ECOTOURISM - A MODEL OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM MEANS

ECOTURISMUL – MODEL DE VALORIFICARE DURABILĂ A RESURSELOR TURISTICE

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Abstract: *Ecotourism –"the responsible travel to natural areas that preserve the environment and sustain the local people welfare."(The International Ecotourism Society). Once we entered the new millennium, we became increasingly aware of the complexity, fragility and priceless value of our planet, and at the same time, tourism tends to become a more and more popular expression of this consciousness. The good thing is that the same rise of tourism creates many opportunities for both conservation and for the welfare of local communities. In response to the increased interest in knowledge of nature, and also in the alarm signals coming from the far corners of the world, a new ethic of travel, called eco-tourism, gradually emerged.*

Key words: *ecotourism, resources, environment*

INTRODUCTION

Due to the transport and information technology development, more and more remote areas became accessible, which contributed to a fast rise of tourism in natural areas.

It becomes more and more obvious that the development of tourism in sensitive natural areas in the absence of appropriate management can present a threat to the integrity of ecosystems and local communities. A growing number of visitors in the fragile areas from the ecological point of view can lead to strong environment degradation. Also, local communities and indigenous culture can be negatively influenced by the increased influx

of foreign visitors with a modern lifestyle. In addition, climate changes, economic instability, and political and social conditions can make from travelling a risky business, especially in the areas strongly dependent on the economic activity.

Ecotourism can provide so much needed revenue to protect national parks and other natural areas, income that could not be obtained from other sources. Also, ecotourism can be a viable alternative of economic development for communities with fewer income-generating activities. Furthermore, ecotourism can increase the level of education and awareness of the tourists, turning them into enthusiastic supporters of conservation of natural and cultural environment. Ecotourism is rooted in the conservation movement of the biosphere. It proved to be an important source of revenue for natural areas that needed protection. In the early '80s, entrepreneurs in tourism based on natural attractions began to prosper around the world, along with growing interest in environmental and outdoor trips.

The emergence of travel and camping equipment of high performance has encouraged furthermore this phenomenon. Some companies have realized that they might have the initiative to preserve the environment through sponsorship of local conservation groups or fundraising. Soon, they learned that by training and employing locals to run the business they had only to win, and at the same time, they could provide important benefits to local people.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In the conception of this study, the authors used the following methods of work: identification and data collection, processing, analysis, observation and their interpretation. For identification and data collection there was used national and foreign literature and also the Internet.

Following collection, processing and interpreting of all necessary information for this task, we could to formulate some conclusions.

The four basic criteria of ecotourism are: involving the conservation characteristics, it takes place in the natural and cultural areas, it encourages the community involvement and it supports the welfare of local residents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

There are many features associated with the idea of ecotourism, including: sustainability, responsibility, protection, conservation, environmental friendly attitude, and not the least "green", a trendy word for this new industry. Hence a lot of confusion between ecotourism and terms such as: sustainable tourism, responsible tourism, alternative tourism, green tourism, and geo-tourism.

Ecotourism is a sustainable version of tourism in natural areas, including at the same time elements of rural and cultural tourism. Besides subscribing to the principles of sustainable tourism, ecotourism has specific principles: it contributes actively to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, it includes local communities in planning, development and operation activities, and it contributes to their welfare, it involves complete and interesting explanations for visitors, regarding the natural and cultural resources, it is intended mainly to individual visitors and also to small organized groups.

Ecotourism always incorporates various activities in nature (hiking, mountain climbing, observing the living beings in their natural habitat, etc.), but it may include cultural activities, too. Ecotourism is an important educational component, it is a chance to learn respect for nature, for the local culture, and for some it is a chance to self-reflection being inspired by the beauty of the surroundings. Another characteristic aspect of ecotourism is to obtain benefits for the local community. This means hiring local staff, sourcing local products, local involvement in decision making and organization of tourist activities.

Ecotourism is a component of sustainable tourism. In fig.1 one can observe where ecotourism is in the evolution process towards sustainable forms of tourism.

The figure also shows that ecotourism is a sustainable version of tourism in natural areas, including at the same time elements of rural and cultural tourism.

Ecotourism is by definition a form of tourism that respects the principles of sustainable development. However, it is important to mention that all forms of travel and tourism activities should all strive for sustainable development, starting with planning and ending with the development of tourism infrastructure and marketing. All touristic operations must consider

sustainable criteria from economic, social, cultural and environmental point of view.

