

## Sustainable Development of Regional Tourism

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### Abstract

Economic development is a major objective of contemporary society which, transposed to the rural area, makes it a factor of production. Regional tourism represents for many countries an alternative to economic development, but it needs a well-developed strategy for a long-term sustainability of this field of activity. Providing regional tourism must be done with special responsibility without omitting the importance of motivation in choosing a certain destination. This empirical research makes a foray into the literature on the sustainability of regional tourism and, using the observation method, presents practical ways of action in this field from several European countries and Lebanon. The main findings reside in the fact that regional tourism can be sustainable if it highlights a sum of intrinsic characteristics that are perpetuated without negatively influencing the environmental, social, economic or cultural dimensions of the considered area.

**Keywords:** Regional tourism, rural tourism, sustainable development, Lebanon.

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### Introduction

Tourism can make a significant contribution to the conservation and maintenance of biological diversity and the sustainable use of natural resources. Regulatory measures, controlling the number of tourist activities and the movement of visitors to protected areas can limit the impact on the ecosystem and can help maintain the integrity and vitality of the site. Other measures related to the planning and controlled management of tourism development and which can lead to minimizing the negative impact of tourism on the environment are: the use of non-polluting building materials, energy saving systems and its production from renewable sources, promoting energy policies. reduction of pollution caused by tourist transports, ecological education policies for tourists, etc.

The analysis of the pressure of regional tourism determined by the magnitude of the relationship between supply and demand, the interdependence of tourism demand indicators and the absorption capacity of the region highlights a number of negative influences on environmental protection and quality, economic growth and population welfare. We understand that tourism activities in various forms can cause negative effects related to air pollution, land use, availability and quality of water resources, and biodiversity. It is clear that between the impact of tourism and sustainability on the ecosystems of a given area there is a direct relationship (Tigu, et al., 2020). Based on this argument, the sustainable development of long-term tourism can only be achieved by eliminating the negative impact on the ecosystem.

The close relationship between tourism and the environment is based on:

- the physical-geographical elements of the environment considered to be tourist attractions;
- tourist facilities and infrastructure belonging to the artificial environment;
- the impact on the environment generated by the development of tourism and the tourist utilization of the regions.

Sustainable development is an important concept and increasingly present in the literature, designed to determine an economic development subordinated to the environment adapted to any field of activity including tourism in general (Hall, 2019), but especially recreational rural areas, in particular (Saarinen, 2020). Thus, sustainability becomes the objective and dominant principle of any policy, regardless of the level of tourism development (Kataya, 2020). The idea of sustainability attached to tourism involves the introduction into the economic circuit of capitalizing on natural resources (for recreational purposes and not only), so that it can be perpetuated for a long time at the same parameters using existing resources and environmentally friendly procedures to protect resources and environmental biodiversity.

Taking into account the need to ensure the sustainability of tourism activities, there is the necessity to interconnect tourism with the environment in its two forms: the reduced form and the extended form. The reduced form includes two directions: environmentally sensitive tourism and environmentally dependent tourism. Environmentally sensitive tourism aims at pollution reduction, nature conservation and protection of the built environment, and environmentally dependent tourism refers to the "Green Sector" area, namely, the tourism industry that offers an experience in nature. The broad form includes the emergence of tourism events in the context of local culture and improving the economic profitability of the tourism industry.

### **Review of the Scientific Literature**

In the last decades, we are witnessing an accelerated tourism development that tends to affect the balance between meeting tourism demand and its ability to be absorbed by the environment (Kostić, et al., 2018). The existence of a pressure that affects the tourist resources or the component of the tourist potential (natural and anthropogenic) is highlighted (Wearing and Neil, 2009); respectively the social component, namely the impact on the resident population in those areas. Basically, exceeding the maximum visiting capacity (by direct tourist pressure on the landscape or other tourist attractions by incorrect capitalization of tourist attractions) leads to a series of negative effects, starting with tourist attractions and tourist satisfaction and ending with the perception of residents competing with those who temporarily visit the city (tourists, visitors, commuters, migrant workers) to use the space and services (Coccosis and Mexa, 2017). Competition is intensified especially when buildings are used, due to the increasing demand for non-residential use. As there is excess demand, it generates higher prices in the real estate and product markets, which increases the cost of living. The use of tourism can help to improve the economic and social conditions of some of the inhabitants (Gretzel, et al., 2015), but it can also cause an increase in environmental problems (Postma and Schmuecker, 2017). In addition, they make it difficult for residents to access public transport. The negative impact is highlighted by the degradation of the environment, water, air, noise, visual pollution, waste, ecological risk, the impact on architectural or historical sites, as well as the damage resulting from the use of the land as a whole.

