

Review

Ecotourism as a Factor of Sustainable Rural Development

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Abstract: This review aims to present the results of research on ecotourism as an innovative form in the field of tourism. In addition to ecotourism, the focus is on sustainable rural development, their mutual correlation as well as the impact they have on ecotourism. The development of ecotourism in the Republic of Serbia is not at the desired level, although our country has a predisposition that is reflected in well-preserved natural landscapes. The review highlights the advantages and benefits of ecotourism that contribute to rural and sustainable development in the long term. In addition, this paper highlights the strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities of ecotourism in the Republic of Serbia within the SWOT analysis. The results of the research accentuate the necessity of implementing ecotourism as a relatively new type of tourism and point to the need to appreciate and respect the environment.

Keywords: ecotourism; sustainable development; rural development; environment.

1. Introduction

The goal of the tourism industry is development following the principles of the environment and appreciation of all the benefits of nature. Tourism in its implementation implies the use of the environment, which shows the close connection between these two terms. Ecotourism is sustainable tourism and for this reason, implies respect for the appropriate principles. The concept of ecotourism was created on the idea of preserving the environment, so all participants get the maximum benefit. The development of ecotourism in the Republic of Serbia is not at the desired level, although our country has a fundamental advantage that is reflected in well-preserved natural landscapes. The reasons for which the situation is unfavorable are insufficient motivation and unsatisfactory profit. Ecologically and economically, ecotourism is an important activity in developed countries around the world because it provides ecotourists with a unique experience. Activities in their implementation aim to develop people's awareness of the importance of natural resources.

Rural development is based on the sustainable use of natural and cultural heritage and includes the continuous implementation of activities that are aligned with the needs of the local population. The economic aspect of rural development is a prerequisite for the continuous sustainable development of rural areas. Although there is a correlation between rural and sustainable development, sustainable development is more comprehensive. Sustainable development is a kind of future project that will bring with it numerous changes, which will have an innovative character.

The purpose of this review paper is to present the results of research into the concept of ecotourism, as a relatively new type of tourism. Furthermore, the paper will present a SWOT analysis that indicates the strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities for rural and local economic development of the selected area.

2. Concept of sustainable development and sustainable development of tourism

Sustainable development is present in the ecological, economic, political, and social spheres of life. Successfully organized sustainable development provides answers to the questions for whom it is carried out, what kind of development it is, how it is realized, and, finally, by what means. A prerequisite for development to be considered sustainable is that it takes care of the future, advocates the preservation of the environment, and serves everyone. Contemporary literature contains various definitions of sustainable development, the one that best describes sustainable development is from the Brundtland report (Our common future): "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without calling into question the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" [1]. For sustainable development to be realized as a project of the future, it needs to be implemented first at the local level, where the local government and the community are of crucial importance. Local sustainable development does not only refer to environmental management but also includes solving problems that have a social and economic character [2]. Today, sustainable development encourages the development of a new socio-economic direction, especially in the field of economy. In economic activity, sustainable development is a method that ensures the connection of ecological and economic factors

In countries around the world, tourism is recognized as a very important factor in economic development. The economic factor is the positive effect of tourism, however, in addition to these, the implementation of tourism also causes negative effects, which are most often caused by the excessive exploitation of certain areas. The expansion of tourism leads to greater pressure on natural resources, and because of this, there is a need to plan and control tourism. The concept of sustainable development of tourism is based on the long-term development of the tourist destination itself. This development is a basic instrument for solving environmental problems [3].

3. Concept and objectives of rural development

Rural development is a very complex concept, especially in modern conditions and from the point of view of economic policymakers. It should not be emphasized how important the correct determination of the future directions of rural and agricultural development is for our entire further socio-economic development. International experience, especially in developed countries, shows that the modern policy of sustainable rural development must be based on a territorial and multi-sector integral approach. Sustainable agricultural and rural development implies the preservation of soil, water, plant, and animal resources, it is technically applicable, economically profitable, and socially acceptable. The fundamental pillars of sustainable development are: economic, social, and ecological. Achieving sustainable development is a difficult task, as all three pillars must be harmonized. Rural development is aimed at achieving several goals: poverty reduction, widespread development, food security, and sustainable management of natural resources [4].

The basis for defining poverty is based on the financial profile of a person, household, or country, as well as on consumption analysis. A person is considered poor if his income is below a certain poverty line. It is characteristic of poverty that it is more often present in rural than in urban areas. The methods that are currently applied in the fight against poverty have not given the expected results, so it is necessary to consider some more innovative methods.

To achieve widespread development, it is necessary to reduce the negative effects caused by the differences between villages and cities, which show the degree of underdevelopment of a country. The participation of state authorities and the implementation of rural development policy measures would help achieve this goal to a certain extent.

In rural areas, the majority of the population is engaged in agricultural production. Food production is the most represented activity in local communities. Although the largest number of households is oriented towards agricultural production, lack of food and poverty are most prevalent precisely in rural areas. If the rural development policy was implemented in the right way, it would

mean better conditions for the development of agriculture and more efficient use of natural resources, all to achieve the third goal, food security.

