

## IMPROVING SERVICES QUALITY IN THE ROMANIAN RURAL TOURISM

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper presents a way in which the request could meet the rural tourism offer directly, thus ensuring a balance between them, and at the same time, a balance between services quality in ecotourism and the price paid for it by the client. The improvement of the ecotourism services quality will be determined by the fierce competition between accommodation units for obtaining the client.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Quality of services, rural tourism, protected areas management, ecotourism destinations, The Supply -Demand Interface Platform*

**JEL CLASSIFICATION:** *M10*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Troughout the world, there is an increased interest for agrotourism. Ecotourism is an emerging activity, which is attractive for growing numbers of tourists, which are eager to participate in nature conservation, preservation of traditional customs and trades. They admire the natural environment, watching species of wild animals and plants, and stepping into the relaxing, rich environment provided by the natural areas. In Romania, improving the quality of ecotourism services is essential for the development of rural tourism. Another objective that is analyzed in the present thesis is the maximization of the customer satisfaction, for this kind of services, by providing only the best quality as well as increased diversity.

### 2. PROTECTED AREAS MANAGEMENT

Ecotourism certification system developed by the Association of Ecotourism in Romania has as main purpose to help entities that provide services in ecotourism, more often than usual, for they will be interested to have the status of ecotourism business. As the Association of Ecotourism in Romania specifies, the ecotourism certification scheme is applied to three categories: ecotourism programs offered by tour operators or tour guides – maximum 15 participants, small pensions in rural areas and natural-maximum 25 rooms and ecodestinations-one or more communities in the natural areas (accessed at 15.04.2013 <http://www.capdd-bihor.org/index.php/turism-responsabil/83-certificarea-in-ecoturism>). At the same time, the Association of Ecotourism in Romania has stated a number of benefits which may result from the implementation of the certification scheme, such as (accessed at 15.04.2013 <http://www.capdd-bihor.org/index.php/turism-responsabil/83-certificarea-in-ecoturism>) :

- enables customers to better identify those products that can offer amazing experiences with nature and rural culture;

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- contributes to higher levels of trust in Romania ecotourism products on the international market;
- becomes a marketing tool for tour operators and destinations;
- ensures a high level of service quality;
- actively contributes to the conservation of nature and sustainable development at the local level;
- supports local governments in the protected areas for developing tourism with minimum negative impact on nature;
- provides a platform for joint activities between the entrepreneurial sector and nature conservation organizations.

Quality assurance in ecotourism is evidenced by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which also proposes a typology of ecotourism destinations, represented in Table 1. Typology of ecotourism destinations:

**Table 1. Typology of ecotourism destinations:**

<b>Ecotouristic destinations</b>	<b>Management objectives</b>
First category: Scientific reservations	Natural reservation : protected area, administrated only for scientific goals.
Second category : National Parks	National park: protected area, administrated only for protecting the ecosystems and for recreation.
Third category: Natures' monuments	Nature monument: protected area administrated mostly for conservation of the natural elements.
Fourth category : Natural reservations	Natural reservation: protected area administrated mostly for conservation throw the housekeeping interventions.
Fifth category: Protected landscape	Natural park: protected area administrated mostly for keeping the landscape untouched and recreation.

*Source:* Adapted from I. V. Dragulaescu (2012, p. 53-57)

Biosphere reserves (i.e.: Danube Delta biosphere reserve) and natural sites of universal natural heritage are under UNESCO protection. Association of Ecotourism in Romania has introduced a range of evaluation criteria of ecotourism services and ecotourism certification system which is based on voluntary activity and only companies with eco-certified products are entitled to use the logo of the "ECO-CERTIFIED" and benefit from the support of the Association of Ecotourism in Romania in the conduct of their activity, as shown in Figure 1. CERTIFIED ECO- ROMANIA:



**Figure 1. CERTIFIED ECO-ROMANIA**

*Source:* retrieved 15.04.2013

[http://www.turismrezezat.ro/00040000\\_Sistemul%20de%20certificare%20%22Eco-Romania%22.htm](http://www.turismrezezat.ro/00040000_Sistemul%20de%20certificare%20%22Eco-Romania%22.htm)

Association of Ecotourism in Romania has the roots of succesful international models, as the Strategy of Ecotourism Australia and Accreditation Program in Ecotourism and Tourism Linked to Nature (Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program). Accreditation program in ecotourism in

Sweden (Nature's Best) is the first ecotourism accreditation system in the northern hemisphere (accessed at 20.04.2013 <http://www.capdd-bihor.org/index.php/turism-responsabil/83-certificarea-in-ecoturism>).

