



Rural Tourism – a Source for Development and Conservation of the Countryside in Neamt County

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RURAL TOURISM – A SOURCE FOR DEVELOPMENT AND CONSERVATION OF THE COUNTRYSIDE IN NEAMT COUNTY

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Abstract. The aim of the research "Rural tourism - a source for development and conservation of the countryside in Neamt county" is to analyze the features of the overall rural tourism (concepts defining its current state, forms and specific activities, their socio-economic implications in the county, possibilities of implementation etc.), caught as possible on two levels, both in terms of their general meanings, as well as their equivalence to rural areas of the county Neamt. Also, another objective of this paper is to acquaint the tourist with the resources available in Neamt county and to offer to the tourists the opportunity to practice a variety of activities for all categories of tourists. Neamt county enjoys a rich natural and cultural heritage in rural areas: nature, rural architecture, remote villages with ethnographic potential which preserve the traditions and customs, attract more and more tourists who want to get closer to nature and participate directly in the specific activities of the Romanian village.

Keywords: rural tourism, development, ethnographic potential, Romania

1. Introduction

World Tourism Organization (WTO) defines rural tourism as "a product that gives to visitors a personalized contact, a taste of physical and human environment of countryside and as far as possible, allow them to participate in the activities, traditions and lifestyles of local people." The European Union defines rural tourism as "a holiday that is primarily motivated by the desire to come close to the experience of rural space, rural community, cultural heritage and their way of life."

Rural tourism development in Neamt county is mainly based on the existing diversified potential, but it depends on their promotional methods used at local and regional level. In the last years there were published a series of papers in the Romanian language that address the concept of rural tourism, but few of them study the specific phenomena in a certain area, most of them being based on the analysis of the Romanian rural tourism in general, such as: *Rural tourism. A small business with great prospects* (Nistoreanu, 1999), *Romanian rural tourism. Potential and recovery* (Glavan, 2001), *Romanian rural tourism in sustainable development. News and Perspectives* (Talaba, 2011), etc. but most of them are just theoretical works.

The scientific articles in English, having as subjects research and case studies published in scientific journals (*Tourism Geographies, Annals of Tourism Research*, etc.) are much more

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numerous; some authors (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011) have identified relationships between rural and even spiritual experiences, while the traditional religious institutions are losing ground.

„Tourism should protect the environment, support host communities, maintain the profitability of businesses and satisfy the visitors. The ideal tourism goes beyond ‘win-win’ to multiple wins.” (Gordon, Chabrel, 2007). With this idea, rural tourism promotes the Romanian village, its old customs and traditions, so the opinions of the authors who have written books about this kind of tourism support this, as mentioned by Petrea (2001) – “rural tourism should represent and preserve the cultural and spiritual identity of the rural community.” Regarding the launch of the Romanian village as a tourism product, Nistoreanu & Gheres (2010) believe that “the Romanian tourist village can contribute to the discovery of our country as a possible tourist destination, creating interest for Romania as a place that offers a wide range of experiences, quality holidays and even business opportunities”. Currently, there are no large-scale works specialized on rural tourism in Neamt county, but some studies on specific areas of the county or on some tourism indicators (I. Talaba, 2010).

Beside consulting the bibliography and databases of the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (NIS), the site Natura 2000, the statistical processing of the obtained data, an important method in developing this study was the observation field including applying questionnaires; the process of collecting data from housing units encountered difficulties, the main reason being that such kind of data are communicated only to official institutions.

2. Rural Tourism in Neamt County – General presentation

To outline the typology of Romanian rural communities one must take into consideration the following criteria (Nistoreanu & Gheres, 2010, p. 30):

- the economic nature of the occupations, distinguished pastoral villages, farming villages and mixed villages;
- the forms of social organizations, distinguished villages of free peasants, boyars village where villagers used to be led by a master, a recently established colony village, the village where the congregation merged with the peasant noblemen etc.

In the mountain, the Romanian traditional village has retained very well its occupational, traditional, ancient, religious, sacred character up to the present days. In these places people live by their own faith, the traditional village acquiring the value of a “living space” (Nistoreanu & Gheres, 2010): “The activities of humans are based on the rhythm of the seasons, on the cosmic rhythm, from the going of the sky until the one required by the meteorological phenomena, but these activities are also influenced by the presence of some representations and of some traditional ordinances which order and direct public life. (Ernest, 1997).

On the territory of Neamt County, rural tourism is at its beginning, but due to high tourism potential, it is in constant development. Currently, rural tourism is only practiced in certain areas in the county, most notably in the following areas: Ceahlau – Durau, Filioara – Agapia, Vanatori – Neamt.

