

Strategic Communication for Ecotourism – a public relations approach

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Abstract

This study investigates the areas of public relations (PR) implementation and improvement as a form of strategic communication that can be used to support concepts, values and practices of ecotourism. This form of sustainable tourism grew organically in the last 40 years and has considerable, yet underestimated, social, economic, and cultural potential. Ecotourism is expected to gain more importance and a better articulated supporting framework, considering international sustainability objectives and the European policy for greener and more responsible tourism. Most practice and scholarship on ecotourism are focused on particular instruments used by some of the stakeholders in this area, the positive and negative implications of this type of tourism or the marketing dimensions in its promotion. Strategic communication and PR can help integrate the purpose, process, and promotion of ecotourism. It potentiates its three pillars (conservation, community, interpretation), by using communication to support both ecotourism actors and its core values. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the dimensions of communication and PR used by the Romanian Ecotourism Association (AER), which has appreciable results. The research design is structured in the form of an illustrative case study, based on a qualitative approach, appealing to an in-depth interview with AER representative and documentary analysis. The findings underline that, unintentionally but highly effectively, AER applies the coordinates and instruments of modern PR, although the Association does not have a designated department responsible for its communication activity. AER endeavours to support ecotourism illustrate a valuable example of good practices. The lessons learnt from this case study, regarding the strategic use of communication in the form of PR, can be successfully applied by other entities interested in ecotourism. Also, the article highlights how PR can be used further, in the case of AER, and also by other similar actors.

Keywords

Ecotourism, public relations, strategic communication, sustainability, stakeholders, Romania

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Introduction

Ecotourism, as a form of sustainable tourism, is aligned to 3 (SDG 12 - responsible consumption and production, SDG 8 - decent work and economic growth, and SDG 14 - life below water) of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Boluk and Rasoolimanesh, 2022). According to the International Ecotourism Society, ecotourism has three pillars: conservation (meant to protect natural and cultural heritage), communities (empowerment to fight against poverty), and interpretation (meant to better understand and value nature, local society, and culture, based on direct experience, without altering them) (IES, 2015). By merging these elements it is clear that tourism must evolve into a cleaner, fairer, and truly sustainable market for all stakeholders involved.

Communication is an important dimension in tourism activities, both in terms of implementation and promotion. Especially in the area of sustainability, communication can play an essential role. The new challenges present in tourism and environmental issues call for an extended communication approach, focussing on responsibility and cooperation, as important coordinates, beyond the traditional usage of

communication in the form of marketing and advertising, The present paper is the first one to focus on ecotourism through the lenses of PR, as a strategic communication process. The main results of PR are focused on positive relationships and reputation, based on ethics and dialogic communication (Tam et al., 2022). PR is used to promote products, services, ideas, or entities, but its true value lies in its role to support organisational, community, and social development, through extensive research and stakeholder communication. Therefore, PR can help to foster positive ideas, anticipate risks and threats, and turn them into growth opportunities that are mutually beneficial to the organisation and its public (Johnston, 2020). The aim of the paper is to highlight the practical dimensions of PR practice as a strategic approach to ecotourism. Most of the existing scholarship regarding the results of ecotourism implementation and promotion is focused on its particular shortcomings or failure (Das and Chatterjee, 2015), and the importance of communication with specific stakeholders, stressing the collaborative dimension (Anderson, 2009; Wondirad et al., 2020). In comparison, the PR approach can offer more than descriptive or evaluative conclusions and integrate past and current practices, alongside better articulated future perspectives.