Currently, there is an intense concern for capitalizing on the landscape resources of rural areas, so that a new form of tourism called rural tourism is emerging (Adamov, et al., 2020). Rural tourism consists of tourist accommodation and dining services located in rural areas (Guzman-Parra, et al., 2015). The infrastructure is specific of small dimensions, with a specific architecture oriented towards the rustic, traditional style. The gastronomy is specific to each area and is served in specific tourist structures run primarily by a family member or family in general.

Economic development is a major objective of contemporary society which, transposed to the rural area, makes it a factor of production. At the same time, the rural area benefits from other resources whose capitalization contributes to the diversification of the rural economy which, on the background of an economic performance, determined the rural area to be promoted as a consumer good, being assigned a new vocation, becoming a residential space, respectively recreational space. Once the

interest for the rural area has been expressed as a consumer good, there is a reversal of values, in the sense that areas without agricultural vocation, with zero sales value, register, if they fulfill a residential function, a significantly higher price compared to the price of the useful agricultural area. The promotion of rural space as a consumer good is directly dependent on the quality of the environment, which is not easy to ensure in the conditions of the contemporary economy (Kachniewska, 2015).

World Tourism Organization defines rural tourism as an alternative to spending free time by tourism consumers attracted by the rural area, developed in an organized way and led by the rural population, in order to capitalize on the tourist potential and local tourist structures. Rural tourism is associated with all forms of eco-tourism complemented by outdoor tourism activities, respectively the discovery of nature, culture and gastronomy (Martinez, et al., 2019). Other specialists define rural tourism as the sum of all recreational experiences, ie visits to rural areas for activities, events or attractions in the urban area (Huang, et al., 2016).

Providing rural tourist products must be done with special responsibility without omitting the importance of motivation in choosing a certain destination. The tourist village is a picturesque area, in general, well represented in terms of economy, urban and cultural heritage, unpolluted and conservative of some cultural-traditional models (Streifeneder, 2016). There are many advanced classifications of specialists focused on the functionality of these villages, and highlights the following categories (Akbarian Ronizi et al., 2016; Jordan et al., 2016):

- landscape and climatic villages,
- tourist villages for winter sports,
- seaside villages,
- pastoral tourist villages,
- villages with historical, art and architectural monuments,
- tourist villages of artistic and artisanal creation,
- tree-vine tourist villages.

The analysis of the internal and external environment of rural tourism shows the influence of the specific component elements on the development and diversification of tourism and at the same time an interpenetration of them whose intensity is given by the experience offered to the consumer of rural tourism product. Thus, we can speak of the following types of rural tourism (Martínez, et al., 2019; Fang, 2020):

- Rural tourism itself - in the sense that the emphasis is on the experience in the rural household (tourist boarding house) and relaxation in a recreational (rural) landscape that allows the visualization of the daily activities of the hosts and the community;
- Agrotourism - in the sense that the emphasis is on the experience in the agricultural household with direct involvement of the tourist in the specific agricultural activities;
- Ecotourism - in the sense that the emphasis is on the experience of various activities carried out in nature (hiking, etc.), but may also include cultural or educational activities, respectively nature conservation activities;
- Cultural tourism - in the sense that the emphasis is on direct access to all cultural aspects offered by the rural environment: annual fairs, traditional customs, cultural and religious monuments, etc.
- Educational tourism - in the sense that the emphasis is on activities for educational purposes carried out in rural / agricultural households, respectively at the level of the rural community (equestrian tourism, speleological tourism, etc.).

From a lack of skilled manpower to exploitation of the rural climate, insufficient physical facilities, and language barriers to a lack of business knowledge, rural tourism faces numerous challenges (Ramakumar and Shinde, 2008). Molera and Albaladejo (2007) described five types of tourists who wanted different things out of their vacation in a rural environment. Just two of these segments were attracted

by events, while four of them valued nature, climate, and peace. The remaining group consisted of people whose sole motivation was to spend time with their families. Other studies attempted to connect visitors to the type of accommodation they stayed in, in addition to the purpose of their trips. Similar groups of visitors with different needs prefer different types of lodging. Pricing is another aspect that influences consumers' decisions on which products or services to use (Mattila, 2004; Deac, et al., 2016).

