

DIRECT ASSESSMENT OF THE ROMANIAN ECOTOURISM SERVICES QUALITY USING THE FOCUS GROUP METHOD

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ABSTRACT

Assessing the ecotourism quality by specialists from Romania, was considered to be useful, using the qualitative research marketing method Focus Group, having the main objective, determining the strengths and weaknesses of the ecotourism quality in the country. This research was presented in the doctoral thesis "Quality of ecotourism services. Methods of evaluation and its improvement strategies in Salaj County. " In analyzing the ecotourism field can be proved that it is necessary for a better communication between travel agencies of incoming and units that provide accommodation service , food, recreation and transportation, so that potential ecotourists benefit from those ecotourism complex packages. It is also pointed out that, through the implementation of eco systems in accommodation units, and also by providing for consumption of products containing "bio" menus, the quality of ecotourism is not put under question and helps meeting demand and completing it, leading to its improvement.

KEY WORDS: *the role of ecotourism, ecotourism services management, ecotourism services quality, Focus Group Method, human resources in ecotourism.*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: *M30, Q20, Z30.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Analyzing the specialized literature both at the international level, as well as national one, it may be said that ecotourism is a form of rural tourism in natural areas having traditional and cultural traits. Ecotourism services may be regarded as tourism services which have a number of characteristics specific to green tourism. Ecotourism is regarded as a form of a smart tourism, because it helps to preserve natural resources, the maintenance of physical and mental health of the tourist, and at the same time, brings benefits to local communities.

During the research presented in this paper, the quality of romanian ecotourism services was measured using opinions of ecotourism consumers and the units that provide this type of services.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The System of Certification in Ecotourism made by Ecotourism Association from Romania which has as main purpose helping entities providing ecotourism services, mainly on those who want to have the status of "ecotourism businesses."

The Ecotourism Association from Romanias' Management sustains the Certification System in Ecotourism by applying it to three categories: ecotourism programs offered by tour operators or tour guides-maximum 15 participants, small accommodation units in rural areas-maximum 25 rooms and "ecodestinations"-one or more communities within natural areas (<http://www.capdd->

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bihor.org/index.php/turism-responsabil/83-certificarea-in-ecoturism). At the same time, The Ecotourism Association from Romania has stated a number of benefits which may result from the implementation of the certification system (<http://www.capdd-bihor.org/index.php/turism-responsabil/83-certificarea-in-ecoturism> retrieved at August 22, 2015). By implementing this system, customers can easily identify those products and services that it can offer them unforgettable experiences, related to nature and rural culture. Another benefit consists in increasing the level of confidence in the Romanian products and services on the ecotourism international market. The level of quality services increases through the implementation of measures adopted in order to improve it permanently, following communication with customers, taking into consideration the appropriate and complete description of the service, to specify clearly its facilities and prices. Specialists in the quality field recommend specifying how to resolve problems that arise along the way and provide the necessary means in order to achieve a transparent communication between provider and recipient (Gresoi, 2011, p. 116).

In Romania, only companies which offers eco-certified products are entitled to use the logo "ECO-CERTIFIED" and benefit from the support of Ecotourism Association from Romania in order to develop their activity (<http://www.eco-romania.ro/ro> retrieved at May 12, 2014).

In the marketing research literature, through direct research methods, there may be mentioned qualitative researches as in-depth interview or Focus Group and quantitative research as survey (<http://www.imas-inc.com/cercetare-cantitativa/> retrieved at October 16, 2015, <http://www.imas-inc.com/cercetare-calitativa/>, retrieved at October 16, 2015).

Specialists in the marketing research field stated the fact that „achieving selective marketing research is a complex process which involves the establishment of general purpose, objectives, assumptions and variables, establishing research organization studied, and also, methods of data collection and implementation questionnaire „(Balaure et al, 2003, p 152-153).

In the questionnaire research contents that compose the selective research the main focus is on (Balaure et al, 2003, p 152-153): " the type of used questions (open and closed), their quality (to be expressed using a simple language, to be representative) and the order of the questions (starting with general questions and continuing with specific ones)".

Concerning the qualitative research method, specialists in the field of marketing researches mentioned the fact that there are a lot of similarities between the study through focus group and in-depth interview.

