

PREMISES FOR A QUALITY TOURISM IN MEHEDINTI COUNTY

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Abstract: *The tourism, social phenomenon, is a growing market, including in Romania. The tourism overdevelopment represents a danger and also a world reality. Among the solutions given to this danger we can mention the increase in quality of the tourism and the ecotourism. The ecotourism provides direct benefits for preserving, rises the livelihood quality of the local communities and preserves the local traditions. The Iron Gates Natural Park represents an area propitious to the ecotourism implementation and development, which makes the subject of different programs and projects financed by the EU. Such a project is “Ecological Education through Recreation – Ecotourism in The Iron Gates Natural Park”.*

KEY WORDS: *quality, tourism, development, ecotourism, sustainable.*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: *L8.*

The tourism is a social phenomenon which is more and more imposing upon peoples' life, acquiring a world aspect especially in the last decades.

Tourism is a growing market, including in Romania. This makes room for all, but only the best are desired.

The difference is given by the unique relief forms, type of tourism practiced by the people, sustainable exploitation of the natural and anthropic environment, and especially by the attitude, awareness, ability to listen and solve the most relevant wishes of the guest. Therefore, the difference lies in quality.

Two elements are essential in the tourism industry system (Mazilu, 2011): product quality and human resources.

Tourism product has unique content, consisting in goods and services, tangible and intangible elements.

The tangible elements of the tourism product include: hotel, restaurant, transportation, food and drink, craft etc.

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The intangible elements of a tourism product include: mood and ambience, methods of setting the table, leisure and entertainment (Scriosteanu, 2012).

Regarding the tourism services, the diversity and quality of services are several sine qua non conditions of a real competition and, consequently, they represent the fundamental issues with which the touristic industry, in general, and the reception international tourism, in particular shall have to cope with.

Therefore, the *services* performed to the clients present two major components: a *quantitative component* with mostly material character that may be an objective assessment and a *qualitative component* which is not objective (but a subjective one) being able to acquire a dominant role.

Or, the essential *criteria* for assessing the touristic services quality implicitly become certain *elements* that result in the content and satisfaction of the tourist: the personnel – tourist relationship; the behaviour and the attitude of the touristic services performer staff ; the personnel's action and reaction manner; the skills related to the „quality services” which the touristic staff has to have etc.

In order to improve and develop the quality of the Romanian touristic services, according to the EU requirements, the following measures have to be observed: the promotion of the positive experience and the good practices; promotion of a certain „culture” of the touristic services; definition of the quality per product / personnel / touristic agency / company principle etc.; the financial motivation of the personnel involved in tourism in order to achieve the position seniority (for avoiding their migration towards any other third markets).

The quality applies to all the touristic performances (from transportation to accommodation, and any type of services) designed for the tourist (the quality, including also the environmental quality of a touristic destination) (Mazilu, 2007).

In terms of service firm managers, quality expresses the perfection (level of excellence) that a company decided to achieve and maintain to meet the preferences of the target customer. In this way, quality is the extent to which firms will be able to comply with this strategic objective of prime importance.

If a services company will act according to the concept "always facing the market", the target clientele will be that who, by its needs and expectations, will determine the quality level required for the company to remain competitive on the market.

By the liberalization of the international trade of value, internationalization and globalization of trade and tourism development, the quality standards always rise.

The continuous trend towards getting an extra quality (Snak, et al., 2002) is also reflected in the prices at which services are provided. Managers of service firms should be aware that, at an equal price, customers will choose the tourist unit which provides better quality services, and at equal quality customers will prefer the services that are even cheaper.

When a client assesses the quality of a service he received, he does not dissociate its different components. For a client it is important the overall impression and not the relative success to "this or that" action part of the services received. Usually, and this is what is worse, the customer tends to stop at that detail of the process that benefit of the worst quality: hence the tendency to generalize a minor

deficiency over the entire set of service he benefited. So, it is essential to ensure the highest possible uniformity among the components of the service. The offer, must be considered as a whole, overall; therefore it appears that, in terms of service, the *quality is total or not at all*.

Also, the environment must be considered when practicing quality tourism. So, *the environmental protection and the long-lasting development* shall condition the development of tourism and shall become a major imperative that is to provide the reliability of any touristic equipment.

Or, the development of the tourism can be durable by observing the principles of a long-lasting tourism: *the ecological durability* (that assumes the assurance of the compatibility relationship between the development and the exploitation of the natural resources, including here the respect of the biological diversity); *the social and cultural durability* (which is based upon the development and protection of the cultural identity); *the economic durability* – obtained in the development process of the society, applying a rigorous management of the human resources by achieving the present and future economic benefits.

The durable tourism shall compulsorily imply the following: the civic responsibility; supported respect and arrangement towards the environment preservation; the integration of the local population in any activity or touristic development.

