

Developing sustainable agrotourism in Central and East European Countries

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Abstract

Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries and is being accelerated by globalization. The fast spread of information communication technology, excellent infrastructure, changes in patterns of spending free time and the need to get away from the stress of the city are all factors that affect the emerging agrotourism industry. Today's tourists are willing to pay for the preservation of the natural and social environments they seek to explore. Agrotourism is a softer way to develop sustainable tourism in rural areas and also acts as farm tourism; agrotourism is seen as a kind of rural tourism related to agriculture. Visitors become acquainted with the cultural landscape, local products, traditional cuisine and the daily life of the people, as well as the cultural elements and the authentic features of the area, while showing respect for the environment and for tradition. Agrotourism mobilizes the productive, cultural and developmental forces of an area, contributing to the sustainable environmental, economic and social development of the rural zone. The objectives pursued in this paper are to research important implications and trends of sustainable agrotourism development in central and east European (CEE) countries. Tourism as a quickly growing industry allowed many developing countries to integrate culture, landscape, agriculture products, and heritage as a part of their strategy in attracting tourists to these countries. We need to understand that as much as tourism needs globalization to grow as an industry, it is due to tourism that globalization became such an important aspect of interaction across places and countries. The main challenge that agrotourism faces is to sustain the growth of rural economies while ensuring the long-term protection of the social and natural environment.

Key words: agrotourism, Central and Eastern Europe, Slovenia, sustainable development

1 Introduction and literature overview

The diversification of farming into areas and activities other than food production such as agrotourism (the processing and on-farm sale of agricultural products) could represent an alternative for rural planning and sustainable development, especially in disadvantaged rural regions. Hjalager (1999) has analyzed empirical evidence about the impact of rural tourism on the agricultural industry. She has shown that the financial returns often don't measure up to the expectations of politicians or to those of farmers. Rural tourism could be considered a contributor of innovation of the tourist product because its smaller scale, green issues and special facilities are quite different from other products. It could be said that sustainable tourism does not fit into the same category as mass tourism. It could be defined as tourism in search of the sustainability principles. It should generate income and employment for the inhabitants of rural areas, but the environment and culture of the local communities should remain intact. This paper offers an overview of sustainable agrotourism in central and eastern European countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovakia, Slovenia, and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia). Although there are substantial differences in the state of the environment in different CEE countries, some general similarities can be found due to similar political and economic backgrounds. The political changes of 1989–1991 resulted in economic changes in the region which have had a profound influence on environmental policy.

Ellingham, the founder of Rough Rides said: "One of the most encouraging developments in the travel industry is that 'responsible tourism' has become a buzzword, something we all want to sign up to. But it has been used far too loosely and it's time to draw breath and work out just what it all means and how we can adopt it. Incorporating sustainability into the travel business is in the interest of everyone – not least the industry – by preserving the environments and

cultures that we all want to continue to enjoy." (Draper & Murray, 2008)

Kneafsey (2000) acknowledged that many rural regions in the peripheral areas of Europe have taken to tourism as a possibility of alternative development strategy to go along with changes in the agricultural food production system. Both national and EU policies have put the emphasis on encouraging a ground-up development revolving around the commoditization of local cultural resources or knowledge. Particularly in more remote areas, but it has been done to a different extent.

Bojnec (2006) argues that "different concepts have been developed regarding the definition, relations and distinctions between rural tourism, agro-tourism and farm tourism" and that "different tradition in rural areas and different patterns in tourism development caused these differences". He suggests that farm tourism could be defined as a sub-set of agro-tourism, or that it could be identified with agro-tourism, while agro-tourism seems to be regarded as a kind of rural tourism closely related to agriculture. Both farm and/or agro-tourism represent only a smaller part of rural tourism.

Butcher (2006) stated that "ecotourism advocates as sustainable development a type of development in marked contrast to both traditional notions of modernisation as development, and the experience of the developed world". Kasperek (2007) proposed following definition: "Agrotourism is the form of tourism which capitalizes on rural culture as a tourist attraction. It is similar to ecotourism except that its primary appeal is not the natural landscape but a cultural landscape. If the attractions on offer to tourists contribute to improving the income of the regional population, agrotourism can promote regional development. To ensure that it also helps to conserve diversity, the rural population itself must have recognized agrobiodiversity which is valuable and worthy of protection. There are a range of other forms of rural tourism which are not necessarily a part of agrotourism in the strictist sense - e.g. ethnotourism, project tourism, health tourism, historical tourism, cultural tourism or adventure

tourism. The term 'agro-ecotourism' is generally synonymous with 'agrotourism'."