### **Research Methodology**

This paper uses observation and case study as a research methodology as it has proven in numerous studies and projects of utility and relevance. The methodology consisted of analyzing relevant literature: reports, strategies, studies, monographs.

Observation is a qualitative method and is defined as an additional method used in field research, which can bring more knowledge due to the fact that the researcher can study the phenomenon in its natural environment. The method contributes to obtaining richer information on the phenomena and processes studied, given that there is a risk that only through interviews we cannot obtain all the information relevant for research.

The case study is the method that allows a complex and in-depth approach to a problem in situations where there is not enough information and it is necessary to conduct an exploratory study. It is a method of holistic analysis applicable to complex situations and fully depicts a given situation, in order to obtain an accurate picture of current phenomena and to understand the causes that determined them. The case study is an analysis that is based on multiple data sources (interviews, time observations, statistics and factual information).

### **Rural Tourism in Several European Countries**

Rural tourism, as usual, has its own history. As precursors of this activity, we mention: trips, visits, feasts, etc. In other localities and even distant countries determined by traditional holidays in connection with the main activity carried out in rural areas - agriculture, as well as by religious motivations (church feasts, pilgrimages, etc.). Currently, rural tourism has reached impressive levels of tourist attraction in rural areas and has developed real models of capitalization of the elements that give tourist specificity of a certain area.

Austria, as a result of a program entitled "Green Plan" and launched by the Ministry of Agriculture and Trade in Tyrol, has succeeded in fulfilling a corollary to promote this form of tourism, such as catalyze the founding of non-governmental institutions to solve specific problems: "Rural Tourism Organizations and Management Centers" (Quendler, et al., 2020). The promotion of the Austrian rural tourism product is achieved through multiple institutions, among which we mention the Chamber of Foreign Trade, Cultural Institutions, etc.

Germany stands out by starting a large project in 1980 entitled "From the North Sea to the Alps" whose result is the training of 2/3 of the German rural area in the practice of rural tourism (Retallack, 2018). The basic feature is the accompaniment of the rural tourist product by multiple support elements (services): cycle-tourist routes, horseback riding and / or cart rides, etc.; introduction to crafts through visits to specific workshops; stays for naturalists, walks, hikes, pilgrimages, etc. Testimony in this regard are the tourism activities carried out in recognized regions such as Schwantwald and Messen.

Denmark illustrates a number of peculiarities regarding the activity of rural tourism starting with its promotion under a specific name: active holidays (Zhang, et al., 2007). Tourist services are provided with the support of the Landsforeningen for Landboturisme in Skandenborg in 22 settlements with about 3,000 beds.

Finland (the land of fjords, but also of Santa Claus), considered a paradise for nature lovers and pure, cool and fresh air, has an infrastructure of tourist equipment detached as if from the world of stories representing over 50,000 approved establishments offering over 10,000 beds.

Ireland adopts rural tourism and develops its specific activities in about 500 agricultural enterprises that have as specific - bed and breakfast - (bed and breakfast), completed on request with half board, respectively full board.

Italy stands out in terms of this form of tourism by promoting the concept - green holidays - whose main component is agrotourism comprising about 15,000 structures (farms, renovated archaic houses, rest homes, guesthouses, traditional houses, modern villas, castles and fortifications).

Portugal offers 800 km of coastline, 12 islands and a passion for the mist of time for the ocean that are crucial elements in promoting rural tourism. It has been regulated for a very long time (1986) being practiced by families of farmers or people from urban areas who own residences that are of interest either from a particular, historical or architectural point of view. Numerically, rural tourism groups over 100 facilities that offer about 1500 beds.

Regarding the consumer population of rural tourism, the elements that influence the characteristics of rural tourism are generally given by the purpose of the trip. It is oriented towards: the relationship with the physical environment, with the lifestyle and cultural traditions or towards their integration. Thus, the following types of national and foreign consumers result.