The products of the durable tourism are those products which are operated in a close harmony with the environment, the community and the local cultures so that they become the beneficiary and not the victims of the touristic development.

There is a series of factors that can be regarded as “determinant” factors and which can decide upon the right direction of the tourism industry towards a long-lasting approach: *the raise of the public’s awareness regarding the costs-saving* by the decrease of the consumption of several vulnerable natural resources; *the awareness by the governments and operators* regarding the fact that the tourism development can have a negative impact upon the natural environment; *the awareness regarding an ecological, responsible and long-lasting behaviour* designed for the tourists and for the potential tourists; *the quality of the natural environment* becomes a sine-qua-non condition for a long-lasting, durable tourism; *increase of the awareness level of the local communities* with a view to their potential to influence the policies in the touristic fields, environmental protection, etc.

Therefore, there have been used the concept of *Eco-labelling* which is applied to all the accommodation facilities as a real modality to amplify the respect for the environment (the raw material for tourism) which benefited of a special attention from EU, being regulated by The Decision of the European Community dated April 14th 2003, regarding „the set-up of the ecological criteria for awarding the eco-label of the touristic accommodation facilities in the EU community (2003/287/EC).

The tourism being characterized by a wide complexity and its development getting special proportions, its impetuous growth increased the forms as well as the types of tourism services.

While the range of the Mehedinti County tourism is large, there are many very attractive and requested touristic sub-segments, such as: archaeology, architecture, art,

churches tours, hydro-technical museum, festivals and folk events and holidays and even pilgrimages. It is easy to identify these sub-segments on the map of the Mehedinți county tourism as “potentially” exploitable!

Also, as a result to the danger generated by the tourism overdevelopment, in the last decades of the XXIst century, the *ecotourism* expanded. The notion of ecotourism has different senses (tourism in nature, green tourism, ecological tourism) depending on the regarded strategies of the countries and multinational companies; on their purpose, economic or environment priorities, education and tourists preparation. During the time many definitions for ecotourism have been recorded such as from Hector Ceballas Lascurain (1983), Cater Erlet, Valentine P. (1991), Figgis (1992), Pearce D., Buttler R.W., Steele (1993), International Society of Ecotourism (1991), International Union for Conserving the Nature (IUCN) (1996).

No matter what definition is adopted, it may be concluded that the ecotourism is a form of a touristic alternative which is based on the durable tourism promotion, that consists in the travel of individuals especially in the attractive natural areas in order to relax, learn, inform themselves with no losses or devastation upon the environment quality, bringing benefits to the local communities and whole humanity.

So, the ecotourism is a responsible travel in nature congruent to the process of preservation and protection. In fact it is an activity axed more on protection than exploitation of the natural resources which presumes the impacts minimization and the travel of the tourists in natural areas; it provides direct benefits for preserving, rises the livelihood quality of the local communities and preserves the local traditions.

Therefore, the ecotourism is an important form of tourism and a way of economic growth that Romania must not ignore.

Respecting the ecotourism resources, very important are the natural and anthropic ones.

Concerning the South – West Region of Romania, this is suitable for ecotourism due to its high number of agrotouristic hostels and pensions, less known but well preserved traditions and the existence of the *Iron Gates Natural Park*.

A natural park is a protected area whose main purpose is the protection and preservation of the landscapes created through long-time interaction between man and nature. (Law no. 462/2001).

Beginning with the 90's, the Iron Gates Natural Park was cited in many legislative acts but its legal status was conferred only in 2000 according to the Law no. 5. Natural Park's delimitation and Administrative structure were established by the Government Decision no. 230/2003.

The Iron Gates Natural Park has a total area of 115 655 ha. It crosses the Caraș-Severin and Mehedinți county border. The Natural Park limits are represented by the Danube's valley to the South, the river Nera to the West, the Danube's tributaries watershed limits to the North and a winding line from downstream Gura Văii to the Motărăț Peak to the East.

The highlights of the Iron Gates Natural Park are enough reasons to tourism development in this region:

- Danube Gorges – Europe's longest defile (134 km)
- Romania's largest Natural Park (115 655 ha)

- Romania's largest Hydropower Plant and Reservoir (Iron Gates I Hydropower and Navigation System)
- richest ethnic diversity in a Romanian protected area
- a true open-air geological museum
- rich biological diversity – over 1600 superior plants
- high diversity of vegetal associations – in the Natural Park area 171 vegetation associations were identified, of which 26 are endemic for Romania and 21 have communitarian interest
- wetland areas host a high diversity of aquatic birds
- remains of Paleolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic human settlements – historical evidences of human habitation: fortress, monasteries, churches
- buildings with high historical and architectural value, water mills with an unique grinding mechanism

