



Research on the tourist traffic in protected areas in Romania

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Abstract

Ecotourism has been gaining popularity in recent times as more people are embracing the preservation of nature. Most countries are implementing laws to preserve natural habitats and other countries are practising a forestation in a bid to restore their lost nature. Romania is a country that is blessed with natural capital and is open to ecotourism. Over the years, Romania has been host to tourists from different countries, especially the European countries, who visit mostly to enjoy the eco tourist destinations of Romania. This research aimed to study the tourist traffic in protected areas in Romania and how they can be improved in order to generate further income for the Romanian tourism sector. This research made use of secondary data that were retrieved from the Association of Ecotourism Romania and the National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism. This research found out that most of the visitors to the Romanian tourist sites were the indigenes. However, tourists from different countries were more involved in ecotourism than the indigenes. At the end of this article, recommendations are made on how tourist traffic can be increased by the Romanian tourism department.

Keywords: Ecotourism, protected area, ecosystems, nature.

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1. Introduction

Ahmed, Djelti and Guellil (2020) in a research explained how tourism could help in the development of a country. In the research, they explained that tourism encouraged people to migrate into the origin country, which is the tour destination. On the other hand, they explained that sometimes migration encourages tourism. That is, when people migrate to a country, their friends and families may want to visit them and take the chance to tour the country.

Romania has a very diverse natural capital. Due to physical and geographic conditions, including mountains, plains, major hydro graphic networks, wetlands and one of the most beautiful delta systems (Danube Delta), Romania is the only country on the continent where 5 of the 9 bio geographical regions of the European Union exists (continental – 53% of the country's surface, alpine – 23%, steppe – 17%, panonica – 6% and pontic – 1%). Romania has a high biological diversity, expressed at both ecosystems level and species level.

Natural and semi-natural ecosystems account for about 47% of the country's surface. 783 types of habitats (13 coastal habitats, 143 habitats specific to wetlands, 196 habitats for pastures and hay fields, 206 forest habitats, 90 habitats specific to dunes and rocky areas and 135 habitats specific to agricultural land) have been identified and characterised. The overall result is the diversity of flora and fauna. Due to the geographical position of Romania, flora and fauna have Asian influences from the north, the Mediterranean from the south and continental-European components from the northwest. Even though the European environmental protection laws have not been so effective around the region (Burgin, 2018), Romania has strived to maintain and improve their natural capital. India, which is in Asia, in a bid to maintain their forests also implemented a law that prevents people from destroying the forest (Bharadwaj, 2018). This goes to show how countries are making efforts to maintain their ecosystem.

Alongside the natural setting, Romanian space also benefits from an ethnographic and folkloric potential of great originality and authenticity. This spiritual dowry, represented by popular architectural values, folk installations and techniques, traditional crafts, folklore and ancestral customs, popular celebrations, etc., plus numerous historical and art monuments, archaeological remains and museums, amplify and happily complements the ecotourism potential of the country.

Jain (2018) in a research explained that innovative ideas that have emotions attached to them possess the ability to generate funds for the custodian of the innovative ideas. Romania is a country that possesses natural resources coupled with the ecotourism sector, which is one of its kind in the world. With the incorporation of the local Romanian culture into the ecotourism system, Romania can stand out among the countries that provide ecotourism. Most countries have adopted their cultures from other countries (El-Ouali & Mouhadjer, 2019); so, by Romania staying true to its culture, it will have a distinct feature that cannot be linked to another country. The people of Kazakhstan adopted the same principle and have since then benefitted from it (Kulgildinova et al., 2019).

In an era where countries are looking up to techno parks and digital industries, among other things, to improve their economy (Hasanov & Akbulaev, 2020), Romania can take advantage of ecotourism to improve its economy. Countries, just like businesses, must set their priorities right and work towards achieving their desired goals (Gulluoglu, Arifoglu, Karahoca & Karahoca, 2020; Kaldiyarov et al., 2018; Tasar, Tengilimoglu, Ekiyor & Guzel, 2020).

