

ASSESSING AWARENESS OF ECOTOURISM VALENCES IN ROMANIA

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The study aims to evaluate the degree of understanding and knowledge of the concept of ecotourism among potential tourists from Romania in order to identify methods and strategies popular among the population of the benefits of this form of tourism. So, we are first outlined the main features of tourism which are then used in the questionnaires distributed in the population sample chosen. We are tracked as follows: the difference between ecotourism and other forms of tourism undertaken at national level, evaluation of eco-touristic potential of Romania, identification of preferences of tourists etc. Observations made on basis this study shows that in Romania, eco-tourism is practiced by very few people, and those who practice it have often deformed perception of this form of tourism. Thus, to promote tourism, both as a separate activity and as activity in other forms of tourism, special measures are necessary and awareness such as: arranging internships special to popularization of tourism benefits, the development of strategies for the presentation of tourism in Romania, specialized training of staff in organizing and conducting ecotourism.

Key words: *ecotourism, tourism potential, awareness of eco-tourism, environmental protection*

Geographical aspects of Romania provide optimal performance of tourism in all periods and all regions. On the other hand, the importance of the sector to the national economy is very large and widely recognized. The large number of tourists and tourism-intensive nature of activities can adversely affect the environment and quality of leisure. We must combine the tourism with recreational activities and educational rehabilitation of the environment so as to result a double effect: knowledge and environmental protection.

Analysts of ecotourism phenomenon are mainly concerned of how to organize tours and popularize this form of tourism. However, we didn't have to forget the novel and particularly of ecotourism. Perception about this form of tourism among the population is missing and when there, it is often wrong, the tourists being surprised by different aspects involved by the deployment of this kind of tourism program. Thus, it ignored the restrictive nature of the number of tourists per unit area, particularly in protected natural areas, is not known about the educational component of ecotourism etc. We believe that to fully meet the challenges of ecotourism and to exclude many of misunderstanding about it, it is necessary to assess the awareness of population and its expectations, following as,

using the basis of information obtained for different populations, to interfere with strategic popularization and information programs that may prove to be extremely effective both in terms of attracting tourists and in terms of laying the foundations of a quality ecotourism, which is in agreement with limits and restrictions that customize it.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Bibliographic exploration of behaviour of tourists and their level of understanding regarding knowledge of the characteristics of ecotourism is the first step in the analysis. First we used the theoretical approach to the issues to be known: the defining characteristics of ecotourism, age of groups who prefer such programs, the criteria to be met regarding in the organization of tourism facilities, necessary infrastructure, etc. Depending on observations made in this regard we proceed to highlight the main elements that should be known by tourists and on that basis we made an analysis of the extent to which tourists know them and recognize them in an ecotourism product. Second, we used the findings of a study using a questionnaire distributed to a total of 160 people in North-East of Romania in November 2008 to highlight issues of interest requiring further approach in the expert studies and practical actions. The questions were grouped into three parts: the respondents 'situation, their sensitivity to issues of ecotourism and awareness of it, if respondents have basic knowledge in this field.

The conclusions thus obtained are the result of theoretical and practical research, which ultimately provides a set of knowledge that could be used both in further studies and by practitioners in organizing programs and activities of national ecotourism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Although practiced since ancient times as a independently tourism or as a component of another type of tourism, ecotourism or green tourism has been defined in the scientific sense at the end of the twentieth century, when it reported its importance and its particular character. In 1988, in the meeting in Belize Program initiated by Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area, one of the first definitions given in the literature said: "Ecotourism is a form of tourism with low environmental impact, in which shall be filed a conscious effort to reinvest an appropriate share of revenue for resources conservation based on".

In fact it is estimated that tourism must fit harmoniously into conservation projects and restoration of natural areas, local community income is needed just to cover the costs of environmental protection and organization of interest.

World Conservation Union indicates that ecotourism is held a responsible tourism in natural areas unpolluted providing active socioeconomic involvement and benefit to the local population.

