



Strategic Planning of Ecotourism in Europe and the Development of its Products in Europe

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Abstract *The idea of ecotourism first materialised mainly by travels to other continents, while in Europe its success relied on specialised products and categories of travellers. Tourism in rural areas displayed very high rates of growth. The promotion of ecotourism should be integrated within the framework the instruments for sustainable development, such as are soil utilization, mobility plans and the economic and social planning at the regional and local level. The higher expectations in terms of quality of life and consumption, leisure time, agrifood liberalization and competition of the urban destinations, form a true field to be explored by the sustainable rural ecotourism.*

Key words:

Ecotourism, strategic planning, development, Europe, mountain areas, sustainable development

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1. Introduction

The state intervenes by its instruments thus making a substantial contribution. Such example regards the investments in the public patrimony for the protection of the landscapes threatened by degradation, by the establishment of facilities that will make the visitors of those areas true ecotourists. The state must play an important role in the management of the constraints that act on the environment due the increased demand for transportation, which endangers the ecosystems from the mountain areas, particularly those from valleys and depressions, where the intensity of the traffic may hamper the touristic activities.

Ecotourism can become a complementary activity for the existing, very much frequented touristic destinations. Additional investments have to be made in these critical areas to protect the natural environment and to alleviate the pressure on the natural landscape. In the field of policy, the application of the successful sustainable ecotourism solutions depends on the existence of the ecotouristic and ecological superstructures at the national and intergovernmental level. The local authorities must guarantee better the enforcement of the specific measures by the democratic involvement of the stakeholders.

2. Ecotourism in the European mountain areas: framework for the strategic sustainable development

Between UN institutions there is consensus regarding the definition of ecotourism and of its activities related to the International Association for Ecotourism within the broader framework of the development of tourism relying on five major strategic motivations:

- Sustainable exploitation of the biodiversity and of the natural resources;
- Reduction, as much as possible, the environmental impact and the impact on the socio-economic environment, particularly in terms of climate change, energy consumption and traditional cultures;
- Autonomization and participation in full awareness of the local actors, particularly of the local communities and of the autochthonous people;
- Awareness-rising and ecological education of all the actors, particularly of the travellers and of their hosts;
- Securing sustainable economic advantages for all economic actors.

Although the term “ecotourism” and the expression “sustainable development” don’t have the same meaning, the specialists consider that any form of tourism must be developed at the ecologic, social and economic level. On the basis of these facts, ecotourism can become an efficient instrument for the valorisation of the sustainable tourism in any country that has a wealth of natural capital and biodiversity.

Even if an ever increasing number of visitors and travellers use the services of various providers of sustainable ecotourism and try to limit the adverse social effects, the market share of the ecotourism is still very low.

The demand for leisure time that observes primordially the environment, the nature preserves, among other, the transfer and the exchange of knowledge. Europe can contribute to this activity because the composing elements of the sustainable ecotourism are linked directly to the numerous forms of tourism focusing on the natural environment or on rural tourism.

The particular attraction of the European ecotourism relies on the direct link with the natural environment and with the culture, joined by the sustainable agriculture. The European natural landscape which we can find in national parks, in natural reservations and in protected areas is administered by humans, which explains why ecotourism in Europe is linked to the rural tourism. In the natural environment, culture and the local populations are always part of the landscape. Just like the agricultural production patterns change in time due to the subsidies that help the European farmers to be competitive, the need for complementary resources aroused the interest of the urban visitors for the areas of economic decline.

On the other hand, the association of reputation and knowledge of the various categories of visitors with the purpose to add value, and the use of destination circuits became the main elements of any sustainable touristic policy. The success of the systems of room reservation in farms is directly linked to ecotourism.

As most of these regions are inhabited by different social groups, Europe also has a rich experience with the participation of some actors to the planning of soil utilization and landscape arrangement. Furthermore, the notion of "equitable tourism" in terms of economic and social activities is better understood by the European tourism actors than by the other worldwide tourism actors. Actually, the first criticism of the adverse effects of the tourism on the society and the natural environment appeared in Europe in the 1970 years. At the proposal of most potential outbound tourists the natural and rural areas of Europe became spots of touristic attraction.