This system of certification is a mechanism implemented in a practical way, in which the basic principles of ecotourism to ensure nature conservation and sustainable development of local communities through tourism, are being an important stage, bearing in mind that the World Tourism Organization has suggested since March 2003 that Governments must support initiatives that promote tourism certification (accessed at 20.04.2013 <http://www.capdd-bihor.org/index.php/turism-responsabil/83-certificarea-in-ecoturism>). The World Tourism Organisation argues that the leading citizens interested in ecotourism activities are coming from countries such as Sweden, Germany, United Kingdom or France.

The operational elements of the quality system in the specialized literature in the field of quality ecotourism are highlighted such services (S. Gresoi, 2011, p. 116, a):

- Marketing (identifying customers' requirements, defining the preliminary specifications, lays down the procedures for the launch of the service, sets out the procedures for advertising);
- Design (defines responsibilities for the design service, prepare specifications and service provision, the analysis of the design process, validation specifications);
- Service provision (observance of the requirements, the process of service provision, communicating with the customer).

The focus is on a sustainable and responsible management based on strategic and tactical decisions, the best not only for a short term, but also medium and long-term, decisions aimed for positively aspects of protected areas, and outlines a number of criteria in order to ensure the quality of ecotourism services in rural areas. There is an increased attention of the specialists in this domain for responsible marketing. Management instruments used by the specialists are the management plan which respects the protected areas, the rules of visiting the protected area, the plan of action under the legislation relating to natural and anthropogenic risks. The organizational subsystem, a component of the management system of protected areas is correlated with the information and decision-making. A special role is increasing the frequency of human resource information in relation with the importance of its work in the context of ecotourism destination.

ISO 9004-2 standard provides a model of quality assurance services that proposes for beneficiaries of this kind of services by compressing the following elements: the responsibility of leadership, human resources and other resources, the structure of the quality system.

The leadership responsibility policy in the field of services category finds itself, focused on the firm's quality image, the fundamental objectives pursued the role of staff with responsibilities in the implementation of the policy, and at the same time, the quality objectives within this standard gives particular attention to meeting the needs of customers, to improve service, continuous fulfilment of requirements relating to the environment and the effectiveness of the service (S. Gresoi, 2011, p. 115, b).

In the United Kingdom there are professional guides, specialized in ecotourism sector, they are trained to interact with clients and make them known codes of social conduct and environmental benefit from continuous training. At the same time, they have first aid diploma. In the United Kingdom there are three fundamental types of holiday: Footprint Holidays, Holidays and Discover Insight Holidays. Each of these types of vacations are promoted through sustainable marketing tools. Ecotourists have the opportunity to choose the type of holiday they want, following an in-depth characterization of ecotourism- products. Cottage Lodge in the United Kingdom provides its clients information on cycling routes, paths, riding routes for the area concerned. Ecotourism activities are proportioned as follows: physical activities, on their own, rest and leisure. Physical activities involve the circulation of cycling, hiking and horse riding. The second category, the days on your own, ecotourist is informed about the sights of the area, so he sets himself a little road trip. Recreation and leisure activities involve ways of relaxation.

In Romania there are very few ecotourism destinations, despite the fact that the country has massive potential in this respect, and this is due to poor promotion and the insufficiency of exploitation. Ecotourism destinations in Romania are highlighted: Danube Delta biosphere reserve, with an area of 580.000 hectares, followed by Iron Gates Natural Park, in the Apuseni Mountains, Rodna, Retezatul Area or Nera's Keys. They represent only a segment of over 1,000,000 hectares of protected natural areas.

