

## **ANALYSIS OF THE MAIN COORDINATES OF ECOTOURISM ACTIVITY IN ROMANIA**

**Roxana Elena Popşa**

**Abstract:** *The international experience in the field of ecotourism certifies the extent of this manifestations of sustainable tourism and the global efforts, of some organizations and associations for the planning, organization and development of this segment of the tourist market. Consistent with existing studies worldwide on the development and organization of ecotourism, we can say that this segment of the tourism market finds in our country a favorable framework for development, representing an opportunity and also a challenge for managers of various tourism enterprises. Thus, this paper has the main objective to provide an overview of the main coordinates of ecotourism activities in Romania.*

**Keywords:** *protected areas, ecotourism, ecotourism potential, natural resources*

### **Introduction**

Currently, the international ecological tourism market has developed by 10-12% annually, having the fastest growing in the global tourism sector. Thus, ecotourism as the main manifestation of sustainable tourism represents a widespread phenomenon, an important segment of the tourism industry which contributes to the economic development of a country and lately has become an engine of social progress.

In these circumstances, it should be noted that professional associations in our country have made significant efforts to boost the efficient development of ecotourism activities and to create and promote Romania as a quality ecotourism destination. The results of the measures adopted by the national associations together with those existing at European level were materialized in October 2014 in the certification of the first two ecotourism destinations from Romania, namely "Zărneşti-Piatra Craiului" from Brasov and "Creasta Cocoşului Mara-Cosău" from Maramureş. In this respect, it should be mentioned that Romania is

among the first EU countries which operationalized the certification system of ecotourism destinations. The ecotourism certification of these two areas of Romania is a partnership between the profile associations and the private sector, and with the certification of the national tour operators is an important step in the development of this small industry in our country. In addition, the developed criteria for the designation of ecotourism destinations, will lead in the next period most likely to the certification of other areas, whose cases are "in work" according to the president of the National Authority for Tourism, among which the "Craiului Forest" from Apuseni Mountains, the Crişan-Mila 23 area from the Danube Delta, the "Haţeg-Retezat Country" and the "Dornelor Country" from Călimani Mountains.

Looking at this context in the following paragraphs will be presented the main elements that make up the rich ecotourism potential of Romania, and the general framework of the development of ecotourism activities.

### **General characteristics of the ecotourism potential of Romania**

One of the coordinates of the ecotourism activity in Romania is its inestimable ecotourism potential, whose characteristics allow the development of unique tourism products that comply with the requirements of sustainable development.

The ecotourism potential of a country is distinguished by the variety of elements able to, protect the environment, folk traditions and values, and to increase social and economic benefits of protected area communities.

The landscape of Romania, through its unique characteristics in Europe and rare in the world - 28% mountains (altitude over 1,000 meters), 42% hills and plateaus (altitude between 300 and 1,000 meters) and 30% plains (altitude below 300 meters) – ensures a favorable framework for the upper exploitation of ecotourism potential (Coccean 2005:37).

In this respect it should be noted that in Romania there are 54% of the Carpathian mountain chain, with an altitude of 1,136 meters, just few of peaks exceeding 2,500 m. Thus, the position, the geological structure, the configuration and other natural components offers to the Romanian ecotourism space individuality and originality (Ielenicz, *et.a.* 2003:61).

Romanian Black Sea coast – is spread over a length of about 245 km and covers 24,000 km<sup>2</sup> continental shelf of the total of 144,000

(16.6%) – offers a wide range of possibilities for the development of ecotourism: sunny virgin beaches, sea water with relatively low salinity, marine bio climate and balneary resources ( Mândruț 2002:70).

The climate, by the temperate continental type with Mediterranean influences, provides through the frequency and type of precipitation, air temperature and humidity, wind regime and the degree of cloudiness (Ciulache 2004:51), a favorable frame for practicing ecotourism activities.

The Danube Delta is the wettest part of Europe, the newest and lowest region, located in the eastern part of Romania. It has a surface of 5240 km<sup>2</sup>, of which 4340 km<sup>2</sup> in Romania, including Razim-Sinoe lagoon ( Driga 2004: 151). Thus, Danube Delta is ranked 3rd in Europe, after the Volga and Kuban size.