Rural tourism potential is represented by the natural components of the landscape and anthropic tourist objectives that can be found in the rural settlements in Neamt County. The natural environment elements to be harnessed are:

- the recreational, aesthetic and landscaping value of the area;
- the curative value of bioclimatic and natural factors;

- locations that offer the possibility to practice different hobbies (massifs, caves, wildlife resources, snow, etc.);
- the cognitive value for parts designated as parks, botanical gardens or zoo, scientific reserves or natural monuments, etc.;
- monuments of architecture and arts (Neamt Fortress, Fortress Batca-Doamnei, Princely Palace);
- museums, collections, memorial houses (Ethnographic Museum Vasile Gaman, Ion Creanga Memorial House, etc.);
- testimonies of popular culture and civilization (Cucuteni culture).

In the Ceahlau-Durau area, there can be found both natural tourist attractions and anthropic tourist objectives (historical, cultural and folklore). Such points of interest for those who practice rural tourism are: the Spring Mountain Lake (Lacul Izvorul Muntelui) – route n°:17, DN15, the Carbonated Springs (Izvoarele carbogazoase) – routes 3 and 4; Small Bistra Canyon (Cheile Bistrei Mici) – routes 3, 4 and 11; Polita cu crini – routes 1, 8 and 17; Princely Palace (Palatul Cnejilor) - 1639 – Ceahlau commune; Schitul Durau – 1835; Ethnographic Museum – Durau; Mountain Day – folkloric events on the first Sunday of August; Sea Festival – first Sunday of August; (Stanescu, 1976, pp. 56-57).

Keeping in mind the fact that rural tourism offers to the tourist the opportunity to spend a few days outside the city, in a quiet place, Neamt County benefits by attractions that folds perfectly to the needs of this type of tourists, giving them a natural picturesque, unpolluted and multiple choice of recreation.

Thus, Tarcau area with Tarcau mountains, which are strongly forested, thanks to their low height, offers to tourists places which are less researched and lovely landscape and flora and fauna in their natural environment. For those looking for quiet and isolated places, Tarcau is the best choice.

The fact that a big part of Neamt County is in the mountain area, grazing was and still is in certain areas a preoccupation of the inhabitants, in this way the traditional gastronomy and organic products produced by shepherds in sheepfolds situated on top of the mountain attract many tourists every day.

Tarcau area was also famous for grazing in the past, being mentioned even by the writer Mihail Sadoveanu in his novel "Baltagul".

The fact that in Tarcau there are currently more trout farms is an advantage for those who provide tourism services and have agritouristic pensions, tourists being interested in these local activities.

In order to preserve traditions, they arranged various ethnographic centers in the localities where they were kept still alive, thus the most important ethno folkloric centers can be visited by tourists who are interested in the culture and traditions of the Neamt County:

- *Agapia, Agapia Monastery*- soft goods center (carpets);
- *Baltatesti* – soft goods center, Maria and Iulian Mihalachi;
- *Bicazu Ardelean* – soft goods center, ARTPOP;
- *Birgaoani* – furrier center;
- *Botesti* – soft goods center (bed spreads, carpets, towels);
- *Ceahlau* – soft goods center (carpets), Maria Parfir;
- *Damuc* – furrier center, Alexandru Gaina;
- *Petricani* – Tarpesti village- masks center, Nicolae Popa;
- *Raucesti* – furrier center, Ioana Varvara;
- *Razboieni, Razboieni Monastery* – soft goods center (rugs) and religious items;
- *Sabaoani* – soft goods center (carpets);

- *Tazlau* – wood art (gates);
- *Vanatori, Lunca village* – Vasile Gaman.

In Tarpesti village there is the Museum "Nicolae Popa" which houses the following collections: ethnographic, archaeological, numismatics, religious art, naïve art. Also, the courtyard houses an exhibition of sculptures in stone and wood and an art gallery. In Lunca village from Vanatori commune one can find the museum-house Vasile Gaman.

It includes various exhibits, including wood paintings, old manuscripts, traditional costumes, exhibits of pottery, tools for agriculture and household occupations. In this mountain area with numerous resources of wood, woodworking art has developed more than in the areas situated outside of mountain area; in this way this preoccupation is represented by the workshop, woodworking tools and household objects made of wood.

Neamt ethnographic area is recognized by the beauty, authenticity and value of folk art objects. In Targu Neamt – Handicraft Association Nemteanca promote these popular items on their offices, where one can admire male and female traditional costumes, towels and tablecloths, decorative carved wooden masks, embroidery, rugs, etc.