In our country, the quality of ecotourism services is reduced and the legislation relating to this field has major deficiencies (accessed at 21.04.2013 <http://www.capdd-bihor.org/index.php/turism-responsabil/83-certificarea-in-ecoturism>).

The specialist in ecotourism, P. Nistoreanu, in his book "Tourism-Services Management" focuses on the concept of maximum quality, as the expression of the need for continuous improvement in the four areas of Deming: professional and personal development, interpersonal relations, management effectiveness and productivity of the organization.

At the same time, in the book mentioned above we meet the concept of Total Quality Management (TQM) which is defined as: the consensus of all personnel integrated into society, the society of management's commitment to the attainment of fundamental and derived, improving service quality, rational problems, as for example, the erroneous prediction of needs and requirements of customers. Financial resources are "the key" to improve the quality management system, consisting of among others, the organization's annual budget for specific objectives and general objectives, preventive action and, where's appropriate, corrective action (F. Popa, 2008).

### 3. RURAL TOURISM IN SALAJ COUNTY

We take for example Salaj County. Sălaj County is located in North-Western Romania. This County has a total area of 3864,4 km<sup>2</sup>. Today, it is composed of 4 cities, the county seat being Zalau. Its rural structure is composed of 57 communes and 281 villages (according INS 2013 <http://www.salaj.insse.ro/main.php?id=404> , accessed 20.09.2013). Salaj County population is presented in Table 2. Population of Salaj County:

**Table 2. Population of Salaj County**

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Population	245,638	244,952	243,157	242,493	241,840	241,014	240,220
Urban	100,118	100,104	99,353	99,196	99,512	99,473	99,215
Rural	145,520	144,848	143,804	143,297	142,328	141,541	141,005

*Source:* according INS 2013 , <http://www.salaj.insse.ro/main.php?lang=fr&pageid=410>, accessed 20.09.2013

In the table above it can be seen that, from one year to another, the county's population is dropping by about 0.4% constant. At the same time, the existing urban population registers fluctuations. In the first four years reviewed we observe a very small decrease, and in 2009, its number increase by 0.1%, in 2010 and 2011 there was registered a decrease of population in urban areas. The situation existing in the rural population registered steady declines throughout. In this county of Romania, tourism is not developed. Practice forms of rural and cultural tourism, it tries an improvement of tourism services by investing in tourist information centers on the area of the entire county. Among the sights of Salaj County may be mentioned: the many wooden churches, monasteries, Bic Strimba, Balan, the Wesselényi Castle, Báthory Castle, thermal baths (Boghis, Bizusa), landscape areas (Poiana cu Narcise, Gradina Zmeilor from Galgau Almasului), Porolissum Fortress from Moigrad, very well preserved ancient fortress and Botanical Garden in Jibou.

Below, you can see the situation of accommodation in Salaj County, summarized in Table 3. Touristic accommodation units:

**Table 3. Touristic accommodation units**

Touristic accommodation units	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Hotels and motels	3	3	3	3	7	8	10
Inns	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cottages	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Camping sites and type PO box units	1	1	1	2	2	2	2
Tourist Villas and bungalows	3	3	3	9	10	10	12
Camps for children and preschoolers	2	2	1	1	1	1	1
Urban guesthouses	4	4	4	4	8	12	12
Holiday Villages	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Rural guesthouses	3	3	3	4	12	9	9
Hotels or youth hostels	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Total	17	17	16	24	41	44	48

Source: according INS, 2013 <http://www.salaj.insse.ro/main.php?id=438>, accessed 20.09.2013

As we can see from the above table, the number of rural tourist guesthouses was constantly in the years 2005, 2006, 2007, and then registered a solid growth of 4 agropenssions, in 2008, to 12 rural guesthouses in 2009, to shrink their number in 2010 and 2011. Box-type units, tourist villas and bungalows have registered an evolution since the economic crisis in Romania has begun, while in 2010, tourist huts began to reign in the county.

