

# **VOLUNTARY INTEGRATION OF ECOLABEL CONCEPT IN THE ENTREPRENEURIAL CULTURE OF GUESTHOUSES IN BUCOVINA - OPORTUNITY STUDY**

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## **Abstract**

Integrating the concept of sustainable development in rural tourism entrepreneurship involves a convergent, qualitative and quantitative, of the socio-economic elements and susceptible potential in order to be ecologically valued. From this point of view, the European Ecolabel – seen as part of a much ample broader EU strategy, strongly sustainable orientation – is grafted on rational production promotion, energetic sustainability, social and environmental responsibility, preservation of the rustic environment and balanced tourism consumption and, from a pragmatic point of view, may represent an important milestone for guesthouses administrators in Bucovina.

Based on these considerations, this paper aims to analyze the degree of maturation of the entrepreneurial culture in rural guesthouses in Bucovina. The scientific approach consisted of highlighting the determination that guesthouses managers had in voluntary integrating the ecolabel concept and the principles of sustainable tourism in guesthouse policy, having as basis an interview type research, doubled by an analysis of the online tourist visibility of the units.

The research involved 64 accommodation units of the 226 rural guesthouses in Bucovina. The results suggest that tourism entrepreneurs are not, at least not yet, willing / ready to accept the adoption of European quality values synthesized as organic label without a concerted campaign of advocacy in this area.

## **Keywords**

Rural Guesthouses, Bucovina, Ecolabel, Sustainable Tourism Development, Advocacy.

## **JEL Classification**

Q01, L83, P25

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## **Introduction**

The European Ecolabel is a voluntary environmental certification ([www.eticheta-ecologica.ro](http://www.eticheta-ecologica.ro)) which is part of the European Union policy on services, sustainable consumption and production of goods distributed for marketing purposes.

The Certification in the environmental area aims mainly to stimulate reduced energy consumption, increase thermal comfort, limiting excessive water consumption and

reduction of waste from operating activities (Reg. EC 66/2010, p.1). It also encourages "the use of environmentally friendly materials and implementation of an efficient activity" (Lupu et al., 2013, p.458).

Award of the Ecolabel for tourist accommodation services includes compliance with the 37 mandatory criteria and with 10 to 19 out of the 47 optional criteria (Toma, 2012).

Of the total of 344 European ecologically certified accommodation units in January 2015 (<http://ec.europa.eu/ecat>), the majority are located in the circumalpine area, encompassing vast territories in countries like Italy, France, Switzerland and Austria.

A percentage of housing units in rural areas, ecologically certified, is difficult to estimate; a fact is that European tourist boarding units, from the desire to be more competitive, are interested in voluntarily adopting eco-criteria promoted by the European Union environmental policy.

Given the similarity of tourism promoted by Bucovina and the alpine area (Austria, the extreme north of Italy, Switzerland), which encloses a large number of units ecologically certified, we believe that the sustainable development model promoted mainly by Austria, is also suitable for the north area of Romania.

In terms of the describing and highlighting peculiarities of tourism demand and supply in Suceava through a series of trials, scientific research (Popp, Iosep and Paulencu, 1973; Uscatu, 1996; Hapenciuc, 2003; Bouaru, 2004; Stanciu, 2006; Chaş ovschi, Hesselman, Chiriță, 2010; Minciu and Stanciu, 2010; Chaşovschi, Hesselmann et al., 2011; Cocerhan and Nastase, 2011; Condratov and Stanciu, 2012; Stanciu and Costea, 2012) and local development strategies (Economic and Social Development Strategy of Suceava 2008-2013, Tourism Strategy Update of Bucovina - Suceava County: a guideline for Further Development - 2010) or regional (Regional Action Plan for Tourism, Northeast 2008-2013), we consider that Bucovina, as tourist destination that overlaps Suceava county, meets the qualities required to be included in the European panoply of rural tourism.

The purpose of this study overlaps our intention to show whether Bucovina, as a tourist destination with international aspirations, is ready to become, in the next 10 years, a pole of European attraction (EU), focusing on sustainable rural tourism. The substance of this research direction started from the premise that, the past 25 years mattered for entrepreneurs in Suceava, and not only, as an excellent opportunity to engage and excel in business, tourism being the most frequently cited in local development strategies. For the same period, analyzing the dynamic exponential growth of rural accommodation units (Suceava county's tourist Breviary series 1990-2014), we consider that Suceava tourism entrepreneurship seems to be near the equilibrium point, marked by the proportionality between demand and supply of tourism (Stanciu, 2012, p.60). However, the economic crisis effects, evident from the chart of tourist arrivals since 2008, ought to oblige travel managers to innovate, to seek solutions to counteract recoil, but this did not happen. We believe that this period of change and tourism marketing policies recalibrations, needs to be studied.