Wallace and Russell (2004) studied the form of eco-cultural tourism defining the ecological and cultural aspects of a landscape in combination with the creation of a site for tourists. They proposed it as a chance for communities which have marginal cultural or ecological resources for development. Sustainability and participation have been pointed out as lighthouses for the long-term future of eco-cultural tourism. An interpersonal, direct and hospitable view of services between country residents and visitors serves as the elementary building block of agrotourism. Therefore, the emphasis should be placed on the tourists' contacts with people, nature, local land and local customs, and various farm work.

There is a lot of potential for the development of sustainable agrotourism in the CEE countries. The European Union is very active in promoting policies which give support to agrotourism. It is evident that some of EU Mediterranean countries earn a significant part of national tourism income from agrotourism, for example the Veneto region of Italy has been successful in joining agrotourism to farming operations with the focus on the marketing of high-value foods connected to the diverse region's historical, cultural and social traditions (Zammit Marmara, 2010).

2 Sustainable agrotourism potential in CEE countries

As often happens, there is no uniform definition of agro-tourism, although this topic has been addressed in literature and at tourist congresses on agrotourism areas in an attempt to unify and standardise definitions. In Slovenia, agrotourism activity as one of the indicators of the growing importance of the viability of rural areas has increased significantly in the last decade. Tourists come mainly from Slovenia (60%), Germany (13%), Italy (12%) and Croatia (8%) (Borec et al., 2004). The countries of the CEE are fighting for sources of economic development and they consider the tourism industry as a source of important challenges and opportunities.

In several CEE countries research with attention the world tourism market, and the number of visitors they manage to attract is growing. As it is written in the Council of Europe report, the CEE region managed to attract more than 17% of arrivals to Europe in 1993. Hungary succeeded in winning the honour of being one of the best five tourist destinations in the world. The CEE countries have important cultural heritage to show and vast untouched natural areas, much more than in the West, which represents many opportunities for ecotourism (Greenpack, 1996).

In the study done by Hayle et al. (2006) it is suggested that agrotourism in the developed world appears to centre on:

- big farms which offer rural vacations;
- institutional links between organic agriculture, sustainable land use, nature and environmental protection, rural development and the protection of cultural heritage and landscapes;
- in Sweden it is focused on lifestyle;
- on Cyprus they try to foster entrepreneurship in rural areas and at the same time protect their heritage;
- in Turkey the emphasis is on tourists in private dwellings and training programmes for women;
- in Canada farms concentrated on beekeeping, berry picking, greenhouses, breeding farms, dairy farms, produce farms and fishing;
- in Italy the emphasis is on development of traditional craft.

In the developing world, agrotourism is also associated with rural farm life, for example (Hayle et al., 2006):

- in Malaysia they are oriented toward fishing villages, mud and mangroves, fruit farms, lakes and fishes;
- in Colombia the most important are home stays;
- in Bali, they have concentrated on fruit and flower farms;

- in Thailand, the focus is on conservation of the environment and linking this to national park preservation, addressing three basic principles of sustainable development, as recognized in Thailand: to conserve natural areas; educate visitors and to be of benefit to the local population.

The Chamber of Agriculture of the Republic of Lithuania is an umbrella organization covering NGO's made up of farmers and rural inhabitants and representing the common interests of rural society. They promote the intensification of agricultural and rural sectors, the rural community, and seek solutions favourable to agriculture and rural development in dialogue with authorities. Strategic goals of the Lithuanian Chamber of Agriculture (2010) are to:

- intensify the competitiveness of the agricultural sector,
- increase the level of farmers' income,
- seek sustainable agriculture, capable of preserving the countryside and remaining the main pillar of rural viability, meeting consumers' needs for food quality and safety and preserving safe environment for future generations,
- intensify the rural development process, involving the rural community in active participation of development and implementation of rural development policy,
- encouraging the activity of rural communities and developing their civil awareness.

In Hungary, the interest from foreign visitors is moving towards three types of rural tourism which offer around 10,000 beds as a response to a growing demand (Rural tourism international, 2010):

- in places near popular tourist destinations (cheaper accommodation);
- in horse-shows organised around Lake Balaton, in order to avoid difficulty in travelling for tourists to the puszta (prairie);
- in traditional gastronomy and wine tasting programmes.