Intensive agricultural production implies the application of agrotechnical measures that impair the quality of natural resources. Land is a basic resource that is necessary for food production. Excessive exploitation of it leads to the risk of being irretrievably degraded. Of all the policies that must be implemented in rural areas, sustainability is extremely important because it advocates meeting the needs of current generations, without questioning the ability of future generations to produce food.

4. Ecotourism

Ecotourism is an integral part of sustainable tourism and represents a trip that has an environmentally responsible character and involves visiting and touring untouched areas of nature to enjoy and appreciate nature. Ecotourism activities minimize the impact of visitors on the ecotourism destination and enable the socio-economic inclusion of the local population [5].

The basic idea in the implementation of ecotourism is adaptation to small groups and the performance of small-scale operations. For these reasons, it is not possible to achieve the massiveness of services or economies of scale. To be economically sustainable, ecotourism is characterized by a higher level of prices and total consumption by visitors, which in our country is not realistically achievable shortly. Market conditions and position in Southeast Europe, relatively underdeveloped infrastructure and overall tourist offer of Vojvodina and Serbia, and low general level of tourism promotion, do not provide opportunities for market valorization of ecotourism products at prices that would guarantee their economic sustainability, including coverage of the social costs of sustainability [6].

In the last years of the 20th century, authors faced the problem of defining ecotourism, so associations proposed their definitions. The most important of them are [5]:

- Ecotourism is a trip that initiates respect for the environment, and emphasizes the observation and protection of natural habitats,
- Ecotourism is a type of tourism that calls for respect for the ecological, social, and economic needs of the destination,
- Ecotourism integrates all factors and stages of travel - transportation, accommodation, and tour operators.

It is predicted that this type of tourism will experience significant growth in the future, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic. The ecotourism offer is increasingly present in the tourist offer of developed countries. The term green or sustainable tourism is often used in the wrong way and for propaganda purposes [7]. If tourist activities are not carried out in a responsible and controlled manner, irreparable damage can be caused to the natural environment.

As a form of tourism that is carried out in the area of protected nature, ecotourism has two basic tasks, the first is to meet the requirements of preserving the natural environment while at the same time meeting the needs of ecotourists, while the second relates to the realization of appropriate profits. There are nine forms of ecotourism [8]:

- Scientific and research tourism
- Cultural and educational tourism
- Excursion tourism
- Hunting tourism
- Fishing tourism
- Bird watching
- Photo safari
- Rural tourism
- Sports tourism

Pressure on the natural environment, changes in countries policies, and global changes caused the appearance of new tourists. These new tourists are flexible, aware, and initiate their own experiences. The basic starting point is to see and enjoy, not destroy. The literature describes three groups of ecotourists [2]: self-initiated tourists, organized travel ecotourists, and school and scientific groups.

5. SWOT analysis of ecotourism in the Republic of Serbia

In this chapter, the emphasis is on highlighting advantages and strengths, but also on noting weaknesses and shortcomings, which should be minimized (Table 1).

Table 1. SWOT analysis of ecotourism in the Republic of Serbia [9,10,11].

STRENGTH	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Favorable tourist-geographical location; - Numerous preserved and protected natural resources; - Multiculturalism; - Hospitality of the local population; - Diversity of the ecotourism tourism product. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inadequate tourist infrastructure; - Inadequate tourist signage in villages; - Unfavorable age and educational structure in villages; - Insufficient marketing presentation of ecotourism; - Insufficient state assistance in financing the development of ecotourism; - Inadequate tourist offer.
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Changes in tourist habits and values; - Connection of local administration with scientific and economic institutions for faster development of ecotourism; - Interregional cooperation with the EU; - Development opportunity, ecotourism is a growing market; - Proposed a series of measures to mitigate the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Political instability and socio-economic crisis; - Inadequate coordination of tourism institutions; - Strong competition from regions that are developing similar tourism products; - Potential threat to ecotourism if the principles of ecotourism and sustainable development are not respected; - COVID-19 pandemic.

Some of the most important activities are the natural potentials that our country abounds in, and the diversity of the ecotourism tourist product. Numerous opportunities would improve the development of this tourism concept, such as changes in the habits and values of potential tourists, international cooperation, but also the tendency of ecotourism to develop. The data that is not encouraging lies in the fact that the concept of ecotourism itself is not sufficiently represented in terms of marketing, as well as the fact that state institutions are not committed to the desired extent to change this. It is also important to note that the Covid-19 pandemic has had numerous consequences for the tourism sector and has accordingly slowed down the growth and development of ecotourism, both locally and globally.

6. Conclusions

Sustainable rural development is one of the economic, social, and environmental priorities in modern society. The key hypothesis refers to the statement that the sustainable development of rural areas depends to a large extent on the activities of all key actors of development, at all levels. Ecotourism is a new model of tourism in the context of developing awareness of the correlation and dependence of tourism and the environment. Today, there is more talk about sustainable tourism, as tourist movement not only in preserved nature but towards nature in general. The importance of ecotourism is increasing, not only as a sector with great potential for economic development - especially in underdeveloped areas, but also as a powerful tool for the conservation of the natural environment if it is properly planned, developed, and managed. Ecotourism in Serbia is poorly developed, despite numerous natural resources, due to abuse of nature and insufficient motivation for the development of this type of tourism. In Serbia, it is necessary to develop ecotourism, as an opportunity for the significant progress of tourism, with an increase in the national budget.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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