Focus Group Method fades through a set of features, such as (Cătoiu et al, 1999, pp. 36-37) :

- *"group card, document drawn up by the moderator, which must contain the information which will be sent to content analysis: time, date, place, time of the interview, number of participants, the general ambience, group structure, the problems encountered during the debate of the group";*
- *"meeting recording is performed with voice recorders or cameras, and then the information collected will note manual";*
- *analysis of the data obtained allows content to be subjected to the process of analysis not only of the members of the group, but also between groups. "*

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Focus Group research was conducted on March 7, 2009, 15:00 within the Artifex University from Bucharest. In order to achieve it, the steps set out were as follows:

- A. Establishment of an information group.
- B. Establishment of a questionnaire based on an in-depth interview.
- C. Analysis of the content of the results obtained.

The group that took part in the Focus Group meeting was composed of 27 members: 4 members representing non-governmental organizations and associations working in the field of ecotourism; 7 members representing employers in the context of ecotourism services and their representatives; 10

members were the beneficiaries of ecotourism ecoturisti respectively and the other 6 members were academics who teach in the field of ecotourism, rural tourism. The meeting kicked off on the basis of a questionnaire, which sought, the achievement of an in-depth interview. In the article are presented open questions or content questions which formed the basis of the qualitative marketing research through Focus Group method. Focus Group participants are mentioned in the doctoral thesis "Quality of ecotourism. Methods of evaluation and its improvement strategies in Salaj County. "

4. QUALITATIVE MARKETING RESEARCH THROUGH FOCUS GROUP-FRAME QUALITY EVALUATION OF ECOTOURISM SERVICES IN ROMANIA

Content analysis was highlighted in a series of elements that members of the groups emphasized. The Group made up of representatives of professional associations or non-governmental organizations active in the field of ecotourism have answered the first question from the interview focusing, in particular, on the need of the people (ecotourists) to restore the working capacity and to recreate in a soothing natural environment, away from crowded areas and sources of pollution. They considered ecotourism, since it represents a factor for maintaining the health of the people, but also for exploiting the natural potential, available to Romania, and at the same time, traditional cultural movement specific to each geographical area.

The group made up of employers and their representatives working in the field of ecotourism, believes such activity, mainly by citing the need to harness the potential of traditional geographical areas and led to unemployment. This group considers useful the work of ecotourism, for reasons relating to the need for the achievement of human contacts and labour absorption of the disadvantaged.

The group made up of beneficiaries of ecotourism services think this activity is useful, citing their need for escape in the middle of nature, far from noise and pollution. They consider useful to rebuild their capacity, in nature, given that, your stay can provide and related services for recreation and leisure.

The group made up of academics working in the field of ecotourism or agro-tourism, deems useful such activity, mainly through the human need to find a remedy against stress, away from noise pollution, given that, business in ecotourism and natural potential of value on each geographical area. Ecotourism is all the more necessary, tourism contributes annually, with a significant proportion from the creation of gross domestic product.

Analyzing the answer to the question *What role does eco-tourism have?*, it was found that almost all representatives of the groups emphasized the need to harness the potential of natural, material, financial and human resources available to our country, and harnessing conditions favoring pertaining to its traditional culture. Ecotourism potential unabsorbed fosters human labour market, as well as misuse of funds and financial resources available to the national economy. Almost all members of the groups and, in particular, representatives of professional associations and teachers considered that, through appropriate cooperation with employers in the sector and promote ecotourism services economically through multimedia channels, it may reach a positive situation for the local and national economy, which led to the accelerated pace at the blurring of economic and financial crisis.

Members of the employers' group and their representatives believes that non-governmental organisations and professional associations must make a substantial effort to promote Romania as a country receiving of ecotourism, as well as in-service, proper disadvantaged who might find a job in ecotourism.

The group made up of professional associations and non-governmental organizations be more active participation of employers in creating packages of specific services and monitoring of ecotourism business in an active manner to create benefits for both companies and for the ecotourists, in order to reduce unemployment rate and increase the degree of satisfaction of ecotourism consumers.

Teachers' group in the field of ecotourism believes that through a better assessment of the potential of natural resources available to our country is to create prerequisites for profitable business in ecotourism and reducing the effects of economic and financial crisis.

To the question *How do you see the activity of ecotourism in conditions of acute financial and economic crisis, on the way to fade?*, groups made up of ecotourism services consumers, educators and employers consider that this kind of activity will develop in Romania, because it might be one of the solutions to get out of the economic crisis that has been installed in our country, in 2008.