The reliability of ecotourism is shown in several studies and scientific papers, and it was often to be known as responsible tourism. Responsibility is one that should generate a different type of behaviour in terms of the same potential, particularly natural. But to have such behaviour is necessary for tourists to know and understand the importance and how to preserve natural resources. Otherwise

must be presented that are elements of interest in travel and which must be their conduct during the stay in a natural area. In fact, the educational activity is an important category of the ecotourism activities.

Basic ecotourism activities consist of exploratory nature and recreational activities through the tourist has the opportunity to know and observe the natural aspects covered by ecotourism program. In this category we include following activities: watching wildlife (bird watching or wildlife watching), thematic hiking, horseback riding or cycling in natural places, visiting caves and other special geological formations.

The diversity of these activities requires, however, particularly in terms of non-specialized tourists, an assistance of guides who have the task of developing the other important component of ecotourism activities namely education. Using their provided information is possible to initiate a comprehensive ecotourism. The level and intensity of transmission of information are highly dependent on tourist profile, but the degree to which he has knowledge about the ecotourism particularity.

Generally, it is estimated that the eco-tourists belong to the category of persons aged 30 and 59, regardless of gender, middle income to high and higher educational level (over 80% college graduates) (WTO 2002). They are very often supporters or members of organizations or environmental-oriented associations, which means that they are at least familiar with the terms of the natural approach. Also, a very large proportion of them are readers of publications that cover the nature and outdoor activities (as HLA and ARA Consulting - Ecotourism - Nature / Adventure / Culture: Alberta and British Columbia Market Demand Assessment, 1995).

Regarding pre-deployment program information, tourists have a great trust in information obtained from others who had access to natural resources like ecotourism customers, but also in their experiences gained in some previous trips. Modern means of information, such as the Internet, often replace the sources listed above, especially to the new tourists, providing essential knowledge on what is ecotourism and which offers various areas.

In many cases, eco-tourism option is on tourists are looking for new, the originality. The particular character of such areas requires knowledge and information both prior to and during the journey. It is noted that this may cause distorted image in the understanding of ecotourism. People who belong to other forms of tourism believes that simply choosing the destination of such sites represent an ecotourism program, making often ignore such activities as:

- action of the natural environment and biodiversity conservation;
- activities of interest to minimize environmental impact;
- limit over-exploitation of resources of interest;
- increase responsibility to the natural environment through information and knowledge;
- achieving accommodation in small locations (hostels, chalets, camping) with low impact on environment.

Ecotourism and environmental associations and organizations are proposing, among other objectives, raising awareness in the know, preserve and rehabilitate the natural state. Their members are those who explain the importance of preserving future values, among the uninitiated in environmental issues, and they have a strong influence contributing to the delineation of personal views of individuals, regarding: state of the environment, exploration possibility of nature by less invasive practices (including ecotourism), related issues of public oversight and protection of natural environment etc.

To assess the extent to which ecotourism is perceived among the population of North-Eastern region of Romania, we show the results of an investigation on a sample of 160 people.

There are points of interest in research three aspects, namely: respondent position, sensitivity to issues of eco-tourism and awareness of it, if respondents have basic knowledge in this domain. As the situation the respondent, emerged the following conclusions:

- of the respondents, 54% were male and 46% women, this structure proceeding chance of the survey, there are no any strategy of choice of respondents by gender;
- in terms of age distribution shows a relatively uniform, especially with regard to age groups up to 65 years, which gives a balanced approach of the survey results that point of view: 19% to 29 years; 27% between 30 and 40 years, 20% between 41 and 55 years, 30% between 56 and 65 years and 4% for those over 65 years;
- regarding on study, noted a rate of over 45% of people with higher education;
- in terms of income declared, are the predominant people with a monthly income between 1000 and 1500 lei (21%) and those with income between 2000 and 2500 lei (35%) so in general, middle-income to high;
- percentage of respondents who are or were married (divorced or widow) is 66%, and 72% of all them said they had children.