The number of specific rural tourism accommodation establishments had a tendency to increase approximately continuously, with a minor fluctuation between the years 2005, 2009 and 2012. Rural areas with high tourism potential such as Agapia and Ceahlau have experienced a very fast growth in the number of accommodation units, while areas such as Tarcau or Hangu, possessing a rich cultural, historical and ethnographic heritage, have not experienced a positive development in terms of infrastructure tourist accommodation.

In Ceahlau commune there are the most tourist accommodation establishments specific for rural tourism, because Ceahlau mountain attracts a large number of tourists due to various forms of tourism that can be practiced on its territory, also Bicaz-Ceahlau area ranks first among the tourist areas of the county, benefiting from a diversified accommodation infrastructure that satisfies a wide range of tourists.

Although since 2007 the economic crisis has begun to affect more and more sectors of the national economy, it seems that tourism has not been so affected, this thing can be seen in Ceahlau commune where in 2009 they registered a total of 27 agritourist pensions, unlike the previous year, most exactly 2008, when there were only 16 agritourist pensions.

One explanation for this phenomenon could be that in this area they built several cottages and villas, the owners specializing later in some specific activities for agritourism and probably having gradually transformed their homes in accommodation units specific to rural tourism.

If in 2001 there were a maximum of 505 arrivals in Ceahlau commune, in the year 2012 there was a significant increase, nearly 10 times higher in the same community. The maximum number of arrivals occurred in Alexandru cel Bun commune, with a total of 15,085 arrivals, this being due to the fact that it is located near the county seat and lately infrastructures such as tourist pensions have taken the place of the hotels, being preferred both for the price and the area they are located in, outside the cities, in areas without excessive noise and pollution.

Over time, in the Neamt County, there were built many infrastructure units of tourist accommodation in areas with high tourism potential that can be developed in the tourism activities that can be carried out in these areas, especially with the introduction of the SAPARD program in 2000 and the granting of European funds for the construction of guesthouses and agrotourist guesthouses. Another program that directly supports the development and promotion of rural tourism in Romania, with branches in several counties is ANTREC program (National Association of Rural, Ecological and Cultural

Tourism). ANTREC Romania provides the opportunity to spend a vacation in promoting Romanian villages boarding the program. Thus, in Neamt County, some of the rural tourist pensions are included in the program of this association.

To increase the average length of stay of the tourists in the Neamt County, rural tourist pensions should diversify their offer in order to satisfy a wide range of consumers. Currently these accommodation units offer a limited number of leisure activities during your stay (hunting, boat trip, horseback riding, ATV ride, sauna, spa). Thus, most pensions located in rural areas, limited their recreational area only to the courtyard and garden, arranging benches, swings, gazebos and some "inside games" such as table tennis, billiards, rummy, backgammon, chess, equipment audio-video, etc. (Nita, 2011). Some pensions offer other opportunities for recreation, such as horseback riding, ATV, winter sports or tennis. In areas with a strong rural specific, where traditional activities were still preserved, travelers can participate in cultural and folk events. Sometimes, tourists have the opportunity to participate in specific activities of the rural economy, especially families with children who are interested in such activities.

3. Rural tourism impact on the environment and local population

The economic activities that take places in rural tourism contribute to the sustainable development of Romanian villages and to the economic growth of these areas. Thanks to this type of tourism development, the local population from the villages included in the tours will benefit from many advantages. These include:

- reducing the rural exodus and increase the number of young people in rural areas;
- creating new jobs;
- involvement of women in social and economic life in rural areas;
- development of technical infrastructure in these areas;
- raising living standards;
- attracting investors from the country and abroad.

Although there are many advantages of rural tourism development, it should not overlook the fact that it generates a number of problems. The main problems resulting from rural tourism phenomenon are:

Pressure on the environment - rural tourism takes place most often in fragile environments that can be easily damaged. These environments are present in the mountain area, in areas bordering lakes and rivers. Such an intensive skiing can bring great harm to the environment by destroying vegetation and slope processes favoring occurrence (Petrea, 2001, p. 40). The noise made by tourists has a negative impact on wildlife in the area in which the activities of tourism develop. These problems can be solved by developing a sustainable and responsible tourism. The impact on wildlife include: unintentional disruption due to stress conditions on big mammals or birds, as for example, disturbances caused by nearby tourist vehicles; accommodate animals with people thanks to feeding them by tourists or feeding of catering waste; direct transmission of the disease from dogs to wild animals; poaching and over-harvesting (Ficlenescu 2011, p. 34).