Because of its inestimable value – 30 types of ecosystems – Danube Delta was declared Biosphere Reservation in 1990, in the same year was included in the World Natural and Cultural Heritage List, and in 1991 was recognized as a wetland of international importance – RAMSAR Convention.

In this context it should be noted that with the declaration of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reservation (DDBR) – 1990 – was established the institution for managing the natural heritage of the Reservation, and also for the restoration and protection of the physical and geographical units from the DDBR territory – the **Danube Delta Biosphere Reservation Administration (DDBRA)**.

In order to conduct an efficient ecotourism activity, Danube Delta Biosphere Reservation is administratively structured in the following four areas:

- **Strictly protected areas** – 20 areas – occupies a total surface of 50 904 ha (8.7% of the reservation). These are mandatory protected and represents slightly disturbed samples representative for the natural, terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems from the reservation;
- **Buffer zones** – were established around areas with full protection regime. They occupy a total surface of 222,996 ha (38.5% of the reservation) and were designed to mitigate human impact on protected areas;
- **Sustainable Development Areas** – covering a total surface of 306 100 ha (52.8% of the reservation). They include lands in easily flooded, dammed lands for agricultural, fishery and forestry use and lands on which settlements are located;

- **Areas for ecological restoration** – are surfaces of land in which the Reservation Administration carries out activities for the ecological balance restoration by using the proper technical means and technologies.

The vegetation through the aesthetic value and contribution to climate influence enhances the ecotourism attractiveness of other elements of the natural heritage, completing them (Draguț 2000:16).

Thus, the Danube Delta vegetation is an important resource of ecotourism potential due to willow forests, numerous species of aquatic plants (water lily, swamp thistle etc.) and various species of shrubs and creepers from the Letea and Caraorman forests.

Under these conditions, the Romania landscape favored the emergence of a diverse range of habitats – in 52 Eco regions – composed of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, for which protection has been declared by law about 2 mil. ha of protected areas.

Regarding the structure and evolution of protected areas in our country, I notice during the scientific research, the alignment with the international standards and categorical system IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) and also the grouping of the areas into six major categories, presented in the following table (see table 1):

**Table 1. The structure of protected areas in Romania**

Categories of protected areas	IUCN Category	Number		Surface	
		Absolute value	% of total Romania	(ha)	% of the total surface of Romania
Biosphere Reservations	-	3	0,22	664446	7,49
National Parks	II	13	0,96	315857	3,56
Natural parks	V	14	1,03	737428	8,32
Scientific reservations	I	79	5,84	100574	1,13
Natural Reservations	IV	671	49,48	136537	1,54
Natural monuments	III	190	14,01	18220	0,21

Source: National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism: National Strategy for Ecotourism Development in Romania, Phase 1 - ecotourism experience at national and international level, Phase 2 - Strategic Plan for Ecotourism Development in Romania, Bucharest, 2009

Currently 382 protected areas - from Romania - were declared sites of Community importance, as part of the European ecological network Natura 2000.

At the level of protected areas, *superior capitalization of ecosystems involves the achievement of an integrated waste management and risk management regarding the negative impact of tourism on the natural environment*. Only in this way, the ecosystem services provided by natural areas will be used by future generations, ensuring sustainable development of the tourism industry and at the same time improving the quality of life through the adjustment services of natural processes, the supply of tangible goods (eg: non-wood forest products, pharmaceuticals) but also through intangible benefits materialized in cultural services provided to the population by ecosystems (eg tourism and education).

In addition to the elements of the natural potential to the Romanian ecotourism development contributes certain components of anthropic potential which ensures the promotion and preservation of cultural values and traditions.

Thus, our country has about 30,000 historical monuments – archaeological sites, historical buildings, memorial houses etc. – of which 6614 are declared objectives of national and international interest, dating from different historical periods. The most representative are included in UNESCO World Heritage; some of them are special by the fact that represent groups of attractions in a certain area and not a single center of interest: the Danube Delta; Monasteries of Moldova – 7 points of interest; Horezu Monastery; Villages with Fortified Churches in Transylvania – 7 points of interest; Wooden Churches of Maramures – 8 points of interest (Ministry of Culture. Management of cultural institutions).