The question: *You've encountered in your work issues related to the quality of ecotourism?*, ecotourists group and academics, were the ones who responded. Ecotourists have focussed mainly on quality transport deficiencies pending the complexes and the lack of adequate recreational services which provide them satisfaction on ecotourism during the stay. Teachers' group emphasized the lack of labeling and appropriate assessment of the material base of ecotourism, deeming useful involvement with more attention, in this connection, employers, associations and ANTREC. Solving these problems takes, according to respondents, the manner in which they can collaborate at the same time, both management and professional associations, in order to ensure full satisfaction of romanian ecotourists and foreigner ones.

Concerning the question number 5, *If you were to evaluate the quality of ecotourism on a scale of 1 to 5, of which you have benefited from the services that are available, which would be this assessment?*, group consisting of accommodation units management, but also groups consisting of ecotourists and academics, were the ones who responded. Accommodation units managers have overstated, on numerous occasions, the quality of the services it's provided, and non-governmental organizations from ANTREC are the ones that should help them more for a correct evaluation of the material base and a natural recovery potential of traditional upper and human resources available to romanian eco-tourism. Evaluation mean of this group was 4,32. The Group made up of academics, evaluated the average Romanian ecotourism services score of 3.04, considering that the main causes of a medium level of ecotourism in Romanian ecotourism is the absence of concern for promoting and resolving situations of deadlock (a public outcry on the part of customers and the absence of adequate recreational services). Mean of ecotourists group assessment was under 3 points, because of a lack of concern on the part of employers, for the activity in respect of supported services, transport and accommodation.

At question number 6, *In Romania, ecotourism benefits from use of geographical factors (natural potential varied), with relevant and diverse composition, which at times was put into value, staff working in the field of romanian ecotourism lacks only minor extent by a suitably qualified and important means for training. The base material is not appropriate in the natural potential and everything traditional: consists mainly in small family businesses or business sized, which due to lack of promotion, enter relatively quickly in the bankruptcy process. How do you assess these issues and how you think useful?*, the group made up of employers considered that it is not sufficiently ANTREC in process of continuous professional development of the personnel working in the field of ecotourism, which is why unemployment in some counties with natural, traditional and cultural potential is relatively high, and businesses may not thrive for this reason. Teachers' group considers appropriate the involvement of employers useful in training and handling the financial funds at their disposal carefully from this point of view.

The groups consider that the main cause of the fact that businesses are entering into bankruptcy, is the lack of an appropriate government-wide promotion of Romania as an ecotourism receiving country.

Concerning the question number 7, *Schools and highschool have not so far the means to create conditions for the future ecotourists education, environmentalist or training of specialists able to give added value to the ecotourism businesses and highlight the optimum level, the natural and material ecotourism available potential. How useful do you think is solving such a situation? Suggest new ways to support romanian ecotourism*, responded mainly groups made up of professional associations and non-governmental organizations and academics. They considered

useful to solving such cases by creating an appropriate framework for inclusion in the syllabus of university study and pre-university disciplines such as Ecological education of citizens, Ecotourism and rural tourism, Entrepreneurship in ecotourism, Management of ecotourism base material, Management of ecotourism natural potential.

At question number 8 *What measures could be suggested for better management of financial funds and appropriate experience in the field of promoting Romanian ecotourism?*, was responded with predominantly by academics anchored in ecotourism. Considering that ecotourism and rural tourism are fields that provide a better response to the factors of tourism in order to improve the conditions ensuring the rebuilding of full employment capacity, most respondents emphasized the need for the creation of business schools in the field of rural tourism and ecotourism, where those who want to engage in this field (people without jobs or those who wish to have access to grants) can benefit from appropriate training to ensure their access to the latest knowledge in the field. In general, respondents considered that appropriate training can give access course toward grants and judicious administration of their ecotourism purposes.

At question number 9, *Leisure services able to highlight the material base and natural potential of Romanian ecotourism are relatively underdeveloped. Have you ever benefited from the activity of those kind of services? If so, how do you rate it on a scale of 1 to 5?*, responded principally groups composed by ecotourists and ecotourism university teachers. Their answers were rated recreational services at a level between 1.85 and 2.90, as, indeed, Romanian ecotourism generally has a lack of quality regarding this type of ecotouristic services. Respondents emphasized that, in general, services are reduced to organize cultural and traditional activities annual or biennial services combined with traditional food services.