Thence, the Iron Gates Natural Park's tourism potential is extremely high. The main attractions are the spectacular landscapes and cultural, archaeological and architectural objectives. Also, the Iron Gates Natural Park offers a great deal of activities that can be conducted throughout the year such as: backpacking, hiking and trekking (marked touristic routes along the Czech Rout that unifies all the Czech villages in the Iron Gates Natural Park); Danube cruises leaving from Orșova harbor; scientific tourism for both protected species and habitats; speology in the Park limestone areas such as the Danube Gorges, Coronini-Moldova Nouă-Gârnic, Sirinia; bird watching in the wetlands from the western part of the Park; fishing (crap, pike perch, starlet, trout, barbell); traditional festivities and holidays (minorities festivals, religious holidays); traditional cooking (such as fish and goat meat specialties, milk based products, vegetables, sweets); water sports on the Danube (such as kayak-canoe, ski-jet); mountain-bike and cycling; cross country skiing along the forestry roads; visiting cultural objectives (such as archaeological, religious sites); visiting water mills (on the Eliseva, Povalina, Camenița valleys); visiting museums and private collections (such as the ethnographic and religious museums and collections); visiting the Czech and Serb villages.

With such a potential, the Iron Gates Natural Park in order to develop the economic level of its local communities on the bases of developing a sustainable tourism, was in the past and still could be in the future the subject of different programs and projects financed by the European Community.

The necessities and coercion perceived in the area could be the reason to start programs to develop a sustainable tourism:

Necessities:

- the necessity of national and even international recognition of the landscapes and cultural values from the Iron Gates Natural Park;
- the necessity of arranging some integrated touristic routes;
- the necessity of informing and awakening the public opinion upon the touristic objectives from the Iron Gates Natural Park.

Coercion:

- the existence of a uncontrolled tourism;
- the lack of the informing materials about Romania border area.

The program priorities could be: the development of the ecotourism in the border areas, of cultural cooperation between the communities in the Iron Gates – Djerdap border area, tourism growth due to facilitation of the ecotourism achieving conditions in the Romania border area.

The target groups to focus on in the programs are: local authorities, young locals, representatives of small business entrepreneurs and the direct beneficiaries are: the (young) locals, Romanian and foreign tourists, representatives of small business entrepreneurs; and the indirect beneficiaries: the Romanian and foreign tourists, the entire community.

The programs for the tourism development are important to the target groups because the young people involved into the projects' activities would realize the special importance of the border area and spread the knowledge of environment education into different social mediums, developing their feelings of local proud. Also the Romanian and foreign tourists would enjoy an ecotourism at European standards in the Iron Gates Natural Park. The small business entrepreneurs would develop economic traditional activities protecting the landscape and cultural values in the Romania border area. The local authorities would support the social-economic growth in the areas fit for ecotourism.

Concerning the objectives of such tourism developing projects, those could be:
(1) the identification of the natural and cultural patrimony in the Iron Gates Natural Park;
(2) arrangement of integrated touristic routes;
(3) informing and awakening the public opinion upon the natural and cultural touristic objectives from the Iron Gates Natural Park.

In order to achieve the proposed objectives, a wide scale of activities specific to each objective is necessary.

For *the identification of the natural and cultural patrimony in the Iron Gates Natural Park*, the main activities regard:

- the inventory of the cultural and natural touristic objectives (field trips, research in archives, library etc.)
- the accomplishment of a data base regarding the cultural and natural touristic objectives
- the identification of the traditional activities specific to the Iron Gates Natural Park
- identification of touristic routes
- identification of the land owners
- the accomplishment of a local workshop in order to obtain the agreement concerning the ecotouristic arrangements.

Concerning *the arrangement of integrated touristic routes*, the main activities are:

- marking the ecotouristic routes;
- cleaning the ecotouristic routes;
- arranging a centre to rent touristic equipment.

Informing and awakening the public opinion upon the natural and cultural touristic objectives from the Iron Gates Natural Park could be accomplished by:

- informative brochures, posters, flyers containing useful information about medical plants which can be picked from the area of the park, about the plants with therapeutically effect used as first-aid in case of accidents, about the plants for obtaining vegetal dyes used in the traditional technique of painting, about the natural and cultural touristic objectives that could be visited, the fenologic calendar, the ecotouristic routes from the Iron Gates Natural Park, the calendar of the traditional holidays from the area comprised in The Iron Gates Natural Park; materials placed in travel agencies, museums, existing park's centres of documentation and information, touristic pensions, hotels, restaurants, railway stations, custom house, airports, schools, universities in Romania and abroad;
- maps with the ecotouristic routes from the Iron Gates Natural Park;
- website with information about ecotourism in the Iron Gates Natural Park;
- a touristic information centre;
- information panels to be placed on the extremes of the ecotouristic routes: big signal panels containing brief information about the Iron Gates touristic area and small signal panels for the ecotouristic routes, with the required time for each route;
- centres to rent touristic equipment.

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