourism is a suitable product to attract young travellers, being one of the most important alternatives in the mountain areas, with several, diversified activities: hiking, biking (or horse riding) paths, that need to be developed and maintained (although the quality of the infrastructure, and the available information are lacking)
- ecotourism is particularly interesting in and around protected areas, where visitor centres, educational paths, as well as local services such as guiding, accommodation, horse-riding, bike rentals, etc. are developed, though there is a lack of information, programs with maps and prices.
- leisure tourism, i.e. recreation and relaxation in the mountains, in a clean and fresh environment with tranquillity, can also be mentioned since especially in low seasons this form of tourism can provide an additional way of attracting tourists.

The Carpathians in the target area as tourism entity do not have a unifying supply or product, being currently rather limited/chaotic, although the mountain tourism can be an important resource in all the counties of the study area.

Development of sustainable mountain tourism

The United Nations Security Council (2009) mentioned “*the growing contribution of sustainable tourism initiatives in mountain regions as a way to enhance environmental protection and socio-economic benefits to local communities and the fact that consumer demand is increasingly moving towards responsible and sustainable tourism*”.

Western European countries have long acknowledged the importance of tourism in the mountain areas, as well as their fragility, signing the Alpine Convention in 1991, concerning tourism management and controlling tourist flows, structural developments such as ski lifts and ski slopes, accommodation and the balanced development of economically weak areas (EC, 2005).

The tourist supply in mountain destinations

There are five major components of tourism supply in mountain destinations: attractions, transportation, intermediaries, destination and activities that are detailed in fig. 5.

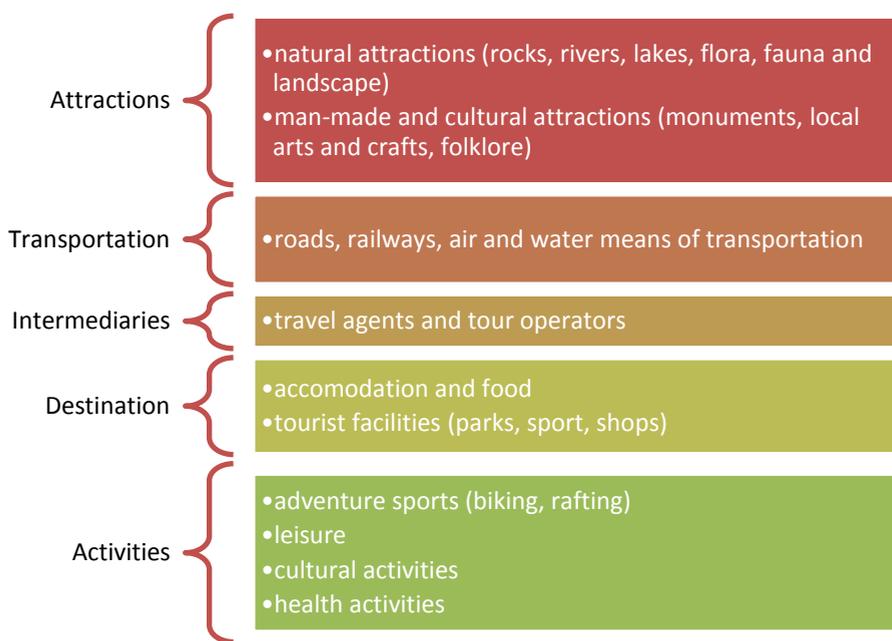


Figure 5 The components of tourism supply in mountain destinations

Some of the opportunities for tourism supply in the cross-border region can offer a development in a sustainable manner and can be based on the nature and landscapes, water activities, snow-dependent activities and cultural resources.

Among the low-impact mountain-based tourism products and activities, there are **walks, hiking and camping** in nature, where visitors trekking and hiking can observe several habitat types and species during trips. But in the case of large number of tourists, these low-impact activities

may affect ecosystems and species. That is why, it is highly recommended to use only established tracks and sites whenever possible when choosing routes and campsites and avoid highly sensitive areas (Charters & Saxon, 2007).