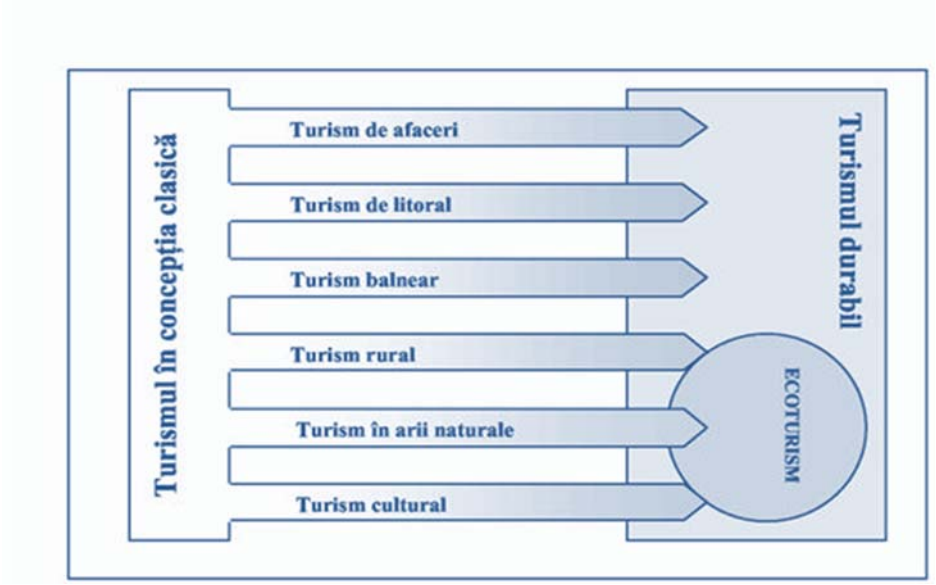


Fig.1. The crossing from classic tourism to ecotourism

The participants at the World Ecotourism Summit, held in Quebec in May 2002, have acknowledged that ecotourism respects the principles of sustainable tourism referring to the economic, social and environmental impact, with some further specific principles:

- ❖ Ecotourism actively contribute to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage.
- ❖ Ecotourism include local communities in the activities of planning, development and operation, and it contributes to their welfare.
- ❖ Ecotourism involves complete and interesting explanations for visitors, regarding the natural and cultural resources.
- ❖ Ecotourism is intended mainly for individual visitors and small organized groups.

Eligibility for accreditation in ecotourism is based on the following eight principles:

1. *Focus on Nature*: It is put an emphasis on direct contact with nature in ways that lead to a better understanding and appreciation.

2. *Interpretation*: It integrates opportunities for understanding the nature of each experience.
3. *Environmental Sustainability*: It applies the best practices for sustainable tourism from an ecological point of view.
4. *Contributions to conservation*: It contributes positively to the permanent preservation of natural areas.
5. *Involving local communities*: It contributes consistently to the welfare of local communities.
6. *Cultural component*: It protects, explains and involves various local cultures.
7. *Consumer Satisfaction*: It consistently meets consumer's expectations.
8. *Responsible Marketing*: Marketing shares are accurate and lead to realistic expectations.

Each of these principles is reflected in specific assessment criteria, which set three levels of accreditation: nature tourism, ecotourism and advanced ecotourism.

Although Europe is a major tourist market, the European statistics do not provide clear information on tourism in natural areas. Research shows that Europeans seek more the rural tourism in Europe than the one in natural areas, because the environment is strongly anthrop, and therefore there are few wild areas compared with other continents.

Reducing environmental impacts should be done:
- by adopting a behavior that aims to reducing of all types of pollution (chemical, biological, visual, olfactory and sound)
- by encouraging small group trips
- by the awareness of the environmental impact of their actions
- by maintaining motorized equipment in good condition
- by using clean and low pollutant equipment
- by selecting durable, reusable and biodegradable products
- by wasting storage areas designed strictly for that purpose
- by facilitating the transport means which do not have or have a minimal impact on the environment.

CONCLUSIONS

After research we can draw the main conclusions of this work, as it follows:

1. Ecotourism is a form of tourism developed in natural areas, whose goal is to acknowledge and to appreciate nature and local culture, which includes conservation measures and ensures an active involvement, generating benefits for the local population;

2. Ecotourism clothes the sustainable tourism principles, but differs from it by aspects related to local community issues, interpretation for visitors to a particular destination, the number of visitors;

3. Tourism has a complex impact on the environment, but it is also generating both cost and benefits;

4. The interest of tourists for travel in natural areas (land or water) has increased recently;

5. Ecotourism contributes to increased revenues from tourism, but also to the positive social effects;

6. Worldwide, there are a large number of natural areas associated with a specific cultural diversity, resulting in particular through the perpetuation of the long traditions and customs;

7. Tourists have a certain responsibility towards the destination visited and the environment by their choice itself, behavior and activities performed in that space, and therefore it is important to be informed about the quality and sensitivity of destinations.

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