The research objectives are addressed in the form of a case study, using a qualitative methodology to investigate the activities of the Association of Ecotourism in Romania (AER). AER is a well-known association, created in 2008, and is a central actor in the promotion and development of ecotourism in Romania. With a wide range of members, from experts in tourism and service providers (travel agencies, accommodation units, experience providers) to nature conservation and sustainable development organizations, AER has implemented in the past years more than 35 projects with national or international funding. The main areas of focus for AER are promotion and marketing, strategic and product development, and certification in ecotourism. Romania offers a wide variety of ecotourism experiences: hiking, wildlife observation (admiring the coexistence between humans and wildlife), bird watching, horse riding, cycling, and mountain biking, water activities, winter activities, caving, photo tours, rural culture, food activities and guesthouse experiences in the countryside (AER, 2021). In total, Romania has ten eco-destinations, among which five are currently holding a designated certificate. In 2019 the Romanian government adopted the National Strategy for the Development of Ecotourism (National Strategy for Ecotourism Development - context, vision, and objectives, 2019-2029), creating the legal framework for its implementation. Also, since 2010, Romania has seen a tendency to increase the number of tourists in protected areas (Minciu et al., 2012).

Aiming to extract valuable conclusions regarding ecotourism implementation, the research questions of the present study are further introduced. (RQ1): Which are the technical PR coordinates of AER communication for supporting Romanian ecotourism (organizational and functional dimensions, communication planning, designated responsables)? (RQ2): What type of PR did AER apply in its activities for supporting ecotourism in Romania?

1. Review of the scientific literature

1.1. Ecotourism promotion

Ecotourism as a concept emerged in the second half of the 20th century. Various defined, three key concepts were considered to frame its practice: nature-based, educational, and sustainable (with socioeconomic criteria) (Diamantis, 1999). Ecotourism has evolved over the years, and is now widely recognised as an individual type of tourism. Fennell (2001) after reviewing 85 definitions identified the most 5 cited variables: (1) reference to where ecotourism occurs, e.g., natural areas; (2) conservation; (3) culture; (4) benefits to locals; and (5) education.

Following technological advancements, communication has evolved throughout the years, and tourism will keep up with this process. Scientific literature on marketing and PR in tourism has been adapted to the new realities and communication channels. In terms of communicating ecotourism values and principles or having a development purpose, the international literature provides several research papers. Runtiko et al. (2023) investigated the use of social networks as a strategic communication tool in the development and promotion of ecotourism enterprises. It examined five social media platforms utilised by Ecoethno Leadcampsite, an ecotourism destination located in Penglengan, West Java, operated by a Small and Medium Enterprise (SME). The aim was to evaluate how social media can contribute to improving the visibility of these destinations, fostering engagement with tourists, and advocating for sustainable tourism practices. The research findings revealed that not all social media platforms were used effectively, with a tendency to emphasise specific aspects of strategic communication, such as tourism activities, resource management, and environmental awareness. Adesuyan et al. (2019) investigated the marketing communication strategies used by selected ecotourism destinations in South-East Nigeria and evaluated their perceived effectiveness. The study population comprised the management of these ecotourism

destinations. Data collection was carried out through questionnaire administration and the analysis involved descriptive statistics and analysis of variance (ANOVA). The findings indicated statistically significant variations in the marketing communication strategies adopted by the destinations and the perceived effectiveness of these communication tactics. Rochmaniah (2016) pointed out that the most influential factors in the development of marine ecotourism were public relations, direct marketing, personal sales, and sales marketing. These results were obtained through quantitative research on the society and government apparatus around the area of research.

For Romania, ecotourism is a topic approached by many scholars in the last 10 years. Several directions of research have emerged after a thorough analysis of the national scientific literature: ecotourism and development process (Merce and Milin, 2014; Candrea and Hertanu, 2015; Tudorache et al. 2016; Adriana Tisca et. al, 2016; Ilie, 2019; Neacsu and Dodu 2019; Moisă and Andronache, 2020; Mazilu and Drăguleasa 2021; Mateoc-Sîrb et al., 2022), current state and prospects (Rabonțu and Marinescu, 2017; Moisă and Andronache, 2020; Stanciu et al., 2023), and marketing communication and promotion (Nistoreanu et al., 2020; Nicula and Spanu, 2014; Teodorov et al. 2020; Constantin et al. 2021).

1.2. Public relations theoretical framework

Public relations (PR) is a strategic communication process (Heath and Palenchar, 2008; Grunig, 2006; 2013; Theaker and Yaxley, 2012), based on ethics (Theaker, 2020; Jackson et al., 2022) It is meant to build trust and mutual understanding, and support societal development, for the benefit of the organisation initiating it and for all the relevant stakeholders (Broom, 2013; Grunig, 2013).