2. Methodology

This research was a qualitative study, which took the form of a descriptive research design. The research therefore made use of secondary data, which were collected from the Association of ecotourism Romania, also known as the Association of Ecotourism Romania (AER), the National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism, and the National Strategy for Ecotourism Development in Romania. The institutions collected the data between the years 2010 and 2016, and it

included strategic plans outlined for the growth of ecotourism by the National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism.

3. Results

There are 917 scientific reserves, nature monuments and nature reserves. Most of these protected natural areas are included in national parks, natural parks and the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve. Under these circumstances, it is estimated that the protected natural areas in Romania (except for Natura 2,000 sites) cover over 5% of the country's land area.

Protected natural areas in Romania have been an important travel destination for many residents and foreign tourists, especially from the Central European countries. At present, because there is no taxing system for tourists entering the parks (with some exceptions), there is no evidence of the number of visitors, which can only be estimated. According to estimates, these areas currently attract about 3,400,000 visitors. Among them are the Bucegi Natural Parks (about 1,000,000 visitors), the Husmas Bicaz Gorge (750,000), the Apuseni Mountains (500,000), the Vanatori Neamt Mountains (400,000), the Geopark of the Hateg Mountains (175,000), Piatra Craiului (100,000) Danube (65,604 tourists accommodated according to official statistics), etc. (Table 1).

Table 1. The number of visitors to natural parks/national/protected areas/nature reserves in Romania in 2015

No Crt	Park/protected areas	Visitors	Average vacation duration (days/trip)	Motivation of travel	Come from Romania (%)	Other origin
1	Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve	65,604	1.9	a	79.4%	20.6% (Germany, Norway, Poland, France, Italy, Spain, Austria, etc.)
2	Retezat National Park	15,000	4.0	hiking, nature, climbing, picnic	80%	20% (Hungary, Czech Republic, etc.)
3	Rodna Mountains National Park	25,250	1–2	hiking, occasional visit	100%	-
4	Calimani National Park	7,000	a	mountain hiking; equestrian tourism	a	a
5	National Park Cheile Nerei – Beusnita	25,000	a	speotourism, rafting, cycling, hiking, climbing	75%	25% (Germans, Czechs, Serbs, etc.)
6	National Park Cheile Bicazului – Hasma	750,000 ^b	a	a	50%	50% (Hungary, Israel, Moldova)
7	Piatra Craiului National Park	110,000	apox. 4	the uniqueness of relief and nature	90%	10%
8	Cozia National Park	60,000	a	visiting monasteries, picnics, photo hikes	a	a
9	Domogled National Park – Cerna Valley	10,000	a	recreation, hiking and balneal treatments	most	a
10	Macinului Mountains National Park	9,800	1	bird-watching, hiking, ATV rides, cycling, climbing	most	Germany, Netherlands
11	Buila Vanturarita National Park	1,700	a	a	a	a
12	National Jiu Gorge National Park	8,000	transit	Visits to monasteries, hiking, rafting, canoeing	most	a
13	Ceahlau National Park	34,111	a	hiking, mountain climbing as well as specific camping activities	75%	25%

14	Natural Park Bucegi	over 1,000,000	a	Hiking, scenery	a	a
15	Iron Gates Natural Park	40,000	a	fishing, boating, hiking	95%	5%
16	Apuseni Natural Park	500,000	a	relief, hiking, speoturism	80%	20%
17	Small Natural Park of Braila	600	a	a	70%	30%
18	Natural Park Vanatori Neamt	400,000	transit	monasteries, museums, memorial houses	80%	20% (Italy, Austria, Czech Republic, Netherlands, Germany, Great Britain, France, Israel, USA, Japan)
19	Putna Natural Park Vrancea	35,000	a	hiking, ATV rides	most	a
20	Parcul Natural Lunca Muresului	38,000	a	a	a	a
21	Gradistea Muncelului Natural Park – Cioclovina	8,000	2–3	visit to Dacian fortresses, speoturism	80%	20%
22	Maramures Mountains Natural Park	40,000	a	Mocanita, Vaser Valey	most	Germany, Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, France
23	Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park	a	a	Sport fishing, hiking, flora and fauna	a	a
24	Natural Park Defileul Muresului Superior	2,500	a	a	a	a
25	Geopark of the Dinosaurs Country of Hateg	170,000	1	georgets, cultural points	a	a
26	Comana Natural Park	40,000	a	a	95%	5%