This fact increases the number of the independent ecotourists who travel frequently and who thus support the existence of the value added destination chains. Ecotourism becomes thus an extremely discussed and important concept within the current European context. 80% of the 250 natural sites of UNESCO world patrimony are exploited below their loading capacity. Most ecotourists display an ambiguous attitude towards the protection of the natural environment and an

equivocal position towards the risks and lack of comfort, which they are willingly accept during their vacation.

Within the European context, ecotourism is regarded as a form of tourism which is not limited just to the protected areas. Ecotourism aims to reduce to a minimum the adverse effects of the tourism on the culture and natural environment. The ecotouristic activities focus on the interest of the travellers for nature and culture.

The European mountain areas are often peripheral areas characterized by agricultural and forestry activities and whose social equilibrium is often endangered by the increasing proportion of old people because the young people are leaving for urban areas.

The sustainable ecotourism can provide a true solution for the social and economic efficientization of the mountain areas given the structural changes implied by the increasing urban areas and rural depopulation. Ecotourism can contribute to the protection of the crop landscapes, may add value for the population by the protection of the natural and cultivated areas.

3. Landscape and agriculture – sine qua non condition for sustainable ecotourism

The whole world acknowledges the ecological and socio-economic importance of the mountain areas. The mountains are the source of 80% of the surface water worldwide. There is a great variety of ecosystems and areas that supply raw materials or which are used for a variety of crops adapted to the local environments which sometimes are extreme.

The attraction of the mountain landscapes beauty resides in the wealth of the panoramas, of nature and of cultures. The recent decades showed the expansion of the protected areas and of the nature reservations worldwide.

The symbiosis between agriculture and tourism, which resulted in agro-tourism (holidays spent in farms), is a key element of the rural areas where ecological tourism is practiced, aware of the social responsibilities. The cultural elements of the mountain landscape represent a strong emotional motivation of the tourists.

4. Sustainable mobility – sine qua non condition for sustainable ecotourism

The sustainable mobility in tourism is an important contribution of the sustainability strategy throughout the European Union. Without sustainable mobility there would be no sustainable tourism. It has the role of potentiating the ecotourism and eco-mobility, to boost the offers and to produce innovative and attractive services that may be marketed successfully on the tourism market. The goal of this action is to make earnings at all levels: ecologic, economic and acceptance by the society.

The sustainable mobility from tourism contributes to a higher quality of the life and of the environment and to a lesser environmental impact of the tourist travels.

The sustainable mobility is possible in tourism and its principles require the sustainable development of the circulation for spending leisure time, transportation policies, internationalization of ecotourism and the application of these principles in order to reduce the traffic and pollution. The basic rules can be found in the EU strategy for integration in the field of the natural environment.

In tourism, the sustainable mobility presumes the application of several strategies, such as:

- Encouragement of the market for ecotourism;
- Improvement of the public transportation in the areas where holiday-makers go;
- Establishment of the convivial system of travelling goodwill using new IT technologies;
- Maintenance of the vehicles with internal combustion within the urban perimeter, or of the large areas used to spend leisure time (except for specific cases);
- Approach the public relations and the marketing relations.

These principles yielded the need to give priority to the public transportation, avoiding plane flights on small distances, which would make the holiday longer (longer and less frequent vacations, contrary to the trends of the recent years).

The application of the principles of sustainable mobility in tourism allows a real economic development and the introduction of high quality touristic products on the tourism market. The technologized networks enable disseminating the idea that the sustainable mobility in tourism facilitates cooperation and the exchange of experience.

5. Exigencies which the strategic partners must consider in ecotourism

As we have seen, the sine qua non strategic actions specific to the sustainable ecotourism involve a strong and active involvement of all the stakeholders, from visitors and ecotourists to national and intergovernmental institutions. They have to be started carefully because they presume observing several categories of exigencies:

- General exigencies;
- Exigencies specific to tourism policies
- Exigencies specific to the destinations and tourism strategic planning
- Exigencies specific to the visitors
- Exigencies specific to the local population.