Based on this structure of respondents who answered the questions “Are you concerned about the state of the environment?”, 90% of them declared themselves „concerned” on environmental health and 71% are passionate about ecotourism issues. The high proportion of those interested in environmental issues and ecotourism, has given us the possibility to analyse the answers to questions about awareness of the phenomenon of ecotourism.

The term ecotourism has been associated by interviewees with: Danube Delta, nature, ecology, a better life, health, relaxation, therapy, nature tourism, flora and fauna, ecological tourism, environmental protection, clean air, health, natural, green another kind of tourism, protection. There is a general tendency towards aspects of leisure. There are, however, and answers for characteristics of tourism curative (treatment, health, a better life). Although is an important component of ecotourism, cognitive activity, education and understanding of the

natural aspects was not included in the responses of those questioned. However, when they were faced with synonyms that you would find suitable for ecotourism, the order of responses was as follows: nature tourism, tourism-oriented on knowledge of nature, environmentally friendly tourism, tourism that promotes the principles of a return to ancient traditions, urban tourism and / or resort tourism, a tour dedicated to all peoples, including those with modest prices, a travel who involves visiting industrial or agricultural areas. The existence of responses that at that ecotourism is tourism in the city or resort tourism shows that some respondents do not fully understand the nature and characteristics of ecotourism.

The question of motivation ecotourism choice in preference to other forms of tourism, the responses were:

- for relaxation, 38% think that largely, 27% to some extent, the rest in a small or not at all;
- for fun and pleasure, 26% think that largely, 44% to some extent, the rest in a small or not at all;
- of habit, 16% think that largely, 33% to some extent, the rest in a small or not at all;
- for environmental actions, 30% think that largely, 36% to some extent, the rest in a small or not at all;
- to be in nature, 40% think that largely, 31% to some extent, the rest in a little or not at all.

These responses show a good degree of knowledge of ecotourism, favouring the motivations like “to be in nature” and “for environmental actions”.

Over 50% of respondents believe that in Romanian tourism there are still quality services, while 71% agree that the infrastructure is not sufficient from quantity and quality point of view related to the manifested needs.

The price is another important reason of discontent regarding access to national touristic programs: 26% are in total agreement and 43% partly agree with this. Linked to the issue price, 55% of respondents would be willing to give up the Romanian tourist program for a stranger one at same price but who give several advantages.

Although most respondents considered that are concerned with obtaining information through various media (written press, radio, television, Internet), their absence creates serious difficulties in fulfilling the function of awareness and tourists attraction in the ecotourism programs. Better information would lead to availability tourists to pay a medium cost (64%) to high cost (29%) in exchange for a quality stay, in line with the principles of ecotourism.

In current conditions, only 13% of respondents believe that the natural potential of North-Eastern area of Romania is well capitalized, considering that 47% is partially exploited and 40% that is untapped. Factors that lead to better use the potential in descending order of importance are: actions on environmental education, cost, customer service, infrastructure, information services and guide services.

After answering the questionnaire (even if some people are considered at least knowing the concept of ecotourism), 60% of respondents considered themselves more interested in the phenomenon of ecotourism in North-Eastern region of Romania than before.

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis and survey results lead to the conclusion that much of the tourists are interested in ecotourism trades, knowing of its basic principles. Under these circumstances, efforts to popularize eco-tourism should not be great. The perception is generally realistic, registering deficiencies particularly in understanding the cognitive nature of such activities. Adaptation efforts in relation to each class of age, social class or level of income may have effect of attractiveness for eco-tourists.

Survey shows a large heterogeneity of responses: from the completely unauthorized to precise answers which show a good documentary and a sustained interest for environmental issues.

Good information together with a great interest in environmental issues creates eco-quality conditions of tourism. Awareness of this field is still relatively brief, but the existence of modern information may lead to a correct image of the phenomenon of ecotourism.

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