Processing after Association of Ecotourism Romania (AER).

^aNo data are known.

^bIn 2010.

Although the estimated number of visitors to national and national parks is quite large, it should be borne in mind that only a small part of them are motivated to practice ecotourism.

The number of visitors, the average duration of a stay or the motivation of the trip, according to the monitoring and registration of the visitors made by the major protected areas in Romania, are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Situation of the number of tourists accommodated in the structures of the AER members, 2014

	Number	Length of stay (days/trip)	Come from Romania (%)	Other provenance (%)
Tourists accommodated	9,500	2.41	55	Great Britain, 13%; Germany, 7.3%; France, 3.5%; Others, 21.2%
Participants in ecotourism programmes	5,860	3.45	22.5	Germany, 21.4%; Great Britain, 21.1%; Austria, 3.0%; Belgium, 5.6%; Switzerland, 2.5%; Hungary, 2.0%; Others, 21.9%

Data processed after AER.

The Ecotourism Association of Romania, the most important association in the field of ecotourism, whose members organise programmes specific to natural areas and protected natural areas, appreciates that the number of tourists attracted exclusively by its members (centralised data from 20 tour operators and 15 boarding houses) amounted to 15,360, generating 44,000 overnight stays in 2015.

Touristic accommodation establishments classified within and adjacent to major protected areas are listed in Table 3.

Table 3. Tourist accommodation structures with accommodation functions

Nr crt	Name of the protected area	Number of structures	Number of places
1	Small Natural Park of Braila	34	1,921
2	Bucegi	1,023	24,959
3	Buila–Vanturarita	74	3,498
4	Calimani	130	3,695
5	Ceahlau	87	2,158
6	Cefa	4	94
7	Bicaz Gorges–Hamas	48	1,307
8	Nerei Gorges–Beusnita	17	356
9	Comana	10	173
10	Tails	70	3,839
11	The Jiu Gorge	39	1,214
12	Gorge of the Superior Mures	20	425
13	Domogled–Cerna Valley	91	5,237
14	Geopark of the Dinosaurs Country of Hateg	61	1,163
15	Mehedinti Plateau Geopark	37	1,731
16	MuncelulGrădistea–Cioclovina	16	528
17	Lower Lakes Lower Prut	35	1,667
18	Meadow of Mures	95	3,428
19	Apuseni mountains	148	2,590
20	The Maramures Mountains	61	1,128
21	Macinului Mountains	2	49
22	Piatra Craiului	512	10,058
23	Iron gates	93	2,401
24	Putna–Vrancea	37	685
25	The Danube Delta biosphere reserve	322	8,152
26	Retezat	36	800
27	Rodna	55	1,844
28	Semenic–Carasul Gorge	55	1,357
29	Hunters–Neamt	58	1,527
Total		3,270	87,984

The National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism and the National Strategy for Ecotourism Development in Romania – context, vision and objectives – 2016–2020, Bucharest, 2015.

The number of accommodation establishments classified within the vicinity of major protected areas amounts to 3,270 structures, with 87,984 accommodation places.

4. Discussion

Romania has a very diverse natural capital. Natural and semi-natural ecosystems account for about 47% of the country’s surface. 783 habitat types were identified and characterised (13 coastal habitats,

143 habitats specific to wetlands, 196 habitats specific to pastures and meadows, 206 forest habitats, 90 habitats specific to dunes and rocky areas and 135 habitats specific to agricultural land).