Other outdoor activities in the mountainous area include cycling, mountain biking, horseback riding, canyoneering, rock climbing, hand gliding and caving, which have a greater environmental impact due to use of equipment to sensitive mountain landscape. Thus it is highly important to follow good practices in conducting and managing *adventure activities*, ensuring sustainable use of the areas.

Mountain *water bodies* (rivers, lakes, ponds etc.) are a source of clean water for the local communities, and, at the same time, the supporting ground for several tourism activities that provide tourists new experiences, such as river tours, canoeing, sailing, windsurfing, kite surfing, kayaking, rafting or fishing. Since the use of motorized and non-motorized watercraft has several negative impacts - erosion of riverbanks, collision with wildlife, spill of chemicals, oil and fuels, it is highly necessary to follow the guidelines for a preservation and management of freshwater bodies: avoid sensitive sites when anchoring and choosing sites to come ashore, encourage sustainable fishing practices, use only clean watercraft and equipment, avoid disposing the wastewater, trash into the water (Charters & Saxon, 2007).

Snow-dependant activities include skiing, snowboarding, sledding or just snow walking which generally imply artificially created sloped and associated infrastructure which impact on the fragile ecosystems.

More tourists are interested in interacting with the local people to *experience elements of the local lifestyle*, food and drinks, as well as visiting various cultural and historical sites, which are partially incorporated in tourism products. It is highly important that visitors receive information on local culture, customs and traditions and adopt a behaviour that respects the local community, while entrepreneurs use local suppliers and labour, are involved in community development and consult with local communities to avoid sensitive sites and share the existing infrastructure and resources.

The main dimensions of sustainable mountain tourism

Taking into consideration several strategies and also the Framework signed by the seven Carpathian countries in 2006, any sustainable mountain tourism plan should address three major types of issues, i.e. social, environmental and economic issues (EUROMONTANA, 2011) (fig. 6):

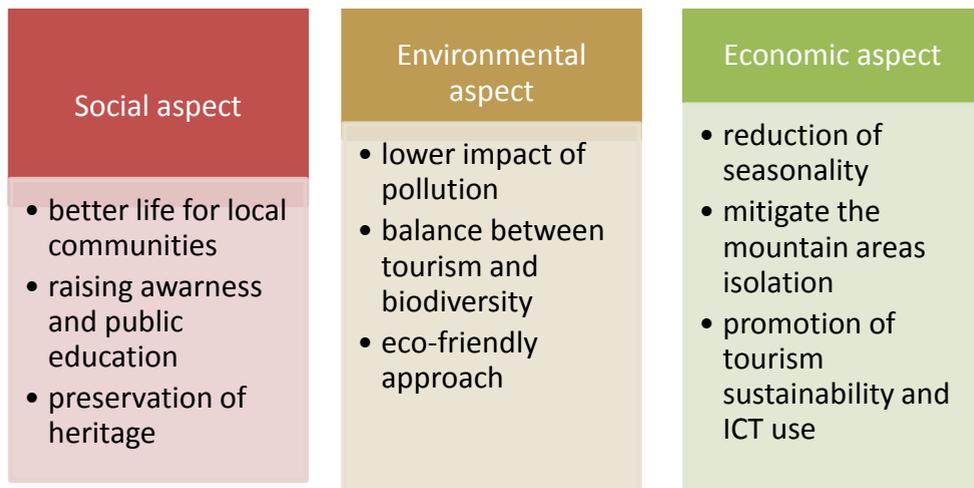


Figure 6 The three pillars of sustainable mountain tourism (adapted after EUROMONTANA, 2011)

According to the Carpathians Environment Outlook 2007: *“Only through international cooperation and maintaining a holistic view of the Carpathian environment, and a common (or at least not contradictory or conflicting) path of development will the governments and peoples of the region succeed in building a viable future within the ‘Carpathian space’”* (www.carpathianconvention.org).