To the formation of a polyvalent framework for the Romania ecotourism exploitation contributes the Romanian folk art, which according to specialists S. Neagu is one of the few in the world in which the three basic elements (wood, stone and clay) are used in a balanced way (Neagu 2003:140).

In this respect it should be noted that glass painting (Transylvania), ceramics (Margeana, Horezu etc.) are important elements through which Romanian folk art stands out, both having a originality appreciated abroad (Dinu 2005: 114).

Considering these aspects, I can say that *the superior capitalization of the Romania's inestimable ecotourism potential can*

*only be achieved through a management able to provide favorable habitat conservation and sustainable development of local communities.* In other words, organizations responsible for managing different ecological sites have to include in the management plan of each natural area a set of indicators to assess the environmental impact of certain activities in order to find the most sustainable ways of preserving the site concerned, monitoring the conservation status of species and habitats to identify in time the negative trends, control exercising to determine possible deviations from the protection area and not least determining visitors to participate to the protection and conservation of biodiversity. Thus, through this system of indicators, proper to an efficient tourism management, will be highlighted in a timely manner the changes occurred after having conducted tourism activities and will be taken the best measures for reducing or even eliminating the unsustainable actions.

### **Ecotourism as a business opportunity**

Form of sustainable tourism, ecotourism appeared as business opportunity since the 70s, when studies in Kenya, have shown that income from tourism in wild areas are no longer just a concretization of hunting activities. Later in the 80s, it is noticed the efforts of some specialists to investigate the rainforests and coral reefs, which determined the appearance of small businesses whose main purpose was to guide the researchers in the interest areas.

Thus, gradually began to develop an industry, literature considering them as pioneers of ecotourism, the tour operators who sell ecotourism packages in areas like the Galapagos Islands, Costa Rica, Kenya and Nepal.

In addition, globally there is a tendency for everything that means healthy lifestyle and our country has the potential to provide new experiences for tourists focused on organic products and responsible activities in the natural environment, giving them the quality guarantee and compliance with environmental requirements through the certification by the Association of Ecotourism in Romania of numerous operators, ecotourism products and services, and lately even of some destinations. Thus, in Romania, ecotourism has become a business opportunity in a relatively short period of time, the proof is the fact that the development of the ecological certification criteria of Romanian tourist destinations in 2012, based on those developed by the Global

Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) and Ecotourism European Standards (EETLS), led to the certification in October 2014 of the first ecotourism areas: Zarnesti, Piatra Craiului, from Brasov and Creasta Cocosului- Mara Cosău from Maramureş.

Regarding the development of an ecotourism business in our country, it should be noted that ecotourism programs are sold through the members of the Association of Ecotourism in Romania – hotels, tour operators – as well as through the large travel agencies from Romania, including Paralela 45, J’Info Tours, Perfect Tour, and Transilvania Tour.

Also, natural areas from Romania have been an important travel motivation for many residents and foreign tourists, fact supported by the studies conducted in the National Tourism Development Master Plan 2007-2026, where it is estimated that the total volume of foreign Eco-tourists lies somewhere between 10.000 to 25.000.

Accordingly, we can say that ecotourism is a business opportunity for the operators from Romania even under the ecotourism certification conditions (see Table .2.)