## **1. Research Methodology**

This research aims to highlight the development stage of tourism culture and entrepreneurial skills of guesthouses managers in Bucovina, voluntarily integrating Ecolabel concept and principles of sustainable tourism in marketing policy.

### ***1.1. The collectivity analyzed and sampling methodology***

Statistical population consists of all guesthouses located in rural areas in Suceava and totaling 226 tourist accommodations (NTA, 2015). There were not included in the area of interest the guesthouses located in high rank rural planes seen as urban structures under Law 83/2004, as Broșteni or Frasin, and villages turned into districts of towns (Voroneț - district of the city Gura Humorului, Argestru, Roșu and Todireni - villages of the municipality Vatra Dornei).

The great territorial dispersion of the respective units and complexity of frontier research have not enabled a thorough interviewing integrating all of the 226 rural guesthouses of Bucovina. So, we opted for a partial research centered on three standard zones, each with distinct rural characteristics, but representative for Bucovina:

- Sucevița, because tourist flows are conditioned largely by cultural and religious heritage, well represented in the area by a number of churches with exterior mural fresco, included in UNESCO. In this case, Sucevița has a central role and pottery center in Marginea and the monastery of Moldovița presents marginal importance;
- Pojorâta, because it channels a distinct segment of tourists interested in the rural tourism – active tourism (some authors consider it to be an essential form of recreation for rural tourism), meaning: housing, meals and local recreation in the guesthouses of Pojorâta – Fundu Moldovei area, doubled by hikes in the near mountain area (Rarău Mountain, especially) or, secondary, monasteries tours;
- Dorna Arini, the background concentration of guesthouses and due to the proximity of the balneotherapeutic resort Vatra Dornei. However, Dorna Arini is known as the second most important location in the county where you can have a spa treatment.

### ***1.2. Research hypotheses and objectives***

In the exploratory research, we aimed to interview all 64 guesthouses recorded in three very important rural areas of concentration for Bucovina, namely: 21 from Dorna Arini, 15 from Pojorâta area and 28 in the Sucevița commune. By extrapolation, the results obtained here can be considered representative and tourist valence comparable for other concentration of boarding from guesthouses from Bucovina (Vama, Mănăstirea Humorului, Sadova, Dorna depression etc.).

For the preparation of the investigation, six objectives were formulated to serve as research directions (work milestones) in the analysis and presentation of statistical information.

- O1:** Systemic analysis of the presence of socio-cultural values in tourist facilities and determining the level of preservation of local culture and traditions;
- O2:** Quantification of the correspondence between the sustainability of the tourist offer and the quality of performance exhibited in rural guesthouses value - predictive assessment centered on post-factum perception of tourism consumption and impartial assessment of the interviewer.
- O3:** Determination of the optimal level of safety (health and safety) for tourists during their stay;
- O4:** Highlighting the level of energy sustainability of rural guesthouses in Bucovina area;
- O5:** Measuring the perception of the entrepreneurs in Suceava rural tourism related to the management and protection of the environment and highlight the implementation status of environmental requirements in the unit;

**O6:** Determining the extent to which guesthouses conduct marketing policies that integrate social responsibility actions and unconditionally support the promotion of sustainable tourism.

In accordance with the purpose and objectives of the research the exploratory research tool was completed. The interview sheet (assessment) includes 94 items, grouped into 7 classes (denoted by letters A to G), and assessed by points from 0 to 5, depending on the level of relevance and partial consensus to the Ecolabel evaluation criteria (Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council, on the EU Ecolabel, 2009) and the principles of sustainable tourism development. The most important aspects detailed in the interview are presented in Table no. 1.

**Table no. 1. Characteristics of the areas of interest integrated in the interview sheet**

Areas of Interest	Items	Cumulated scoring items
Integration of the guesthouse into the landscape	A1 –A6	30
Socio-cultural values, fostering local culture and traditions	B1-B11	30
Quality of the touristic services	C1-C12	30
Health and safety of tourists	D1-D8	30
Sustainability of energy (electricity, heat)	E1-E20	50
Ecology and environmental protection (water, soil, air)	F1-F24	50
Local Social Responsibility and marketing policy of the accommodation unit	G1-G13	30
<b>Total</b>	<b>94 items</b>	<b>250</b>

In addition to these criteria it was also followed if for analyzed guesthouses there are posts in the online media that stressed the quality of the touristic services, through the filter of the travel consumer. There have been consulted, especially: sites for tourism reviews and feedback (AmFostAcolo.ro), online platforms for presentation and marketing of tourism services (turistinfo.ro, booking.com), "upload" sites (YouTube.com) and social networks (Facebook.com, Twitter.com).