Among the general exigencies are:

- Ecotourism needs practical and efficient systems of coordination between the stakeholders (the state, the

private enterprises, the non-governmental organisations, universities and local communities);

- The public sector organisations and the non-governmental organisations or other socio-economic actors involved in environmental activities, as well as the collective services must cooperate within an organisation which regulates and monitors the touristic activities;

- Education and professional training are sine qua non conditions for the sustainable strategic development and management of ecotourism. The managers and employees of the enterprises, and the local population need proper and specific professional training which to include both general and particular aspects of the services they provide to the visitors. Ecotourism needs proper guidebooks (ideally, showing the local specificity too). The accessibility, duration and quality of the professional training are decisive strategic factors for the success of the due activities;

- The international cooperation of the strategic partners (tourist operators, transporters, travellers, contractual and environmental rights defending organisations) is very important for the successful application of the principles of a sustainable mobility in ecotourism. The tourist destinations should cooperate directly with the countries of origin of the tourists and with the transporters (particularly by railway and bus) in order to develop strategic principles of tariffs that are attractive for the packages of services to be marketed. The transnational cooperation such as the Alps Mobility is a good example to be followed.

Among the exigencies specific to tourism policies are:

- Ecotourism involves policies, strategies and programs adapted to the specificity of each country, region or area. These can be achieved only by cooperation, which ensures the strategic-active permissibility without any adverse effects;
- The successful application of the measures of sustainability and mobility in tourism depends much on the coordination of activities and of the parallel measures from other sectors: territorial arrangement, development of leisure spots far away from urban centres with the purpose to avoid the following situations:
 - Increased density of the high quality networks and equipment for cyclists, shopping, horse travel, busses, cabs;
 - Rearrangement of the streets and restrict the circulation of cars, using little polluting of unpolluting transportation means, management of merchandise mobility or traveller logistics, all this with the purpose to protect the environment;
- In the field of the sustainable mobility, the strategic plans of activity are developed and applied by the

integration of the inhabitants and of the socio-economic actors of the tourism;

- Improvement of the services of railway transportation is an important factor in support of the public transportation and deterring of the air transportation at the national and EU level;

Among the exigencies specific to the destinations and tourism strategic planning are:

- Ecotourism must contribute to the protection and arrangement of the natural areas and to the sustainable development of the neighbouring areas and of their communities;

- The sustainable mobility must configure vacation destinations using solutions specific to each individual location;

- The strategic planning of tourism must not be limited to this vector only; it has to be part of a general development plan of the communities and their objectives. The strategic planning must be global, must include the priorities, values and knowledge of the local communities and they must be followed by monitoring and evaluation activities. The local social structures, particularly the groups of women, must be drawn in this thrive for efficacy and efficiency;

- The strategic planning of sustainable tourism should include delimitation criteria by the establishment of reservations in areas of poor and medium impact. These criteria should be applied and observed rigorously by all stakeholders;

- The identification and establishment of exchange circuits in different admission points are efficient means of information and of tourism facilitation, tourist education and utilization of the different leisure areas;

- It is possible to combine the relevant environmental and cultural heritage centres (thematic routes). The training programs and the professional guidebooks are essential for the control of visitors, thus aiming to alleviate the possible adverse effects of the tourism;

- The cross-border projects can become efficient means to protect the ecosystems stretching on the territory of several countries. In these areas one must encourage the community management of the tourism, even if there are constraints regarding the infrastructure, history, political reticence, which must be overcome in order to allow crossing the borders;

- The implementation of the principle of sustainable mobility involves encouraging the use of non-polluting (electric) vehicles up to the destination, while the streets must be rearranged so that they become less dangerous for the pedestrians and cyclists. The speed of vehicle circulation must be adapted to the speed of pedestrians. The bicycles should become an important means of transportation for the visitors. This presumes parking lots and special tracks. Other forms of movement, such as using the animal power (horses or

dogs) should be encouraged. The frequency of visitor passage should be monitored in order to avoid the adverse effects on the traditional culture and natural environment.

6. Conclusions

The strategic planning of ecotourism has multiple benefits, economic and social, because it drives in its domain of activity towards a continuous regional, sectorial and local development of the political decision-making and social factors, the economic agents and the mere citizens.

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