PR activity is portrayed as a management function, emphasising the important role of this type of communication in the top-level decision-making process, substantiating internal and external policies of an organisation and potential developments in the area in which it operates (Bowen, 2010; Grunig, 2013; Gregory, 2020; Tam et al., 2022). The PR process uses creativity (White, 2000; Gregory, 2008). However, this is not the main ingredient in PR, which is centred on research and measurement (Volk, 2016) and responsibility (Holmström, 1997; Johnston and Zawawi, 2014). Compared to marketing, PR seeks more than pragmatic and instrumental results and can support sustainable growth and positive social gains (Grunig and Grunig, 1991). Emphasising social responsibility, PR contributes to co-creating social values (Lee, Kim, and Kim, 2020). PR is a natural and valuable approach to promoting the core principles and activities of ecotourism. However, so far it has not been used as a theoretical framework to analyse the practices and implementation in the area of this type of tourism.

The specific conceptual construct that supports this paper is the PR *excellence model* (Grunig and Dozier, 2003; Grunig, 2006; 2013; Bussy, 2013). This evolved after long research analysing differences between *craft PR* (either propagandistic, press agency model, or journalistic, public information model) and *professional PR* (in the form of either two-way asymmetrical model, or two-way asymmetrical PR) (Grunig and Grunig, 2013). With all its criticism, as synthesised by Laskin (2009), *excellence theory* is considered to have had the most important contribution to PR theoretical developments (Botan and Hazleton, 2010), emphasising dialogic, two-way responsible communication, ethics, managerial function, proactive approach and mutual participation of both the organisation and its public. This is the rationale for using it as the theoretical framework of the present study.

2. Research methodology

Initiated as pilot research illustrating the use of PR in ecotourism, this article takes the form of a case study focussing on the activity of the main association supporting ecotourism in Romania. The reasons for this choice are linked to the complex country offers in the area of ecotourism (in terms of both nature and culture) and considering the numerous positive outcomes of AER for ecotourism over the years at the national level, and its international visibility.

The study is based on qualitative research, using mixed methods: secondary data analysis and an in-depth interview. Secondary data selected consist of official regulation documents, online content, and traditional and online communication channels. This involved: (1) official government papers on the Romanian strategy for ecotourism development (Governmental Decision regarding the approval of the National Ecotourism Development Strategy - context, vision and objectives - 2019-2029; National Strategy for Ecotourism Development - context, vision and objectives, 2019-2029), (2) 20 AER publications to promote and implement Romanian ecotourism (AER, 2012), 37 press releases (AER, 2023) and 11 annual reports (AER, 2020a) and (3) AER two online platforms that are dedicated to ecotourism providers in Romania and its national and international audiences (AER, 2020b; 2021). The purpose of the secondary data analysis was to substantiate a clear understanding of the Romanian ecotourism process and development

and its present results. The interview was conducted with AER management, to access in-depth information beyond public data and to explore the motivation, limitations, and practical implementation of activities that contributed to the development of ecotourism in Romania.

The methodological instrumentary was based on the five scales proposed by Laskin (2012) to analyse PR activity, each with its pair of opposing poles: (1) *communication direction - two-way or one-way (from the organisation – FO / to the organisation - TO)*, (2) *intended beneficiary – symmetry/asymmetry (organisation – BO / public - PO)*, (3) *role of practitioners and their approach (technical – TA / managerial-TA)*, (4) *strategic nature approach (reactive – RA / proactive - PA)*, and (5) *timeframe (short-term focus – ST / long-term focus - LT)*. With the use of these five scales, the AER PR activity was analysed, to investigate its correspondence with the theoretical *excellence model* in PR (Grunig, 2013). As indicated by Laskin, codes from 0 to +10 were attributed to each of the five scales on each of their sides, to mark the position between their opposing poles and the central position. The extreme positions (from +8 to +10) indicate the dominance of one of the poles. The central positions (between +2 to +2) illustrate the PR *excellence practice*, with the balanced position centred on 0.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Organic unintended PR implemented by AER

