

# Ecotourism and nature tourism – components of a sustainable management of forests

Blaj R.

“Lucian Blaga” University, Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, Food Industry and Environmental Protection

\*Corresponding author. Email: robert\_blaj@yahoo.com

**Abstract** This paper studies the link between functions and the role fulfilled by forests and ecotourism or nature tourism. There are defined concepts of ecotourism and nature tourism, showing the principles governing the two activities. European network of Ecotourism started work in 2011 as a result of an international project and developed a European standard ecotourism certification, based on 40 criteria. It is intended to act as an instrument of European regulatory harmonization initiatives in ecotourism quality or regulate individual service offer of ecotourism. They inventoried the most popular ecotourism destinations in Romania, as well as products and certified ecotourism destinations.

## Key words

sustainable nature-based  
tourism, ecotourism,  
community development,  
forest recreation

In our life, but especially in maintaining life on Earth, forests play a role so important that their significance cannot be expressed in a few words. Forests are invaluable in every way: climate, biodiversity, ecology, economic importance etc.

Besides helping to maintain a climate conducive to life, forests have other environmental benefits: they prevent soil erosion by reducing the intensity of rainfall, and by absorbing large amounts of water, help preserve topsoil intact. Forests also act as water filters and help capture and store water, which then feeds the aquifers. Forest also retains moisture in the air and favors the occurrence of precipitation.

Massive deforestation leads to soil erosion and desertification of the area. [1]

**Ecotourism** is part of tourism related to nature, which must meet the following criteria: share of revenue and actions directed towards nature conservation and protected areas, most of the income from tourism remains local for education for both tourists and locals, minimizing negative impact on the environment.

Tourism linked to nature: is travel / trips relating to nature in an interesting area with attractive nature (often areas / protected areas) must satisfy the following conditions: the area must have a high natural potential, must be a tourist application.

Forest tourism is a way of leisure in an unpolluted environment and comforting because forest ecosystem components: the existence of purified air, ionized oxygen, the beauty of landscapes, plant and animal biodiversity.

Forest tourism is an activity that has caught global scale enjoying great success among lovers of nature tourism.

By developing forest tourism activity aims both to highlight the outstanding landscapes, unspoiled habitats and biodiversity of the planet's forests and public awareness on the need to protect nature. [2]

For all times the mountains and the woods were true friends of man whom it offered, free of charge, bare necessities of life, food, natural medicines and shelter.

Aerosols, fascinating colors of the forest, the birds singing, pure spring water and tranquility heights: This will be so beneficial for that man, that the mountain, dressed in the cloak of forest green, can be considered very important for human health. [2]

Closely related to the forest and the roles that it fulfills two concepts have emerged that make the link between this and tourism: ecotourism and nature tourism. [4]

## Materials and Methods

The paper is based on consultation literature in the fields of forestry, forest tourism and sustainable tourism. The research was conducted by consultation of online bibliographic resources.

## Results and Discussions

Ecotourism is defined as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people." [5]

## **Principles of Ecotourism**

Ecotourism is about *uniting conservation, communities, and sustainable travel*. This means that those who implement and participate in ecotourism activities should follow the following ecotourism principles:

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

Principles of ecotourism are approved and promoted by the Association of Ecotourism in Romania (AER) and are based on two international models: Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program developed by the Ecotourism Association of Australia and Nature's Best, the accreditation system promoted by the Association of ecotourism in Sweden. From the perspective of AER, these principles must be put into practice by those who develop ecotourism products, as well as those who plan the development of an area-based ecotourism. [6]

### **1. Focus on natural areas**

Ecotourism focuses on direct personal experience in nature, it takes place in the nature and is based on its use, its geomorphological characteristics, biological, physical and cultural aspects of it. Hence the emphasis on natural area is essential in the planning, development and management of ecotourism.

### **2. Interpretation of ecotourism product**

Ecotourism offers opportunities for experiences in nature that lead to a better understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of discovering and preserving local nature and traditional culture for both visitors and the local community. Ecotourism products attract those tourists who want to get into interaction with the natural environment and, in varying degrees, it provides the knowledge, understanding, appreciation and pleasure. Those who develop or coordinate ecotourism activities should provide an appropriate level of understanding of natural and cultural values of the areas visited, usually through the use of qualified guides properly and providing accurate information both before and during the experience. The level and type of interpretation is planned, designed and offers so as to meet the interests, needs and expectations, with the inclusion of a wide range of possibilities for interpreting both personal and non-personal. Also, the destination and ecotourism products, it is important to create the opportunity for local community members to have access to information and interpretation offered in the developed ecotourism program.

### **3. Sustainability from the perspective of protecting the natural environment**

Ecotourism activities and their planning should provide best practices for tourism and planning in terms of nature conservation and sustainable development. Tourism activity should be planned and implemented so as to reduce the impact on nature. Ecotourism product runs and is driven so as to preserve and highlight the natural and cultural environment in which it is performed, the recognition and implementation of sustainable, characteristic tourism practices.