The types of tourism consumers are:

- traditionalist tourist - also comes from an urban environment and prefers to spend his legal holidays in a rural, traditional environment; traveling with family or friends;
- the high-income tourist - resides in the urban area and chooses the weekend party or the holiday in the rural area in order to discover the specificity of the country, he travels with his family or friends; manifests a series of requirements, such as: superior accommodation conditions, varied and traditional local gastronomy, the hosts to be at his disposal and to satisfy his needs, although traditionalist seeks urban comfort (cable television, parking, etc.); is willing to pay to have access to his vision of accommodation and meals; moves on its own; is attentive to special offers (e.g.: holidays) and generally book your location online or by phone; generally prefers tourist areas with high natural and anthropic resources but which offer something interesting or important to visit in their free time (monuments, religious objectives, etc. known); can be retained by pensions that meet its quality requirements;
- the middle-income tourist - residing in the urban area wants to spend his vacation in an environment accessible from the budget point of view, so as to ensure the optimum between satisfaction and costs; travels with family or friends;
- low-income tourist - resides in the urban or rural area who wants to spend his free time / vacation in an environment accessible from the budget point of view; it generally chooses off-season offers that have low prices and allow for an extended stay; travels alone, with family or with organized groups (pensioners, budgeters, etc.);
- weekend tourist - he resides in the urban area, he is integrated in the labor market with stressful and tiring effects on him, fact for which he chooses to retire for the weekend in the framework offered by the rural space in a pension, for relaxation and recreation being accompanied by family or friends.
- The types of tourism consumers of foreign nationality attracted by rural tourism according to the little information available describe the following types of consumers:
  - European foreign tourist - is distinguished by the fact that he is a family man; eager for new cultural experiences; adventure spirit; follower of holidays in rural specifics, traditionalist; knows basic elements about the country, having direct or indirect relations with local people, reason for which it appeals to the choice of locations based on their recommendations or friends and less based on advertisements; he moves on the basis of a very clearly established route and chooses known locations or where other of his compatriots have been; knowledgeable about the infrastructure situation, which is why he chooses more accessible transport routes; prefers transport on its own and will not go very deep into the country; wants to know the rural experience we mentioned before, the cultural and religious customs, gastronomy, crafts and local handicrafts, etc.

- Eastern foreign tourist - is distinguished by having information about the rural tourist offer, focused on important areas; destinations are very well chosen, they usually strictly respect this choice; generally prefers areas close to the border; travels with family, friends or the group being oriented towards visiting some tourist objectives; it is accommodated in high capacity pensions, from resorts of tourist interest; the choice of the visit is made according to the price and offer; they can be loyal especially during the traditional holidays.

This typology is very important in highlighting the characteristics of the rural tourism product because it highlights a series of correlations between certain factors that substantially influence rural tourism: mentality, hospitality, customs, folklore, culture, politics, economy.

### **Rural Tourism in Lebanon**

Since one of the core concepts and values of sustainable tourism is to protect the environment and its resources in rural areas, many tourism policies and regulations in rural areas in Lebanon, particularly in large areas such as nature reserves, promote or even forbid visiting the area alone without a local guide as a practice to help local people in these areas.

The preference for self-organizing a journey, exploring the region without a local guide, and driving one's own car rather than taking an organized tour are all indicators of the Lebanese's lack of trust in the services offered by tourism stakeholders, demonstrating that visitors' culture has a significant influence on their decisions and behaviors. (Ghadban, et al., 2017) Tourism stakeholders should enhance and increase the quality of services, establish strong customer relationships, and improve the skills of local guides in rural areas.

Due to Lebanese customs and practices, as well as their history, most people tend to visit rural areas during the summer. Rural regions must maintain a positive picture of themselves and the services they offer, as well as improve customer relations, by creating efficient and interactive websites that provide visitors with important information prior to visiting the region. Tourism research centers should provide more information and take advantage of the internet and social media, perform more rural tourism studies, and share the findings with stakeholders and tourists. (Ghadban, et al., 2017)

Regional tourism in Lebanon is facing various challenges as a result of unbalanced post-war development policies, causing a change in living habits, as demonstrated by the decline of the agricultural sector and the deterioration of the environmental and historical landscapes. This generated an increase in rural exodus, with young people migrating to cities in search of better jobs and living conditions. In relation to tourism, Lebanon's domestic and international tourism markets are seeing a change in demand. People are turning to rural areas in search of unique experiences and idyllic landscapes. (Ghadban, et al., 2017)

As a result, if tourism in rural areas is not well planned and handled, it can have a detrimental effect on the natural and cultural heritage. Hence, the solution is to develop a combination for regional tourism and sustainable landscape management that will support the rural population by providing extra income sources. Moreover, the Syrian crisis has had a significant impact on the Lebanese tourism industry, particularly international arrivals. Lebanon has suffered from ongoing internal political conflicts, security incidents, and a large influx of Syrian refugees over the last years.