Mountain tourism covers a wide range of tourism types, from mass tourism to niche tourism (ecotourism, winter sports, rural tourism, active holidays and hunting tourism).

Some proposals for each of the three pillars/dimensions can improve the current situation and can determine a better capitalization of tourist resources, such as:

- social pillar: the social capital, meaning the social values and resources must be preserved and developed and in the same time promoted; the education through solidarity and equal rights must be provided for the identity continuation and for mitigating the areas with economic decline
- environmental pillar: the biodiversity and the zones of natural importance should be preserved, keeping the resources consumption below the level of regeneration; a better management of the impact of environmental risks (water, soil, air, climate pollution) should be applied by reducing them to a safe level

- economic pillar: economic competitiveness and the capacity for innovation have to be improved and the income and employment rate should be increased or at least maintained and distributed equally in the geographical areas of the cross-border region.

Tourism sustainability policies in mountain destinations

The policies that must be applied in such cases in terms of sustainability are somehow general and can be found in almost every destination no matter the geographical localization.

At the beginning, one of the important things is the recognition and raising the awareness about the unique features of this mountain region and local communities. Only after this is accomplished, one can speak about the increasing of ecological, social and economic inputs to have better investment decisions, promote and strengthen the partnerships at the cross-border level. After the encouragement of conservation of environment, the flows of information and tourists can increase and the local communities can offer support and even can control their local tourist resources. All the economic interests need to be aligned with the goals of environment protection and with the needs of local communities and even of the stakeholders in the area.

Nevertheless, the keywords remain the cross-border agreement and cooperation for the protection and development of the mountain region located in the study area.

Conclusions

It is worth mentioning the economic and social advantages that the development of sustainable mountain tourism can bring to an area: the fostering of the local rural economy through the increased production of local agricultural products that can be sold, the capitalization of rural traditions and folklore, new jobs being created; the tourist infrastructure and services are stimulated and sustainable activities of mountain tourism are brought to attention, the cross-border interrelations being improved.

Some challenges in the area still remain to be tackled in the future. For example, the product development that demand a common branding is an issue that need to be addressed. The necessity of development of tourism products can bring common advantages to the local communities and stakeholders in the cross-border area. Representing a common tourist identity, the common brand of these products can create a better understanding of the assets and core values of the Carpathian area at the cross-border. Also a common standards policy regarding the

accommodation, services and facilities require a close cooperation. A good system for the implementation of these indicators and criteria can be better assessed (using similar thresholds and quality standards) and monitored in certain periods of time in order to increase the quality standards of tourism in the area.

The outcomes of the sustainable mountain tourism development in the Romanian-Serbian cross-border area are very clear in terms of the need to have a proper planning, maintaining the balance between the three pillars of sustainability; the need to improve the infrastructure and services by reinvestments of the earnings, helping in this way the local communities.

Sustainable tourism is seen in the area as bringing benefits to the local communities and economies. The growing popularity of mountain areas can become a threat for the natural resources. The competitiveness of the sector is actually based on the sustainability of the resources. The challenge is represented by the coordination between the infrastructure development and tourist activities on one hand and the biodiversity and local communities on the other hand. There is needed actually a communication between all the involved stakeholders in terms of the responsible use of natural resources, taking into account the environmental impact of activities, protection of the heritage, the quality and sustainability of the created jobs.

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NOTES ON THE AUTHOR

Amalia NIȚĂ is Lecturer PhD at the Faculty of Sciences, Geography Department, University of Craiova. She holds a PhD in Geography and is the author of various articles, books and studies/strategies in the field of tourism, urban/rural development and cross-border natural and cultural heritage. Amalia Niță is a member of the „Romanian Society of Geography- Societatea de Geografie din România (SGR)” and of the “Romanian Association of Tourism Journalists and Writers” (AJIR). Currently she is also a member of “The Research-Innovation Centre in Regional Tourism- Centrul de Cercetare-Inovare în Turism Regional (CCITR)” of the University of Craiova. E-mail: amalia.badita@gmail.com