### **4. Contribution to Nature Conservation**

Ecotourism contributes positively to the conservation of natural areas. Ecotourism involves participation in the conservation of natural areas visited, offering constructive ways for good management and conservation of these natural areas (eg offering financial assistance in shares, rehabilitation of natural areas, collection of waste left by tourists or contribution to conservation organizations).

### **5. Constructive contribution to the development of local communities**

Ecotourism provides lasting contributions on the development of local communities. The local community is often an integral part of ecotourism product. Benefits of ecotourism should return mostly to local communities. Local benefits can come from using local guides, buying local goods and services and use local facilities. Ecotourism activities and their planning should ensure a reduction in the negative impact on the local community visited and on their lifestyle, while providing long-term constructive contributions of these communities. Consequently, ecotourism should emphasize the cultural component of the area visited and contribute to the conservation of this component.

### **6. The degree of satisfaction of tourists**

Ecotourism meet the expectations of tourists. In developing ecotourism products should be taken into account that, in general, potential tourists in this area have a high level of education and expectations. The degree of satisfaction related to ecotourism product is essential information offered to meet or exceed the expectation of tourists.

### **7. Correct marketing**

It aims to achieve a correct marketing that leads to realistic expectations. Marketing ecotourism offers customers complete and responsible information that leads to the enhancement of the natural and cultural environment of the areas visited and the level of satisfaction of tourists.

### **European Forum in ecotourism**

In 2011 was founded the European Network of Ecotourism-EEN as a result of the European project ECOLNET. The main purpose of the project was to create a virtual community of interest, open to new members.

EEN brings together, mainly to share best practices and knowledge, stakeholders of nature tourism and ecotourism. [7]

European Ecotourism Network broadcasts, supports and maintains ECOLNET learning and assessment strategies to improve knowledge and quality of European ecotourism services including online learning, program and assessment systems for agencies, companies and appraisers who wish to apply European Standard Certification in Ecotourism (EETLS). [8]

One of the main objectives of the EEN is to promote and implement the European Standard Certification in Ecotourism (EETLS).

This standard is intended to act as an instrument of European regulatory harmonization initiatives in ecotourism quality or regulate individual service offer for ecotourism.

### **Ecotourism Certification System in Romania**

Association of Ecotourism in Romania (AER) [9] considered absolutely necessary to develop an ecotourism certification system - a mechanism which practically applies the basic principles of ecotourism - to ensure nature conservation and sustainable development of local communities through tourism. This is an important step since the World Tourism Organization has advised governments, starting in March 2003 to support initiatives that promote sustainable tourism certification.

Ecotourism Certification System of AIR adapts international experience in the context of Romania. It was developed in accordance with the Program Accreditation Nature and Ecotourism promoted Australian Association of Ecotourism (NEAP is the first accreditation system in ecotourism) and Nature's Best of the Swedish Association of Ecotourism (the first accreditation system in ecotourism in the northern hemisphere).

Ecotourism Certification System applies to two different categories: [10]

- ecotourism programs offered by tour operators or guides (maximum 15 participants);
- hostels in small rural and natural areas (maximum 25 rooms).

AER has identified a number of benefits that may result from implementation of the certification system, such as:

- allows customers to better identify those products that can offer amazing experiences related to nature and rural culture;
- contributes to higher levels of trust in Romanian ecotourism products on the international market;
- becomes a marketing tool for tour operators and owners of hostels;
- ensures a higher level of service quality;
- actively contributes to nature conservation and sustainable development at the local level;

- supports local governments in protected areas in developing tourism with minimal impact;
- provides a platform of joint activities between the business sector and nature conservation organizations.

Association of Ecotourism in Romania has made some trails (thematic) performing in various protected areas in the country: "Nature's Path", located near Parcul Național Retezat, Țara Hațegului, "Poveștile Măcinului" localized in Parcul Național Muntii Macinului, "12 Apostles" localized in Parcul Național Călimani, "Forest stories" localized Parcul Național Defileul Jiului.

Also Romanian Ecotourism Association has certificated a number of products: namely, hostels and tour operators specialized in activities such as the riding, mountain biking, canoeing, photo tour, hiking tour, forest tourism, etc.

For the younger generation, there are organized in our country since 2004 camps of "junior ranger". They are held in all the major national parks in the world and are aimed at educating children on the protection and conservation of nature and winning of strong future allies in this area. [11].

**The literature describes the concept of "Nature Tourism"**, often referred to as Ecotourism, was introduced to the tourist industry in the early 1980s. Ecotourism was initially connected with outdoor travel to remote, unique, and/or scenic areas. Though early Ecotourism involved an educational aspect, this was not a crucial or required element to the industry or the consumer. However, as the demand for Ecotourism has increased, the inclusion of educational elements has become increasingly important.