**Table 2. Eco-tourism structures certified by the Association of Ecotourism in Romania**

<i>Nr. crt.</i>	<i>Guesthouse denomination</i>	<i>Emplacement</i>	<i>Number of seats</i>
1.	Bio Haus Cioran	Sibiu, Nucet village, Hârtibaciului Valley	16
2.	Alexandra House	Bistrița-Nasăud, Lunca Ilvei	22
3.	The House between the willows	Tulcea, Murighiol, Uzlina village, is located on the St. George arm, which continues with the ensemble of the lakes Uzlina, Isac, Iscel, Cyril and Litcov channel	26
4.	Green House	Harghita, Tuşnad Baths, near the Tinovul Mohoş Community site – Saint Anne Lake	12
5.	Codrin	Hunedoara, Sălaşu de Sus, Nuşoara village	27
6.	Dora	Hunedoara, Râu de Mori, Râuşor Valley, Retezat National Park	22

7.	Feher Akac	Harghita, Tuşnad Baths, near the Tinovul Mohoş Community site – Saint Anne Lake	5
8.	Felicia	Suceava, Suceviţa, near the monasteries from Moldova	8
9.	Hotarul Ciucului Inn	Harghita, Tuşnad Baths, near the Tinovul Mohoş Community site – Saint Anne Lake	37
10.	Hilde's Residence	Suceava, Gura Humorului city	35
11.	Ibolya	Harghita, Tuşnad Baths	14
12.	Kalnoky	Covasna, Baraolt city, Micloşoara village	19
13.	Mosorel	Braşov, Zărneşti city, near the Piatra Craiului National Park	36
14.	Hunea Halt	Suceava, Panaci, near the Vatra Dornei balneoclimateric resort ( in the place known as Dornelor Country) and the Calimani National Park	20
15.	Călimani Gate	Located to the limit of Călimani National Park, is the starting point to the geological reservation "12 Apostles", " Iezer Lake " Călimani sulfur career, "Saru Dornei Tinovul Reservation"	5
16.	Ul pia Traiana	Hunedoara, Sarmisegetusa, near the Natural Dinosaur Geopark	8
17.	Dornelor Valley	In Dornelor Country, on the right side of the Golden Bistrita after its confluence with Dorna and Neagra, at the exit of Vatra Dornei towards the Piatra Neamt	10
18.	Villa Hermani	Braşov, Moeciu, Măgura village, in the middle of Piatra Craiului National Park and near to Bran and Zărneşti	40

19.	Vila Şoimul	Harghita, Tuşnad Baths, near the protected areas: Piatra Şoimilor, Tinovul Mohoş, Saint Anne Lake, Nadaş Baths, “Middle Valley” Swamp, Mestecăniş Garden, Beneş Field, Cemo Field , Ozunca Baths, Tinovul Buffogo, “Puturosu” Cave	25
20.	The Old Vila	Hunedoara, Haţeg, near the Retezat National Park	54
21.	Zamolxe	Hunedoara, Sarmisegetusa, near the Retezat National Park	37

Source: processing after [www.eco-romania.ro](http://www.eco-romania.ro) the guesthouses sites

Considering the analysis of the main coordinates of the ecotourism activities in Romania, to ensure the long-term development of this form of manifestation of sustainable tourism in our country, I think that a tourism offer should meet the following criteria:

- the tourism product contributes to a better understanding of the need and satisfaction to know and protect natural areas and cultural values;
- the tourism product has been developed in accordance with the optimum capacity of reception;
- the tourism product is based on promoting natural sites that have operationalized a management able to minimize the impact of tourism activity on the environment and maximize consumer satisfaction;
- the technical and material base on which the tourism product focuses is the result of an active benchmarking in terms of waste management, water and energy conservation, respect for the local architecture.

The increasing interest of the Romanian and foreign tourists for responsible holidays will lead to the revenue maximization of the operators who orientates their activities and management practices to this market segment.

### **Conclusion**

Ecotourism as the main manifestation of sustainable tourism is able to ensure the preservation of vulnerable ecosystems and cultural values as well as increasing the living standards of human habitats,

thereby unifying the decisions concerning the environment and the economy.

Therefore, taking into account the specificities of ecotourism in the market, the actors involved in its development in Romania, whether it is about the government institutions, public administrations, NGOs, members of the private tourism sector and local communities should be able to adopt measures in accordance with the stipulations of the European Union and with the global adopted conventions to efficiently capitalize the rich natural, cultural and anthropic heritage, that our country has. In other words, each destination should apply a performing management in terms of environmental protection, waste management, the use in some extent of alternative energy sources and sustainable valorization of tourism potential.

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