At question number 10, *Ecotourism specific transport services in Romania benefits from a small measure of attention. Have you ever benefited from such services? If so, how do you rate on a scale of 1 to 5?* answered the groups of ecotourists and university teachers. Of course, it appeared in their answers, the interest for such services, even though they are poorly developed in Romania, and their valuation was set at a low level (between 1.20 and 1.90).

At question number 11, *Accommodation services from which benefits Romanian ecotourism are available in small measure of appropriate classification and labelling. How do you evaluate these services on a scale of 1 to 5?*, respondents replied that indeed they have benefited from such services, regardless of the group of which they were part. The assessment was set between 2.75 and 3.25, indicating a relatively low level of their quality, nor to the labelling or the classification is not possible.

In the case of question number 12, *Romanian cuisine, rich in variety and calories are benefiting from its implementation in agro and ecotourism accommodation units, by traditional recipes from specific regions and geographical areas. How do you rate the food services specific to the Romanian ecotourism on a scale of 1 to 5?*, respondents who have received such services, believes that the primary motivation of ecotourists, after recreational services is some traditional snack menus specific to each region. Romanian ecotourism benefits from the great experience of some people who were also old (women). They shall, in the opinion of the respondents, respect the Romanian traditional recipes, Romanian culinary arts-specific. Here's why, also the evaluation of these services, it was situated at a level above the average (4.28).

The results obtained from the analysis of information collected through qualitative marketing research Focus Group, constitutes a useful undertaking to outline strategies and action plans in order to improve the quality of ecotourism.

5. CONCLUSIONS

People interested in developing businesses in the field of ecotourism need considerable financial funds. Financial funds can be generated by bank loans, access to European funds, and at the same time, the establishment of a cooperative.

These funds are obtained most easily by specialized institutions to access european funds grants, as can be seen in Figure 1:

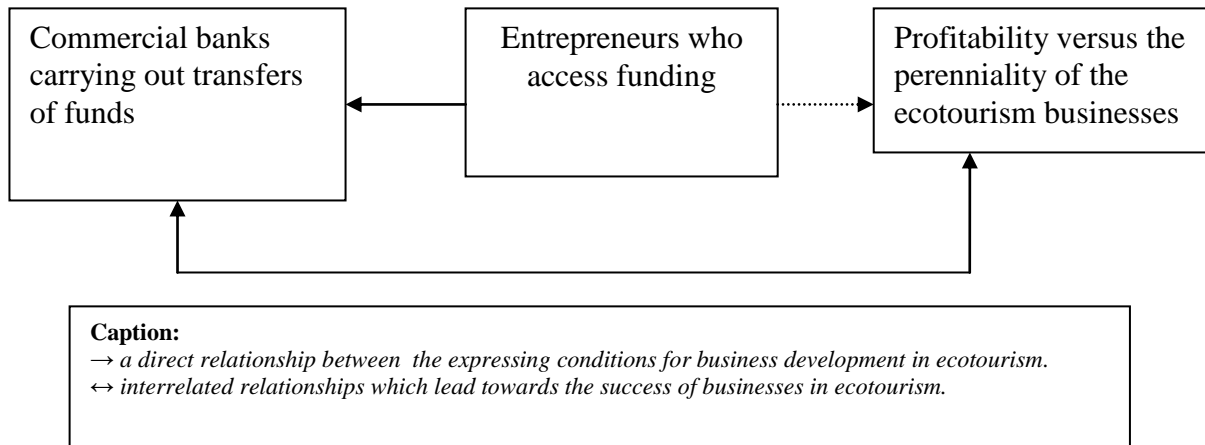
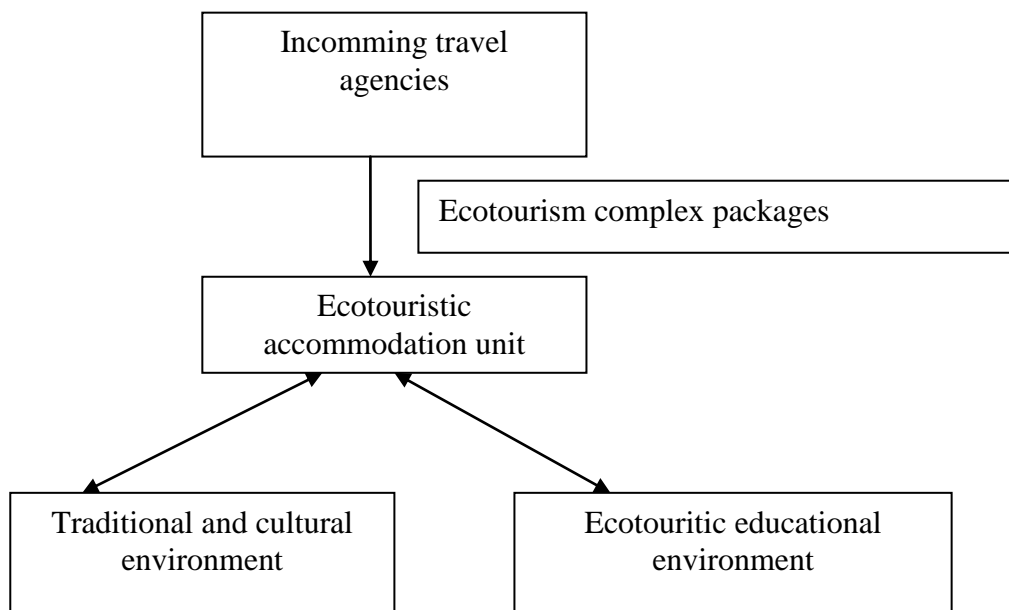