Since its conception, Ecotourism has grown to include an entire methodology of planning, management, and economics. It is a robust and encompassing process that not only includes site information, but also considers the environment, conservation, education, equitable social benefits, and community responsibility. [12]

Nature Tourism includes several major principles:

1. Education about the area
2. Sustainable use of resources, and avoidance of degradation
3. Enhancement of local community and assistance in development
4. Respect for cultural/social/political aspects of local people
5. Profit for tourism industry

Both forests and tourism are relevant issues from an environmental perspective. Tourism is sometimes argued to be the last possibility for nature protection. More special attention has been recently paid to negative environmental aspects of tourism. In principle, there is a potential for the co-development of tourism and forests: forests could absorb more tourism by increased recreational provision, and tourism could

benefit forest owners by providing direct income that can be used for supporting sustainable forest management [12]

## Conclusions

Offer of ecotourism and nature tourism in Romania [10]

In Romania, the first ecotourism programs began to appear around year 2000, initiated by several National and Natural Parks (Retezat National Park, Vânători Neamț), recipient of a GEF grant and the nature conservation projects had a component of ecotourism: the Carpathian Large Carnivore project (Zărnești) who developed programs focused on bears, wolves, lynx and local traditions related to them or the "combined actions for the protection and enhancement of natural heritage in the Apuseni Mountains", implemented by Romanian Federation of Speleology, which has developed programs focused on caves and karst ecotourism in general and local traditions.

Currently ecotourism programs in Romania focus on the following areas:

- Delta Dunării and Dobrogea (bird watching, boating);
- National Park Piatra Craiului and surroundings (especially programs based on observation of large carnivores: wolf, bear, lynx, and the specific plant species, equestrian tourism, bike, snowshoe walking, etc);
- Carpathians (many protected areas, some national park status or natural) with programs focused on: equestrian tourism, cycling, hiking thematic skiing, snowshoe walking, etc);
- Apuseni Mountains (Apuseni Natural Park, conservation areas, speleological, geological and mixed): speleology, thematic trekking, cultural, skiing, equestrian tourism, bicycles, etc);
- Transylvania (Székely and Saxon culture discovery, horseback riding, hiking theme, etc.)
- Maramureș (cultural programs discovering nature: fauna and flora, traditional occupations, architecture, horse riding, cycling, etc);
- Bucovina (cultural tourism and monastery, combined with the observation of nature: flora and fauna, thematic hiking, etc.)

Moreover forest- based tourism is a growing land-use activity and an important economic sector that involves a variety of different types of entrepreneurs, many of which are relatively small, located in rural regions, and might only work part-time in tourism combined with agriculture, forestry or other rural means of livelihood. Many of these businesses are challenged by seasonality in tourism demand and the use of natural areas for tourism and recreation purposes might conflict with other natural resource uses. Even with the complex and

valuable role recreation and tourism plays in forest management, it is somewhat rare to find the benefits of forest-based recreation and tourism specifically addressed in forest strategies or management plans. Over the last half century, social science researchers have made great strides to better understand how to provide opportunities to attain the wealth of personal, social, economic, and environmental benefits available through the use of forests for recreation and tourism.

Forest tourism is part of the sustainable management of forests, which is part of the current trend of "green economy", that is safe and sustainable development of the economy today.

## References

1. Blaj Robert, 2013, Biodiversitatea vegetală și animală din ecosistemul forestier Miercurea Sibiului, în relație cu bioproducțiile acestuia și principiile bioeconomice și ecoeconomice în scopul realizării sănătății integrate a mediului, în contextul eco-bio-sanogenezei. Lucrare de finalizare a Școlii Postdoctorale, Institutul de cercetări Sico-economice "Constantin Kirițescu", Academia Română, București.
2. Milică Constantin, Roman Carmen Nicoleta, Troia Daniela Stela, 2013, Armoterapia și cromoterapia din pădurile de conifere în combaterea afecțiunilor pulmonare și ale sistemului nervos. Lucrare publicată în volumul clei de-a XV-ediiții a Conferinței Internaționale "Turismul rural românesc în contextual dezvoltării durabile. Actualitate și perspective", vol. XXX, pag. 49-53, Vatra-Dornei, Editura Tehnopress Iași.
3. Florescu Ion. Nicolescu Norocel, 1996, Silvicultura volII. Studiul pădurii, Editura Lux Libris, Brașov.
4. Stanciu Mirela, 2009, "The role of ecotourism in sustainable rural development", Scientific Papers, seria D, vol. LII Animal Science, The 38th International Session of Scientific Communications of the Faculty of Animal Science, Bucharest, Romania, Total Publishing, 2009, pp. 323-328;
5. [http://www.ecoloc.ro/articol/Importanta-padurilor]
6. http://www.eco-romania.ro/ro/ecoturism
7. http://bsc.smebg.net/ecotourguide/ro/resources
8. www.ecotourism-network.eu
9. http://www.eco-romania.ro/ro/sistemul-de-certificare/
10. [http://www.fpdI.ro/public/pdfs/ecoturism.pdf]
11. http://ranger.ro/junior.html
12. Font Xavier, Tribe John, 2000, Forest tourism and recreation. Case Studies in Environmental Management.
13. http://bookshop.cabi.org/Uploads/Books/PDF/9780851994147/9780851994147.pdf
14. http://naturetourism.allegheeny.edu