IS IT POSSIBLE TO RUN ECOTOURISM IN ROMANIA? A COMPARISON WITH THE ECOTOURISM IN THE U.S.A.

E POSIBILĂ DESFĂŞURAREA ECOTURISMULUI ÎN ROMÂNIA? O COMPARAŢIE CU ECOTURISMUL DIN S.U.A.

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Abstract: *The ecotourism tradition and experience make the U.S.A. the most eloquent model of practicing a sustainable tourism. Romania is only at the beginning of ecotourism development, and a comparison with the U.S. ecotourism could be excluded from the start, since the protected area network in Romania is only „on paper". Is it possible to run ecotourism in Romania? The answer is certainly „NO"...or at least not now, or not in the near future.*

Key words*: ecotourism, the theory of the competitive advantage of nations, the United States of America, Romania*

INTRODUCTION

The U.S.A. has the most advanced ecotourism services and is the world leader in ecotourism arrivals and receipts. The ecotourism tradition and experience make the U.S.A. the most eloquent model of practicing a sustainable tourism.

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MATERIALS AND METHODS

In drafting this paper, we interpreted the statistical data provided by the National Park Service (www.nps.gov), we used the information from the tour guides of some U.S. national parks (www.nps.gov), as well as some studies in this field regarding the economic impact of ecotourism (Stynes, 2009). The theoretical research is based on the papers mentioned in the references below.

RESULTS AND DISCUTIONS

Is it possible to run ecotourism in Romania? Could we state that ecotourism runs actually within one of our national parks or even one of our Biosphere Reservations? The answer is certainly „NO"...or at least not now, or not in the near future.

The following approach tries to prove this idea, using „Porter's diamond". This is about the theory of the competitive advantage of nations formulated by Michael Porter, a theory according to which some nations' industries are more competitive than others due to certain conditions. Porter identified four determinants or factors that may be compared to the facets of a diamond: resources, domestic demand, related and supporting industries, and firm strategy, structure and rivalry.

Resources:

- The primary ecotouristic resources or the natural endowment of the U.S.A. are richer than Romania's: a higher number of national parks, a larger protected area, and an extraordinary variety of landscapes, or flora and fauna species.
- The U.S. ecotouristic infrastructure is much more developed than Romania's (accessibility, roads, cable transport, internet and mobile phone access within the parks).
- The environmental education - the Americans are thought from childhood to love and protect nature as a patriotic duty, to do sports and experiment outdoor activities (e.g. junior scout camps). Therefore, the environmental education in Romania should start in the family and continue in the elementary school.
- The ecotourism know-how and tradition are incomparable, since Romania is only at the beginning of ecotourism development.
- Ecotourism capital and investments are low in Romania (except for the Danube Delta and Retezat National Park).

Domestic demand (the home market):

- Domestic demand for ecotourism results in a high quality of this activity: an American ecotourist asks for a high quality standard of the ecotouristic services, and this request determines an according answer of the ecotourism operators. On the other hand, a Romanian tourist is content with minimum quality at lowest price (so that a decent, somewhat "elevated" offer may not be taken).

Related and supporting industries

- The competitive success is connected with to the success in the related industries: the U.S. national parks prefer local suppliers, so that construction, transport, small commerce, food and accommodation companies developed nearby. All these related and supporting industries contribute to maintaining a high ecotouristic flow in the U.S. national parks.
- In Romania, there are no or few facilities in the areas adjacent to national parks. The local people are not encouraged and trained (educated) to support the development of the respective national park and consequently the related industries. Often the investors are foreigners, they leave after the resources are exhausted, and local community has nothing to gain.

Strategy, structure and rivalry:

- There is a strong rivalry between the U.S. national parks, especially between those located in the same state. Their purpose is to attract a higher number of ecotourists. This competition is extremely benefic for service quality, infrastructure investment, innovation, and new ecotouristic program development.
- The U.S. national parks are not organized as some non-profit organizations; on the contrary, they are organized and managed as companies that bring benefits to the local communities, while the mission of their administration is to provide quality services, protect nature, share environment knowledge, educate tourists toward an "eco" or "green" spirit.
- The employees of the U.S. national parks are well trained and educated in the field of ecotourism, and they are also polyvalent (tour guides, mountain rescuers, orators, pedagogues, specialists in local flora and fauna, alpinists, etc.). These are qualities difficult to achieve by the employees (few and less remunerated) of the Romanian national parks. For example, Retezat National Park has 15 employees, while Great Smoky Mountains National Park has 1,000 times more employees (although the area of Retezat NP is only 4 times smaller than that of Great Smoky Mountains NP).

CONCLUSIONS

What exactly do we need to implement ecotourism, as a form of sustainable tourism, in Romania? In order to run ecotourism in Romania, the followings are necessary:

- infrastructure, accessibility, cable transport, different facilities, internet and mobile phone access on the entire protected area (e.g. emergency number, mountain rescue);

- entrepreneurs to invest according to the characteristics of each national park;
- governmental aid to develop the respective areas, as exemption from taxation for the local investors during a certain period;
- creating an ecotouristic mentality, starting with the environment education in family and elementary school;
- tourists' proper behavior and respect for nature.

In conclusion:

- it takes decades to achieve a competitive advantage: the history of the U.S. national parks spreads over 150 years;
- the governmental policies (regarding infrastructure, tourism, education, facilities for investors, governmental funds or facilities to attract grants to develop this sector) have a strong influence on the "diamond".

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