Figure 1. The relevant relationships in ecotourism specifying grant financial function

Source: Made by authors

The current situation makes these funds available to potential entrepreneurs, and that they can access after a cumbersome procedure (report forms that must be filled carefully, concrete evidence of the profitability of possible businesses), cannot get into the direct beneficiaries ' accounts, whereas commercial banks should carry out transfers, do not proceed accordingly, blocking these funds on its own purposes for long enough periods. Entering late in the bank accounts of beneficiaries, funds stops, and their success is questionable. Is needed a review of the methodology for entering into funds possession, on financial grants that beneficiaries are entitled to acquire, to commence in good time, profitable business in ecotourism, so that quality of services improve and the express intentions of the entrepreneurs are put at the disposal of ecotourists, such as complex packages to provide a comfortable stay and highlight the natural and cultural potential of the geographical areas in which they will be implemented.



Caption:

→ The direct relationship between the factors which determine the success of business in ecotourism.

↔ Two-way relationship between conditionalities bifactoriale of business success in ecotourism.

Figure 2. Direct links in ecotourism field which details the arrivals of foreign ecotourists

Source : Made by authors

In Figure 2 is shown the relationship between incoming travel agencies and entrepreneurs in the field of ecotourism:

As shown in Figure 2, entrepreneurs in the ecotourism field, want to ensure the perennality of the cooperate businesses, mostly with incoming travel agents that provide service packages that are varied and interesting for foreign tourists who wish to spend their holidays in tranquility in a pleasant natural environment and positioned geographically, mostly marked by a specific traditional cultural environment. Participants in qualitative research through Focus Group, in the light of their experience in the field, saw that ecotourism, even though it is supported by the entrepreneurs with the best of their intentions, do not receive sufficient ongoing conditions, because the road transport infrastructure, which should ensure access to the areas and towns with ecotourism potential, has a lack of sufficient funds and also a lack of judicious allocation of funds and financial resources which should ensure its functionality and help it become an effective means of consolidating business profitability in various fields of activity.

Ecotourism, in the sense provided by experienced participants in qualitative marketing research through Focus Group, is an activity through which it can be experienced new methodologies to educate the population in the spirit of growing environmental and information among actual or potential consumers of specific services.

Through ecotourism, a tourist does not benefit only specific conditions of food but also of natural environment or accommodation comfort to ensure restoration of work capacity and maintaining the health, as it can be seen in Figure 3:

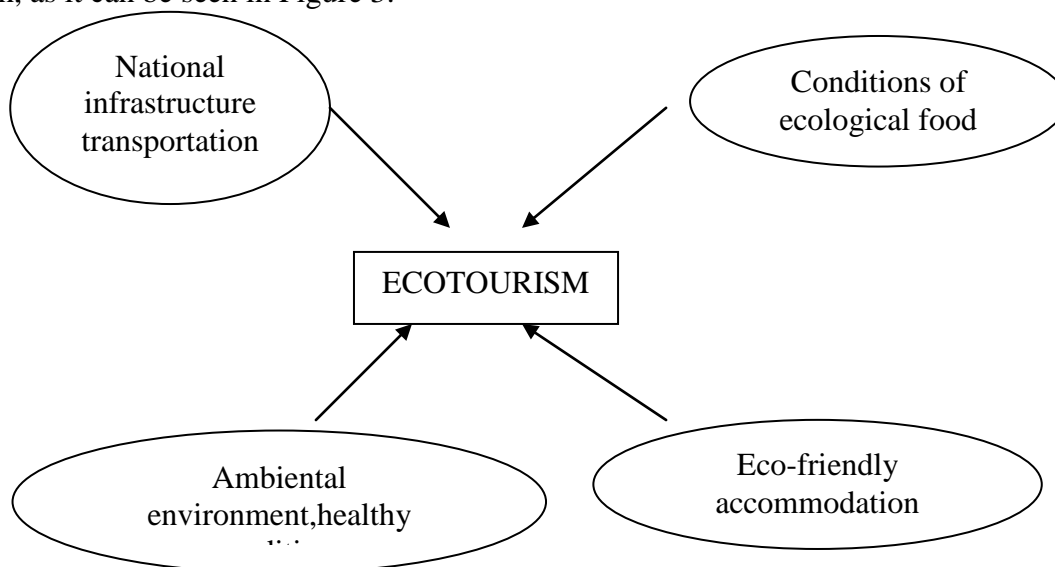


Figure 3. Direct relations which details the operation of ecotourism

Source: Made by authors

In Figure 3 it can be seen the quality of ecotourism services dependence by environmental factors or techniques or technology that makes up the ecotourism services package.

Ecotourism represents a conditional activity, both multifactor frequency with which consumers are choosing to spend their holidays in hostels, and at the same time, ecotourism business in this field whose functionality depends on the management of ecotourism accommodation units and the human resource quality that works in those units. Also, training of staff who took direct contact with ecotourism consumers is important.

This relationship can be seen below, in Figure 4:

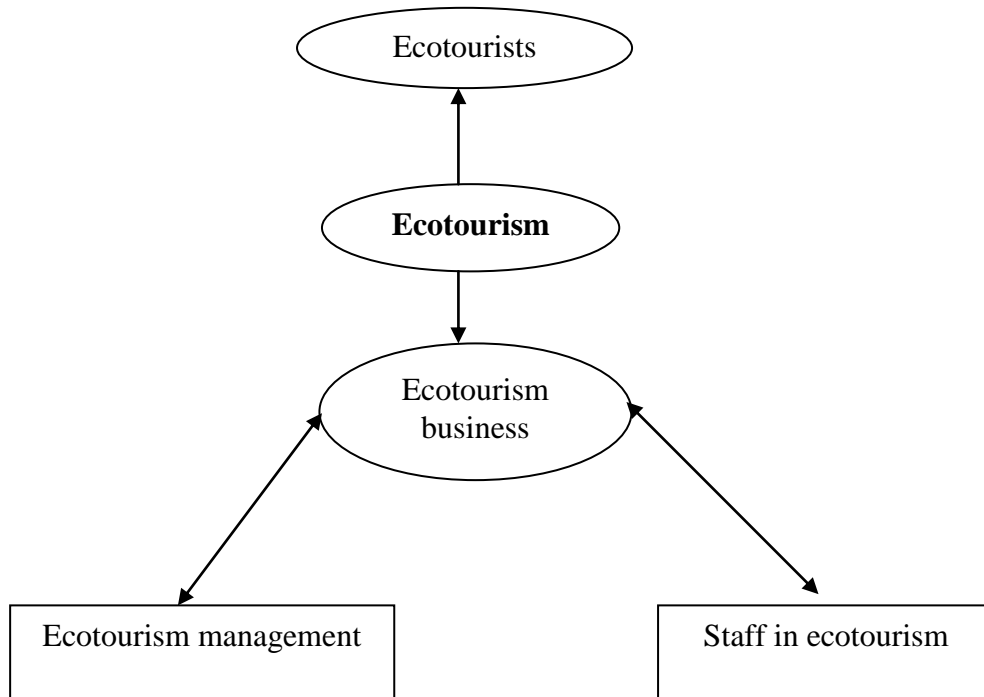


Figure 4. Direct relations regarding the benefits of ecotourism

Source: Made by authors

Ecotourism promotes through the services it makes available, development of traditional cultures and respect for the traditionalist professions. Thus it was that many hostels, in particular ecotourism units abroad, but also from Romania, include in their service packages, also occupational services that promotes traditionalist type respect for nature and the environment. Such occupational services involve learning some crafts within the ecotouristic staying, which enable consumers to approach more traditionalist culture of some peoples or nations.

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