Sociocultural pressures - tourism promotes communication, exchange of ideas, information, and stimulating cultural horizon widening effect on the intellectual formation. But tourists can intervene negatively on local communities, not only on nature. They can occur on local culture, local traditions, and introducing new forms of modern culture influencing traditional ones in rural areas. The highest pressure on traditional society takes place when people living in the urban environment acquire land and houses in the countryside. Thus local people do not benefit from many advantages from tourists, tourism

receipts calling into the local budget in full, but taxes, unlike homes and rented land, retaining cash flows in the territory. These new residents can gradually turn new housing to permanent housing, most often resulting from changes in the market, strained relations within local communities etc. (Petrea, 2001, p. 41).

The development of tourism activities in rural areas can lead to a decreased interest of the local population to abandon the way of life and a traditional activity in favor of tourist activities, which bring profit much faster and require a much lower labor effort. But this would result in a loss of traditions, leading to the diminishing tourism potential of rural areas, which attract tourists because of the traditional way of life, activities and traditional architecture.

The limited accommodation space - in rural areas with high tourism potential, increasing tourist influx could raise problems of accommodation, because in some small villages, investments in tourism infrastructure were not numerous. This can be seen in the mountains, where sheepfolds have specialized in tourism. Also, such a problem could lead to the creation of a sustainable tourism strategy for the long term, designed to protect the tourism potential of physical degradation or deterioration traditional way of life.

Passivity to the external entrepreneurs' pressures. One evident trend in many rural areas is the lack of involvement of the local farmers and businesses in the tourism market (Petrea, 2001, p. 41). Thus, the amenities and tourism activities are owned by entrepreneurs that came from outside and not from rural areas. They can bring a high intake of capital in the area providing tourist services, but can also have negative influence not knowing local traditions, the architectural style established in the area. Also, the workforce is brought from the outside, without educating the local population in tourism activities and sources of supply necessary for the development of tourism, sources that could be taken from rural areas remains in the resulting capital activity.

Problems of planning, local control, public participation and partnership. Planning and forecasting tourism can provide a balance between tourism development and use of land (Petrea, 2001, p. 42). Different types of tourism activities should be implanted in those areas which are best suited for practicing their investments, not without a positive result. Training local people in the provision of tourism services, skills training and marketing reception tourist, also heritage interpretation and tourism recovery can stimulate a favorable acceptance of tourists in local communities.

Between entrepreneurs and the local population, there are sometimes large conflicts because entrepreneurs have the financial strength that gives them an almost absolute control over tourism activities, the local population being somehow restricted feeling in their own space.

Territorial differentiation of rural tourism potential. Even if rural areas are in a fairly high number, not all of them benefit from a valuable tourism potential that can be exploited extensively. Tourism activity is extremely dynamic and must meet a wide range of tourists. Factors tourist attraction are presented in figure 1.

There are advantaged regions by natural or cultural landscape quality, degree of modernization of transport and services, a privileged position in relation to the areas of origin of tourists or tourist destinations. The attractiveness of the regions where tourism practice, derives from many factors found in that territory. The geographical position of rural areas is another factor influencing the villages which are near large cities and which are more visited than the more distant, but tourists do not stay in the area only for a short period of time, usually on weekends, unlike those at greater distances, which retain tourists for longer.