Tourism stakeholders that have direct contact with tourists must raise their understanding of the importance of adhering to sustainable tourism standards and guiding principles. Visiting rural communities and living in a luxury hotel or dining at a fusion restaurant does not imply that tourists engaged in rural tourism or acted in a sustainable manner. The ideas of guest rooms, eco-lodges, or other types of ecologically sustainable accommodation must be conveyed to possible customers more effectively. Researchers have investigated tourism demand to better understand tourist wants and requirements and to stimulate them to discover more rural regions, although it is critical to strike a balance between welcoming tourists and preserving the environment and natural resources.

## Results and Discussion

The sustainability of rural tourism means its continuity and involves investments in projects that capitalize on landscape, material and human resources without altering them and for the benefit of the consumer of such services and the environment. Rural tourism can be sustainable if it highlights a sum of intrinsic characteristics that are perpetuated without negatively influencing the environmental, social, economic or cultural dimensions of the considered area. Sustainable tourism development is a concern of the local community that seeks to optimize the benefits of tourism for all stakeholders, but adapted to local needs. Based on these preliminary observations, the development of rural tourism, but especially its sustainable development, must start from individual-consumer but also supplier/producer to national/transnational policies being absolutely necessary to take into account what it has, maybe, he wants and knows how to offer the local community.

The sustainable development of rural tourism is done only if we take into account the particularities of the communities, their own development policies, which will then be framed in national/transnational structures of a political, economic or social nature. On the other hand, the sustainability of rural tourism is dependent on the way in which man, taken in his individuality, and the local community, as a whole, are able to preserve the natural environment, which must and can be used with one condition: to be maintained and to produce at the same stable level. In the absence of a balance between quantity, quality and productivity provided by human and natural resources in rural areas, adapted to economic dynamics, variable and often difficult to anticipate, sustainability cannot exist in fact. Making a synthesis of the elements of sustainability, Sillignakis (2001) observes that ensuring sustainability requires the following conditions to be met: a maximum number of tourists that do not affect the natural environment or the quality of the tourist experience; the quality of the natural environment and the quality of the recreational experience; the physical and social capacity of the rural space to support the activities and the tourist development; the ability of local communities to economically, socially and culturally support tourism development.

Some authors highlight that tourism, as an economic activity, is a vehicle of development, emphasizing the fact that rural tourism is an alternative to mass tourism, demanding and requested, which, however, has its advantages and disadvantages (Briedenhann and Wickens, 2004). Beyond the strengths of developing a community through tourism, be it even recreational rural tourism, sustainability remains a controversial term and state of affairs, but many authors and specialists leave no room for controversy regarding their choice on this topic: any form of tourism should, in itself, be environmentally sustainable and able to lead indefinitely to the achievement of sustainable development policies and objectives.

## Conclusions

In some parts of the world, recreational rural tourism has proved to be an alternative to economic development, but, beyond the obvious benefits that could be perceived as conditions for rural development, the chaotic approach to business in the field of rural tourism, respectively the business trend to develop in an ad hoc manner prove that, in fact, recreational rural tourism develops without any strategy, which generates a reduction of any medium and long-term sustainability of this field of activity.

In order to increase the sustainability of regional tourism, it is necessary to take into account some essential aspects, themes and key issues: impact on the environment; concern for a balance between supply and demand; competition between suppliers from the same geographical area, but also between different rural areas; aspects related to marketing; cooperation between various providers and the network they should form.

Rural tourism, beyond the inconveniences of a human activity, can be considered, along with other forms of tourism, but also with other forms of human activity of an economic nature, an option and an alternative for sustainable economic development. The study of the issue of sustainable development through rural tourism highlights an awareness of the importance of rural tourism in the rural economy and beyond; there are numerous initiatives for the valorization of rural tourism but without taking shape and examples of success in the development of rural tourism but on a small scale.

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