The research revealed that although AER does not have formal dimensions for the implementation of PR, it uses this type of communication organically, to the benefit of its public in Romania and internationally. The association is small, with limited budget, mainly provided by its members and the projects it accesses, with external funds. There is no dedicated PR or communication department and neither is an assumed integrated communication plan. According to the response of the AER representative during the conducted interview, 'communication is a prospective area, to be developed during the next period'. However, the values and principles AER promotes, guiding its actions, ensured a convergent direction over the years. Since 2001, when ecotourism concerns began to emerge in Romania, with the main support of AER representatives, these translated into its development on multiple levels: promoting the concept, shaping a public policy and technical framework for ecotourism implementation (including evaluation and certification), developing ecotourism destinations in Romania, and promoting associated practices.

These portray an organic form of positive public relations, implemented by the association without actually intending to use it as such, and without even knowing it: 'Our main focus, at least until now, was not the associated communication, but how to manage to move things forward for ecotourism' (AER representative).

3.2. Excellence PR

Based on the conducted research, using the five PR scales, the activity of AER presents a positive example of *PR excellence*, as illustrated in figure no. 1.

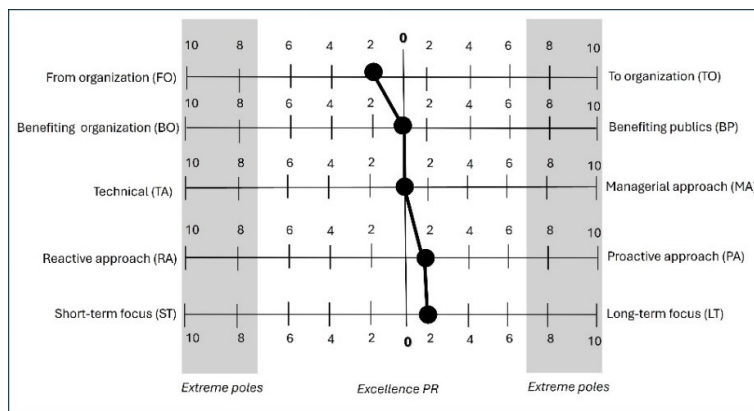


Figure no. 1 . AER activity and communication for Romanian ecotourism, according to PR scales

Source: authors' own processing, based on the conducted study

The first and main result of the study underlined the mechanism of AER communication with the public, both in terms of disseminated content and in the investigation of information meant to understand stakeholders and their needs and interests. The research showed a central, balanced approach for the first dimension analysed, *communication direction*, with a light orientation toward the *public information*

model (disseminating content and output) rather than *listening* to the public. This is natural, considering that AER has played a central role in ecotourism in Romania over the years, as an expert and legitimate actor in initiating change and spreading information and knowledge. Four main indicators and their subindicators were identified for public information: (a) promotional content (such as (i) Discover Eco-Romania catalogues, published in Romanian, French, English, and German, to address the profile of the intended audience, (ii) maps (designed in collaboration with specialised providers), (iii) brochures (portraying Romanian ecotourism various experiences, participation in dedicated fairs, nationally but mostly internationally)); (b) technical content and direct/indirect support (specialised publications, training, counseling, and dedicated activities for members), (c) general content (distributed through (i) AER website and (ii) *Discover Romania* portal, (iii) AER mass media instruments – especially press releases, and (iv) AER reports, presenting its activity, projects and outcomes). This was coupled with an open approach to other stakeholders, reflected in AER initiatives and its extensive active participation in efforts initiated by other actors, sharing knowledge, exchanging ideas, and developing projects. The main dimensions identified in this area are: (a) active participation in substantiating the public policy for ecotourism in Romania, under the coordination of designated governmental authorities (since 2009 when the Romanian ecotourism strategy started to take shape, to 2019 when it was adopted, and further on to its implementation); (b) communicating with other experts, mostly international (participating in working groups, events); (c) conducting longitudinal research to understand the profile of the actual final public for Romanian ecotourism (since 2021).