The total area of protected natural areas in Romania, included in Law no. 5/2,000 regarding the national territory, 'Results', is of 1,234,710 ha, which means 5.18% of the country's surface.

Total area of protected natural areas in Romania is categorised as follows:

- the area of Romania is 23,839,100 ha;
- the area of the protected natural areas is 1,234,608 ha; and
- the percentage occupied by the natural protected areas is 5.18%, out of which, the Danube Delta occupies 2.43% of the country's surface.

The more varied and complex these resources, especially the functional anthropic activities, the greater the tourist interest in them, and the tourist activities they generate are more valuable and attractive, responding to many tourist motives. Although the estimated number of visitors to the national parks is quite large, it should be borne in mind that only a small part of them is motivated to practice ecotourism.

The ecotourism sector per estimate receives 3,400,000 visitors. Majority of these visitors are from Romania. This is expected because most tourist sites are first exploited by indigenes before foreigners exploit them. If the indigenes are visiting these tourist sites, then it means these tourist sites are good and worth visiting. The question then remains: Why are these tourist destinations not receiving the attention they deserve? This is one of the questions that this research recommends for future researchers who may want to probe deeper into the tourist traffic in Romania.

The good side to tourism in Romania is that most tourists from foreign countries were more interested in the ecotourism, according to the report of the AER. From that same report, it was evident that the indigenes of Romania were not so keen in ecotourism. If the custodians of these beautiful tourist destinations are not so keen in enjoying them, it would be hard for them to sell the beauty of these ecotourism destinations to tourists who visit the country. The ecotourism sector of Romania has a competitive advantage over other tourist destinations in different countries. To benefit from it, therefore, the tourism sector of Romania has to be innovative about the way it is presented to the world, especially to prospective tourists. As Jain (2018) explained, any innovative idea that does not have a bit of emotional attachment does not stand the chance to make an impact as intended. Evidently, ecotourism is not so much appreciated by the indigenes of Romania. The people should therefore be encouraged to love and appreciate what they possess.

5. Conclusion

Simply visiting a national park or protected area is not ecotourism, but tourism in nature. One of the conditions for a tourism product to be considered ecotourism is its educational character and its contribution to the awareness of tourists and local communities.

Most major protected areas have made significant investments in visiting infrastructures during 2007–2015. Part of this infrastructure (visitor centres, educational and thematic routes) plays a special role in interpreting the natural and cultural heritage of these areas.

The Ecotourism Association of Romania, the most important ecotourism association whose members organise programmes with specific features in natural areas and in protected natural areas, estimates that the number of tourists attracted exclusively by its members amounted to 15,360, generating 44,000 of overnight stays in 2014.

Ecotourism in Romania should be encouraged and acknowledged as a competitive advantage over other countries' tourist destinations. This should encourage the sector to improve their operations, so as to make Romania's tourism stand out among other tourist destinations.

6. Recommendations

This research was based on data that were retrieved from the AER and the National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism. Although these data were beneficial to this study, the fact that most of the data were just estimations and not a representation of the actual number of visitors or tourists explains how the data record aspects of the tourism sector need to be improved. It is important to take accurate records of the number of visitors, tourists, their activities, as well as other vital information that may be needed to make solid analysis of the current state of tourism and how it could be improved. This research recommends that the tourism sector puts structures in place or sets up a department with clearly laid down procedures of acquiring accurate data.

In their research, Savasan, Yalvac, Uzunboylu and Tuncel (2018) explained that staff working in the tourism sector should be trained in such a way that they are able to embrace change and improve the face of tourism in their country. As evident in the data that were retrieved from the AER and NIR, Romania needs to improve their tourism sector. By training their staff to be more proactive and innovative, the country's ecotourism sector will stand out among other countries.

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