Proper conduct of the research involved the following logical operations:

- tourist assessment following consumption and online visibility of the guesthouses included in the target group, highlighted by the statistical observation;
- a form filled by the field interview operator, inside or in the vicinity of the accommodation, after a prior discussion with the guesthouse administrator or with another person delegated by him;
- a comparative analysis online visibility - guesthouse evaluation sheet, followed by the creation of an individual profile, specific to the structure of the examined tourist accommodation unit.

The interview type research was conducted between February - March 2015 and required engaging in individual discussions of about 30-40 minutes of 61 rural guesthouses administrators as follows: 26 from Sucevița, 14 from Pojorîta area and 21 from Dorna Basin, respectively Dorna Arini. Unfortunately, 3 of the administrators initially targeted (2 of Sucevița, one of Pojorîta) did not cooperate, refusing the interviews and not allowing us access to the accommodation.

For the success of the investigation, discussions were held at the headquarters of the accommodation, the restaurant, sitting room or dining room and the on site appreciation of

the interviewer had a defining role. Usually, the meeting ended with the tour of the unit, at which time the issues were clarified. There were times when, for unexplained reasons, we were not allowed to visit the kitchen.

## **2. Results and discussion**

Analysis of data obtained from the interview sheet was performed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), IBM SPSS Statistics, version 20.

### ***2.1. Socio-cultural values, fostering local culture and traditions***

The etymology of the village and local history are generally known by employees and owners of the accommodation establishments (94.9%) because many affairs in tourism are family business, established in the place of residence or have locals as employees.

Increasingly, local traditions acquire ornamental value in the tourism context, and sometimes uninspired rustic-modern alternation may create the impression of kitsch. This was emphasized in 28.8% of cases, especially in guesthouses rated with 2 and 3 flowers. The overall impression reinforced by interviewers concluded that more than half of pensions visited (54.2%) had a mix between old and new and are deeply marked by the unilateral presence of modernist elements.

Inside, wooden furniture, dish shelves, icons painted on glass, painted eggs, local pottery, handmade towels, embroidery, doilies and other handicrafts adorn 59.3% of the analyzed guesthouses, but they have lost their practical utility.

Hearty meals, supported by large portions, have a menu based on traditional recipes and local products, cooked in their own household (79.7%). Polenta, fish, cabbage rolls, and especially desserts ("papanasi", "tocinei", "poale in brau") are always present in the gastronomic offer.

Traditional occupations are not properly supported and promoted. Moreover, poorly highlighted are also the complementary activities, especially those involving local crafts and small industry, which are no longer attractive to the younger generation. Only 11.9% of guesthouses administrators encourage such practices, while 27.1% of them are concerned about the fate of small local economy, but recognize that they have a non-participating attitude.

### ***2.2. Quality of the touristic services***

For tourists, the first impression matters in a large measure, but, depending on context and individual subjectivity, the quality is perceived differently. The vast majority of guesthouses analyzed are neat, well equipped, pleasantly furnished and have a modern look (74.6% of total), the bathrooms are clean and properly equipped (67.8%), tourist private space is respected although warning labels with the words "Do Not Disturb".

The main drawback lies in the fact that many rooms are either small or have a cramped or undersized bathroom (37% of cases), which creates a certain level of discomfort. In the alternative, situations were encountered where the arrangement of the accommodation spaces had nothing to do with rustic and local specifics, but more reminiscent of modern urban comfort.

### ***2.3. Health and safety of tourists***

With few exceptions, all units include medical kit. On the other hand, many units are not equipped with fire extinguishers or the ones that do have them, do not perform their periodical inspection. The number of people trained (qualified) to provide first aid barely

exceeds 10% (11.9%). Although the vast majority of guesthouses owners states that employees are able to provide help in case of accident, health expertise leaves much to be desired.

Food Safety Management Systems (ISO 22000 / HACCP) and quality management (ISO 9001: 2008) are considered too expensive to be implemented in guesthouses. Out of purely economic reasons, some accommodation units do not offer/ have renounced catering services (restaurant), instead allowing tourists access to equipment and tools in the kitchen.

#### ***2.4. Sustainability of energy (electricity, heat)***

In this chapter, units have obtained the lowest score. Regarding energy efficiency certificate, there is only one newly established economic entity which owns it. Also, there are no accommodation producing cogeneration of high efficiency, guesthouses having energy performance audit of buildings or automatic light switch systems in rooms (card based room device for access mains).

Getting electricity and hot water by photovoltaic / wind generation is a practice little used (1.7%) in rural accommodation. Instead, almost all guesthouses are equipped with bulbs that have a low power consumption (93.2%). In the same distinctive key, analyzed accommodation units did not have electric heating systems - substituting biomass (wood plants are universally used) - heat pump, radiant infrared or variants for automatic shutdown of the heating / ventilation system when the windows are open.