Regarding the *beneficiary scale*, the AER communication shows a *balanced approach*. Promotional and technical content, together with direct presentations to actual and potential ecotourism providers, indicate a slight public interest-orientated approach (PO2). General content is useful to the public, but also contributes to the reputation of AER. The same applies to participating in working groups, structuring frameworks for ecotourism labels and certification or conducting evaluations, and participating in policy dialogue, which all indicate a balanced mutual interest. Research on the present eco-tourist profile helps build an efficient strategy to develop ecotourism in the long term. Presently, these studies support the organisational efforts to project a data-driven plan.

The *role scale* indicates a clear *balanced approach*. This is natural considering that the association has a small team and the fact that people taking decisions and participating in AER activities (including internal and external communication) held managerial positions in the association and have extensive expertise in the area of ecotourism and its main coordinates.

The *scale of strategic nature* indicates for AER communication and activity a slight orientation toward a *proactive approach*, on most of the indicators and sub-indicators. The area of policy dialog is rather reactive, which is due to the role of AER as an actor participating in public consultation and discussions initiated and coordinated by the authorities. In the case of events, meetings, and working groups, the results show a balanced approach, considering the partenerial role of the association in organising and implementing such activities. For all others, the AER activity is slightly geared toward a proactive approach.

On the *time-frame scale*, there is a slight orientation toward *long-term results*, especially in the case of promotional content, implementation of ecotourism policies, research substantiating ecotourism activities, and contributing to direct and indirect training for ecotourism providers. These include providing specialised consulting and offering support in developing and implementing interpretive trails and visitor centers.

The AER activity indicators identified in the study in association with the five PR scales are presented in Table 1, showing their corresponding values.

Table no.1. Indicators of AER activity in supporting ecotourism and their value on the 5 PR scales

Indicator	Scale positioning		Comm. direction		Intended beneficiary		Role of practitioners		Strategic nature		Timeframe	
	FO	TO	BO	PO	TA	MA	RA	PA	ST	LT		
Providing promotional content	2			2	0			2			2	
Providing technical content & support	2			2	0			2		0		
Disseminating general content (AER website, Eco-Romania portal, press releases, interviews)	2		0		0			2	0			
Offering direct presentations and counselling to providers	2		0		0			2			2	

Active participation in policy dialog	0	0	0	4		2
Conducting research on ecotourist profile	4	4	0		2	2
Participating in events, meetings, working groups & designing/conducting evaluation	0	0	0	0	0	0
communication type	FO 2	balanced	balanced	PA 2	LT 2	

Source: authors' own processing, based on the conducted study

Conclusions

Ecotourism, as a sustainable form of tourism, implies a complex implementation and communication effort, which is recommendable to be supported by actors with proven expertise and ethical approach. Based on the content analysis of secondary data and on recently conducted research, using an in-depth interview with AER representatives, the present paper, the first to apply a PR approach to ecotourism, underlined the positive case of developing ecotourism over the last 15 years in Romania, a country with great potential in this field. Although AER does not have a formal framework for applying PR and does not intend to use it in its activities, the study illustrates an organic manifestation of this form of communication. Using a qualitative methodology based on a five-scaled analysis for PR implementation, the study shows that AER uses the PR *excellence model* to integrate the three pillars of ecotourism. The lessons extracted from this case study emphasise the role of responsible activity and organic developments in ecotourism, based on mutual interest and cooperation between stakeholders, and the use of strategic dimensions of communication, as offered by the PR framework. Positive results, obtained through the unintended use of the PR approach, can be further enhanced, in the case of AER and other similar actors, by also adopting the formal coordinates to apply PR practice in ecotourism, to the benefit of all stakeholders and fostering sustainable development. The limitations of the present article are related to its nature and methodological approach, as it was designed as a pilot study. To obtain a wider set of results regarding the potential value of PR practice in ecotourism, the study will be extended to investigate more PR dimensions (*reputation* and *stakeholder relations*) and will also analyse data related to other relevant actors (policy decision makers, ecotourism providers, and the local community). The aim is to propose an integrated applicable PR model for ecotourism practices.

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