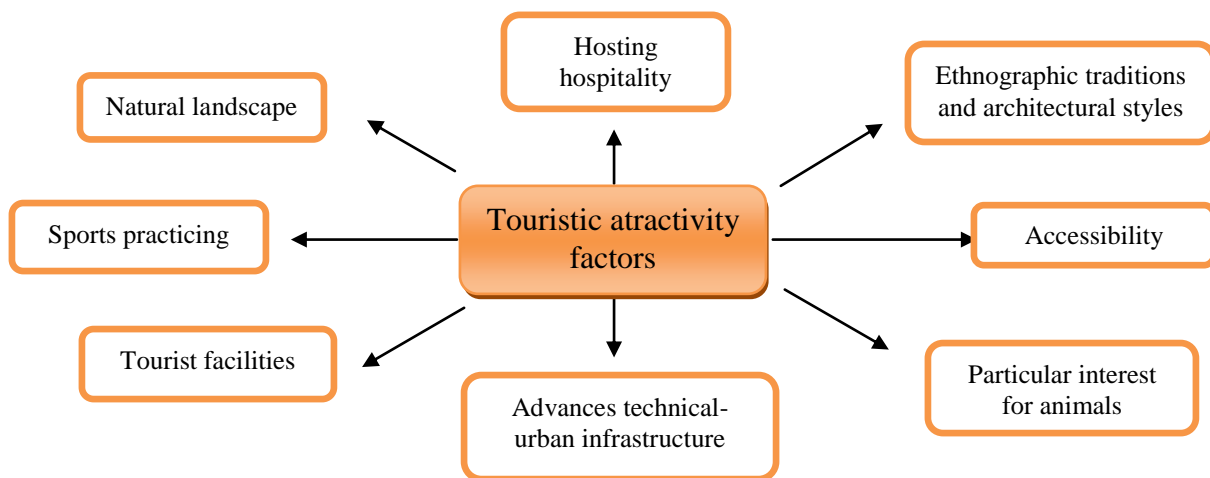


Figure 1: Tourist attraction factors in rural area
Source: (Petrea, 2001, p. 44)

Reluctance of farmers. Farmers are the basic pillars of rural economic development, and the existence of the landscape of which depends rural tourism (Petrea, 2001, p. 45). They are not however fully aware of the opportunities offered by tourism. Because the rural population is not prepared and has no experience in tourism, most often occurring dissatisfaction from both the tourists and the peasants of the former on the services precarious offered at the destination and the peasant the fact that disturbs the tranquility and conveniences of tourist spot. Though individual training regarding tourism services training takes a long time, this is not impossible.

4. SWOT analysis of rural tourism in Neamt County

This involves four elements of major importance, as follows: **Strengths**, **Weaknesses**, **Opportunities** and **Threats**:

Table 1: SWOT analysis of rural tourism in Neamt County

Strenghts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - natural and anthropic potential of rural areas; - various possibilities of leisure and practicing a wide range of tourist activities (hiking, pilgrimage, mountain-biking, paragliding, water skiing, bird watching, climbing, etc.); - inclusion of protected areas in tours; - traditional lifestyle; -tourists participating to rural household activities; - superior quality of products used in food (vegetables, fruits, meats and bio cheese); - organizing festivals that leverage popular traditions and creations; - reduced pollution;
Weaknessess	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - underdeveloped transport infrastructure; - accommodation and beverage services of average quality; - lack of a well-organized system of indicators for goals and tourist routes; - the transport to public sights is poorly organized and promoted; - entertainment -infrastructure underdeveloped; - lack of qualified staff at the receiving structures; - insufficient promoting of rural tourism locally;

	- insufficient greening of tourist areas.
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - restoration / renovation / rehabilitation of the objectives related to historical heritage and the tourist harnesses of them; - connecting a larger number of tourist pensions in ANTREC network; - attracting European funds for developing sustainable tourism in protected areas; - creating a local brand; - development of tourist villages, denoting purity and archaic Romanian village; - training population for sustainable tourism development in rural areas;
Threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - infrastructure of utilities (water, sewerage, waste management) in underdeveloped rural areas; - migration skilled labor to urban areas; - degradation of architectural heritage in rural space through villages depopulation and rural communities; - urbanization of local population and local conditions involving loss of authenticity; - produce natural disasters that can stop the development of tourism in the county (floods, landslides).

Conclusion

Neamt County villages are characterized by simplicity, each distinguished by ethnographic specificity. Elements of archaic culture as the organization of the sheepfold, habits bounded by agriculture and human life events (birth, marriage, death) combine today increasingly more with cultural elements of urban, that are visible unfortunately increasingly more often especially in interior and exterior architecture, but also in traditional clothing that is worn only at important events. At present the elements of urban space increasingly require more rural areas, leading to the loss of identity and originality of rural life Neamt County.

Neamt County has a valuable tourist potential but it is not adequate for efficient operation of local resources, whatever their nature. Rural tourism and artisanal food stimulates domestic production, which represents the perfect opportunity occupations of everyday life, which can be valued and known to the public, and marketing of products is a complementary source of income. The local population is the active component of tourism, an important role in tourism development in rural areas.

The introduction of new tourist activities that reduce seasonality and the creation of a much larger number of tourist sheepfolds offering tourists the opportunity to spend a stay in a typical rural area would lead to an increase in tourist flows in the county. The creation of a local brand and declaring certain places that hold outstanding tourist resources as "tourist villages" would increase interest in culture enthusiasts.

In conclusion, much higher development of rural tourism, in terms of a sustainable tourism, locally would benefit by attracting European funds, but also from tourists who may become potential investors. Another local benefit would be that the local population in rural areas would involve much more in tourist activities, with multiple benefits from it, including reducing the rural exodus and increase the number of young people in rural areas creating new jobs, developing technical infrastructure and raising the standard of living.

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