#### ***2.5. Ecology and environment protection (water, soil, air)***

Exploratory research revealed that the strategies of the analyzed guesthouses are not based on explicit environmental policies, in 84.7% of cases lacking a concrete program of action towards environmental protection. Most often, accommodation units engage on this side more out of reasons of ethics and social ethics. Approximately 2/3 of the units do not have a person responsible for environmental issues, in 30.5% of cases employees have explicit environmental duties outlined in the job description, and only 3.4% of pensions have a delegated person with relevant expertise .

Constant monitoring of energy and water consumption is applied superficially in 33.9% of the guesthouses, and all the time, but unorganized, in 5.1% of cases. In over 60% of the establishments surveyed there are no explicit concerns in this respect and annual reporting of these two indicators is not on the list of priorities of any of the 61 units.

In guesthouses, taps allow manual adjustment of temperature and water flow in rooms, but there is no electronic system accessible to tourists, enabling automatic control, easy and preferential. Also, the flow of water from taps and showers (8.5 liters / minute), the volume of water consumed in the toilet (6 liters single use) and the amount of water consumed by washing machines for one washing cycle (12 liters / kg of laundry in a standard cycle at 60 ° C) are not within the standards set by the European Union in any units assessed.

Neither the environmental measures, seemingly simple, such as display of information messages on water saving in the bathroom and toilet, use of environmentally friendly cleaning agents or selective collection and separation of waste by tourists, found application (3.4% of units).

Separate collection and separation of waste by tourists, directly on consumption site is perceived as counter-productive, since the local sanitation company retrieves and stores garbage unselectively.

## ***2.6. Local Social Responsibility and marketing policy of the guesthouse***

Responsible initiatives and interest of boarding house management for social causes in the community are treated cautiously because they are seen rather as a moral act than as a marketing policy.

Out of all the responsible actions, most likely to create a positive mood among employees are the spring / autumn annual greening of the surroundings campaigns (the area surrounding the guesthouse, forest, road sides) (50.8%). On the other hand, there could be distinguished a number of responsible social actions (15.6%) like helping orphanages, homes for the elderly, families with many children or ill children. It is noted that social responsibility of the guesthouses is unsatisfying and often confused with the individual measures taken by employees or owners.

Given that tourist guesthouses are economic entities with limited tourism promotion possibilities, the focus is on online marketing policies (own presentation site, online visibility on social networks and upload websites), membership to various professional associations in the field, partnerships with local guides, use and consistency of materials to promote tourism.

As indicated in the interview sheet, only a third of respondent units have a presentation website, most entrepreneurs preferring travel portals like: turistinfo.ro or inbucovina.ro. Out of all the presentation websites only 13.6% are regularly updated.

Regarding Social Media, 25.5% of the guesthouses are present on social networks (Facebook, less on Twitter) and YouTube, while 16.4% of them are present exclusively on Facebook.

## **Conclusions**

We appreciate the value of the natural environment cannot be denied or minimized if quality tourism practice is desired, but this should be seconded by judicious highlighting of human components (human resources in the unit, household, craft, ethnographic, folk and even spiritual components). If unanimous interest of stakeholders will not converge towards preserving the rural spirit and the commercial kitsch in the folk art (culture) will not be limited, then there is a risk that local tourism will regress and struggle in obscurity.

On the other hand, although environmental impact energy initiatives require high costs, however, in a long-term, they will represent points of convergence generating competitive advantage. Thus, guesthouses managers that will understand the relevance of the ecological imperatives and act accordingly will be able to compete with accommodation in notorious European tourist regions.

Limitation and waste prevention and waste management may seem, at first glance, expensive, but they call for a change of attitude and respect for nature that surrounds us, ultimately contributing to improve the image of the guesthouse and tourist destination, as a whole. Acting sustainably one attracts sympathy and interest of people having similar beliefs.

However, through the provided service guesthouses managers in Bucovina must ensure standardized consumer comfort, opting for an emotional and participatory relationship with the environment and local community, so that the general psycho-sensorial perception strengthens the idea that tourists have taken the best holiday option.

From a pessimistic assumption, substantiated by the results of the analysis interview and tourist online feedback, we admit that rural accommodation units are not yet ready to accept ownership / adoption of European values synthesized in the Ecolabel and, out of market-related reasons of economic survival, are not willing to invest time and money

unless the law requires it. Consequently, the common tourism policy of the guesthouses in the analyzed area is pragmatic, risky, uncompetitive and uncorroborated with the European (EU) vision and requirements.

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