Below is presented the following situation of tourist accommodation capacity corresponding to Salaj county, both before the outbreak of the economic crisis in Romania and in difficult economic context in the next three years, as can be seen in Table 4. Tourist accommodation capacity and tourist accommodation activity:

**Table 4. Tourist accommodation capacity and tourist accommodation activity**

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Existing tourist accommodation capacity (seats)	1,058	924	829	754	1,263	1,381	1,509
Function tourist accommodation capacity (thousand beds-days)	267.6	240.4	225.5	208.3	386.7	409.6	446.5
Arrivals overnight stays (thousands)	15	18.4	16.3	17.4	21.4	24.3	29
Stays-overnight (thousands)	61.6	63.7	54.2	64.2	61.7	70.2	86
Net use of the capacity indices (%)	23	26.6	24	30.8	16	17.1	19.3

Source: according INS 2013 <http://www.salaj.insse.ro/main.php?lang=fr&pageid=510>, accessed 20.09.2013

In the table above is pointed out that in the past three years look at tourist accommodation capacity, both the existence and operation, has registered an annual increase between 9-12%. In 2008, the capacity of tourist accommodation has registered the lowest values, 754 and 208,3 thousand beds-

days. Since 2005, until the advent of the economic crisis in Romania, accommodation capacity corresponding to the County Register steady declines to the lowest threshold in 2008. The Arrivals suffer from variations from one year to the next, in 2005, registering the lowest value of 15,000, while the largest, from 29,000 in 2011. For the period 2007-2010, it grows progressively. The situation is similar to enchantment-pointer, but the only year in which it is located are dropping, 2007 and 2009. Significant increase in 2011 when reaches the highest, 86.000.

To be able to achieve a vision of the situation in this county of Romania, from the tourist point of view, we examined the tourism function in Salaj, such:

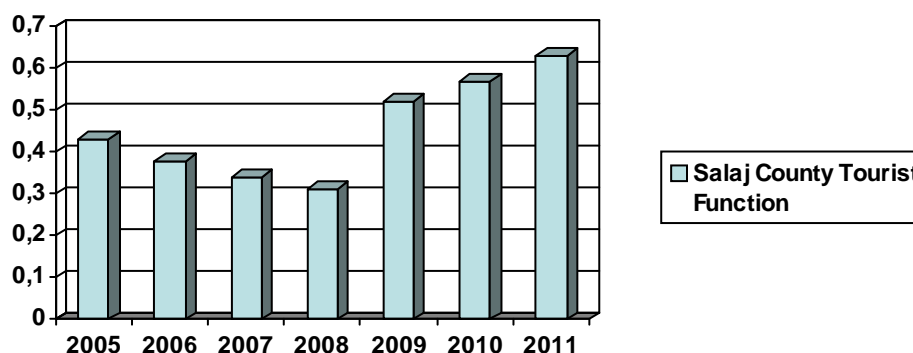
Salaj County Tourism Function (R. Minciu, 2004, p. 48)

$$FS_j = \frac{L_{Sj}}{PS_j} \cdot 100 \quad (1)$$

where: L<sub>Sj</sub> represents the number of accommodation places in Salaj county;

PS<sub>j</sub> is the permanent population of Salaj county.

As a result of the calculation performed on the timeframe 2005-2011, one can observe the evolution of the county tourist function mentioned in Figure 2. The Evolution of the Salaj County Tourist Function 2005-2011.



**Figure 2. The Evolution of the Salaj County Tourist Function 2005-2011**

In Figure 3 we can conclude that the tourist function of Salaj is going down, with 0.43% in 2005, in 2006 the 0,38%, next year reaching 0.34%, and in 2008 with the lowest level of 0.30%. Over the next three years, the tourist function register analyze growth year-on-year, so in 2009 is 0,52%, in 2010 increases by 0, 05% compared to the previous year, and 2011 stands at the highest level, 0.63%. In order to develop the tourism function of Salaj, promotion of rural tourism in this county, to diversify the supply of services by the accommodation units in Salaj, improvements and satisfy the needs of their clients, are to be presented by the Supply Demand Interface Platform, as the basic service provided to tourists.

