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SUSTAINABLE RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN WESTERN ROMANIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FROM THE RESIDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *Rural tourism supports economic diversification and heritage valorization in rural areas. This paper analyzes the challenges and opportunities for sustainable rural tourism in Western Romania (Timiș, Arad, Caraș-Severin and Hunedoara counties) from the residents' perspective, based on an online questionnaire. Most respondents rated rural destinations as attractive (68%) and considered that tourism contributes to local economic development (70%), but only 42% believe it creates sufficient jobs. Poor infrastructure (32%), insufficient promotion (27%) and limited funding (21%) were the main obstacles. Environmental protection (85%) and heritage preservation (82%) were considered essential, while ecotourism and agritourism showed the highest potential. The results support targeted investment in infrastructure, promotion and local entrepreneurship.*

68% rate rural destinations as attractive

70% see tourism contributing to the local economy

42% believe tourism creates sufficient jobs

64% consider promotion insufficient

• Introduction

Rural tourism is a means of economic development and diversification for rural localities, and agritourism provides complementary income for rural households. Western Romania (Timiș, Arad, Caraș-Severin and Hunedoara) combines agricultural lowlands with mountain and karst landscapes, protected areas and heritage sites, yet residents' views on rural tourism in the region have received little attention.

Aim: to analyse the challenges and opportunities for sustainable rural tourism development in Western Romania from the residents' perspective.

• Material and method

- Online questionnaire with 18 closed questions organised in five sections;
- 180 residents of Timiș, Arad, Caraș-Severin and Hunedoara counties;
- Distributed in July–September 2026 through personal and professional networks, NGOs, organisations and university students;
- Five-point scales, analysed with descriptive statistics (% of respondents).

Table 1. Profile of the respondents (%, N = 180)

Age	%	County	%	Rural visits (past 2 years)	%
18–24	25	Timiș	35	Yes, several times	42
25–34	32	Caraș-Severin	25	Yes, once	28
35–44	23	Arad	20	No, but intend to	21
45–54	13	Hunedoara	15	No, and do not intend to	9
55+	7	Other	5		

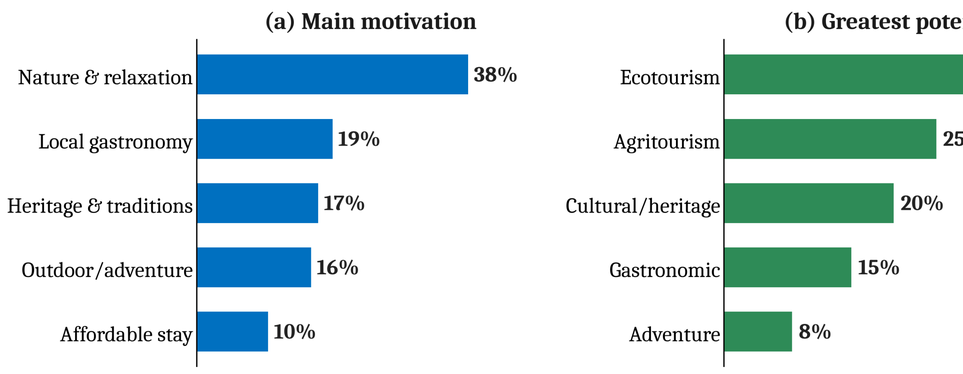


Figure 1. Main motivation for visiting and forms of tourism with the greatest potential

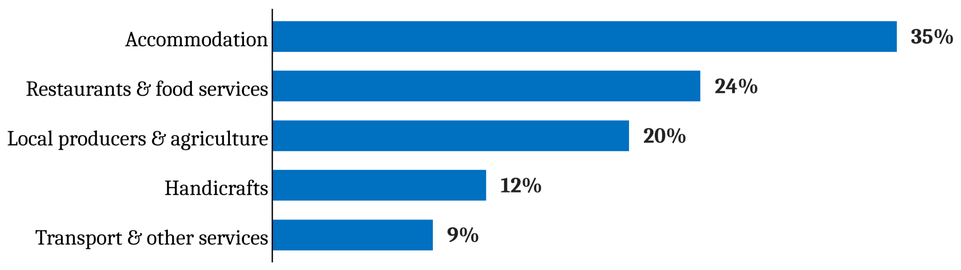


Figure 2. Sectors perceived as benefiting most from rural tourism (%)

• Results and discussions

Residents hold a largely positive view of rural tourism: 68% find rural destinations attractive and 70% believe tourism contributes to local economic development. However, only 42% think it creates sufficient jobs, as benefits are seen as concentrated in accommodation (35%) and restaurants (24%) rather than local producers (20%) and handicrafts (12%).

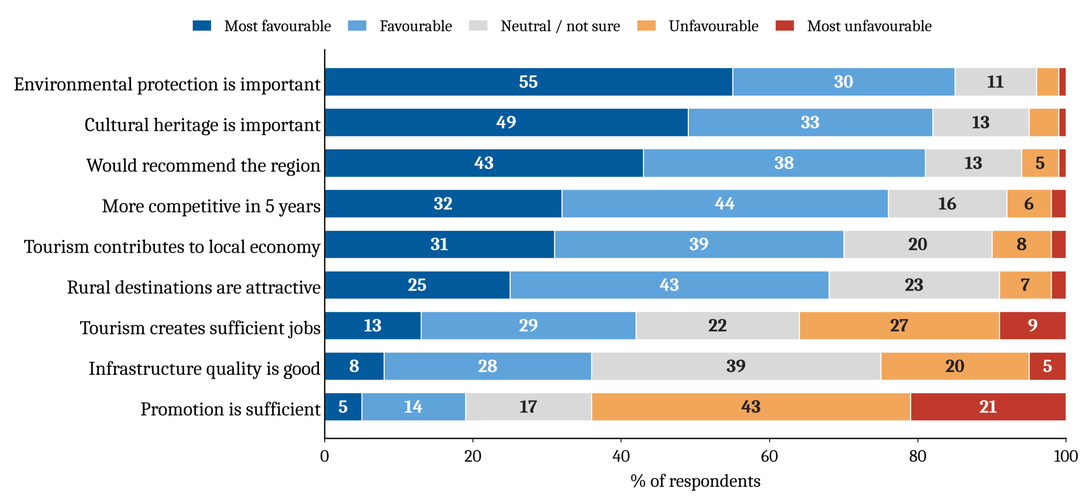


Figure 3. Residents' assessment of rural tourism (% of respondents)

Promotion is the weakest point (64% consider it insufficient) and only 36% rate infrastructure as good. Environmental protection (85%) and heritage preservation (82%) are considered essential, consistent with the preference for ecotourism (32%) and agritourism (25%).

Table 2. Main obstacles and main priorities (% of respondents)

Main obstacle	%	Main priority	%
Poor infrastructure	32	Roads and infrastructure	30
Insufficient promotion	27	Promotion	25
Limited funding	21	Support for local entrepreneurs	20
Lack of qualified staff	12	New attractions and activities	15
Other	8	Service quality and staff training	10

Obstacles and priorities match closely, indicating a coherent local agenda. Residents are also optimistic: 76% expect rural tourism to become more competitive within five years and 81% would recommend the region.

• Conclusions

- Residents view rural tourism positively, but its benefits translate only partly into jobs.
- Infrastructure, promotion and funding are the main challenges.
- Ecotourism and agritourism show the highest potential, in line with strong environmental and heritage values.
- Priorities: access roads, a common promotion brand for the four counties, support for local entrepreneurs, links with local producers and staff training.

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