#### 4. SUPPLY DEMAND INTERFACE PLATFORM

The process of continuous improvement of ecotourism services' quality leads to maximum capacity, which is based on customer orientation and a total quality management.

In order to satisfy the customer's need at maximum parameters the authors proposed an informatic model, Supply Demand Interface Platform, making a brief analysis of it, emphasizing the possible advantages and disadvantages, both from the point of view of accommodation units, as well as that of the potential consumer of this service, as you can see in Table 5. Advantages and disadvantages for the services provide by the Supply Demand Interface Platform and its customers below:

**Table 5. Advantages and disadvantages for the services provide by the Supply Demand Interface Platform**

<p><b>Advantages for the service providers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• an increase in the degree of occupation by attracting customers through an extended offer (more services at the same price);</li> <li>• profit growth;</li> <li>• reduced costs by eliminating travel agencies;</li> <li>• an increased level of quality offered by the accommodation units through modernizing the space and outfitting it with all the necessary equipment for service provision;</li> <li>• a continuous improvement in the quality of services, by including quality standards.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Disdvantages for the service providers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• additional expenses for the improvement of auxiliary services (e.g. the electirical power for the surveillance cameras);</li> <li>• environmental lighting;</li> <li>• royalties for the Supply-Demand Interface Platform;</li> <li>• auxiliary staff for the maintenance and repair of extra equipment, tour guides;</li> <li>• additional expenses for promoting the services provided.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Advantages for customers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the customer's possibility to choose the desired service at the desired price;</li> <li>• the customer's possibility to choose the (position of the) room;</li> <li>• the customer's possibility to travel without an attendant to a hotel that facilitates access to disabled persons;</li> <li>• ensuring the psychological comfort by involuntarily eliminating the "cheaper accommodation regret" (an effect that appeared and grew worse with the financial crisis);</li> <li>• eliminating the search times for finding the most convenient offer, according to specific requirements and standards (all offers are just one click away);</li> <li>• reduced reservation costs (since the number of phone calls is significantly diminished – to one call per accommodation unit).</li> </ul>	<p><b>Disadvantages for customers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• none.</li> </ul>

*Source:* Adapted from A. Gheorghe (2013, pp 351- 352, a)

When a customer advertises its availability for a certain period of time (i.e. he/she launches a demand), the accommodation units present their offers and compete for the expressed demand. In the end, the potential customer examines their proposals and chooses the version that best fits its needs and possibilities (A. Gheorghe, 2013, p 352, b).

This model will cause the accommodation units in Romania the implementation of several strategies for diversifying their services (e.g. accommodation services can add services such as food, transportation and guide services). This model can be highlighted also as an innovative

service, released on an electronic market in tourism, which in Romania is in its early stage, but with a massive development potential in this regard. At the same time, it can be regarded as a deep Blue Ocean, because it focuses on diversification of ecotourism services at a low cost, eliminating the costs of promotion and the commission directed to the travel agencies, taking over by each of their functions and emphasizing at the same time, the golden opportunities of accommodation units determined by bidding in the competition held on the above-mentioned platform.

Accommodation services' quality in ecotourism using Supply Demand Interface Platform is illustrated by a series of indicators, as follows:

1. The volume of accessings = number of website accessings
2. Physical access area on the website: up, down, central
3. Seasonal statistics: number of clients at the beginning of the season, number of clients at the end of season
4. The request structure for the tender packages: only the accommodation services; accommodation services, food services, guidance services; etc.
5. Customer Feedback
6. Future accessing volume
  - number of actual customers = share of tourists returning after first visit once
  - number of loyal customers = the number of tourists who return after their first visit with a number of comebacks: twice, three times, more than three times, etc.
7. Scheduling of the websites' access: number of accessings the website between 8: 00 A.M. and 14: 00 P.M., 14: 00 P.M. and 20: 00 P.M., 20: 00 P.M. and 8: 00 A.M..

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, there can be identified as a beneficial effect for the economic aspect of local communities a higher number of jobs in the accommodation units, thanks to their services diversification provided by the accommodation units. At the same time, the social aspect of local communities can improve the development of the rural tourism industry.

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