In Romania, the National Association for Rural, Ecological and Cultural Tourism (ANTREC) has been working in the area of rural tourism since 1994. It is a non-governmental organization and it is a member of the European Federation for Rural Tourism (EUROGITES). Today it has 32 regional branches and some 3,500 members (owners of tourist and agrotourist capacities in 900 locations. The association was formed to identify and promote rural tourist potential; it organizes professional seminars for hosts, tourist agencies and to discuss experiences and exchange ideas with similar associations from abroad; to exchange information inside the network ANTREC; to organize marketing campaigns. Its basic functions are to represent members and lobby for political decisions, marketing, to control and standardize products, to educate, facilitate reservations and provide information (Jelinčić, 2007).

The Association of Tourism Farms in Slovenia, founded in 1997, has over 310 members – holders of tourist activity on farms (2,054 beds, 11,600 seats) and is in charge of marketing and promotion at home and abroad. Strategic objectives of the Association (Združenje turističnih kmetij Slovenije, 2010) are to:

- improve the quality of goods on offer from farms;
- emphasize higher occupancy rates;
- have more daily guests to excursion farms and wine cellars;
- create a positive image of rural tourism;
- preserve jobs on farms;
- contribute to the maintaining of the population density
- contribute to the maintenance of the cultural heritage in rural areas.

Activities of the Association include:

- marcom activities;
- representing the interests of their members;

- informing the members and publishing information material for farm guests;
- organizing training for members;
- preparing project proposals about quality development, marketing, international cooperation;
- improving the promotion of rural tourism, presenting catalogues, brochures, bonus systems (allowing 10% to 60% discount on the entrance fee for the most attractive sights of Slovenia, Carinthia and Friuli Venezia Giulia) and other activities.

Rural tourism training organizations in Slovenia:

- The Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry of Slovenia is very active with the Association of Tourist Farms of Slovenia and also with associations of tourist farms in Carinthia and Friuli Venezia Giulia within different international projects.
- Rural accommodation provider's association such as the Institute for Sustainable Development (ECEAT Slovenia), especially on the international level.
- involvement of tourism schools.

As Minoiu (2001) reports, the agricultural sector is more important in most of the central and east European countries than in EU member states, employing 22% of the labour force vs. 5.1% in the EU. The agricultural sector in CEE countries is accountable for 7% of GDP vs. 1.7% in the EU. However, there are significant differences inside CEE countries too, for example the agriculture of Romania and Bulgaria is the most important sector. From Table 1 we can see the differences in percentage GDP from agriculture in CEE countries and some development trends.

Arnold (2004) explained that if income expectations are low, tourism could be run as a complementary sideline. There is a tendency for farms to have a large area of scarcely used space; a bed and breakfast offer can be run by one of the family members. IAMO (2004) study on the future of rural areas in CEE countries said that for most of the CEE regions, the contribution of tourism will not represent a major source of income,

Table 1: *Percent GDP from agriculture, CEE countries*

COUNTRY	2000	2005	2008
ALBANIA	29.1	22.8	20.6
BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA	11.0	10.5	10.2
BULGARIA	14.2	9.4	4.6
CROATIA	9.1	7.6	6.1
CZECH REPUBLIC	3.9	2.9	2.6
ESTONIA	4.9	3.7	2.9
HUNGARY	5.4	4.3	3.2
LATVIA	4.6	4.0	3.3
LITHUANIA	7.8	5.7	4.3
MACEDONIA	12.0	12.8	11.4
POLAND	5.0	4.6	4.0
ROMANIA	12.5	10.1	8.1
SERBIA	NA	NA	12.3
SLOVAKIA	4.0	3.9	2.6
SLOVENIA	3.2	2.6	2.2

Source: World Resources Institute (2010) and own elaboration

because the tourism market is a highly competitive market globally. We also have to keep in mind that development of needed infrastructure and support institutions for tourism is hindered by a lack of capital so it is most likely that areas with unfavourable conditions could not expect tourism to play a really important role.

3 Conclusion and discussion

In conclusion, we could state that agrotourism could represent a viable solution for rural regions of CEE countries. There should be involvement from different stakeholders, from government, overboard initiatives, local government, NGO's, agricultural policy bodies, farmers, etc. Zammit Marmara (2010) suggested that the most favourable scenario would be to stimulate state and private initiatives to propose a joint national plan for agrotourism that could offer new employments in the studied sector. An economic and cultural strategy should be planned for local sustainable development. It is quite usual that farming in some rural areas still represent a significant source of living, but it is no

longer the prevailing pattern. Globalizing processes have entered into the rural sector too. Doitchinova (2005) emphasized the fact that contemporary lifestyle, from ICT to infrastructure influence rural traditions. Huylenbroeck et al. (2007) were not the first to propose the idea of multifunctionality as a way to fuse agriculture with actual social and environmental needs. Postmodern agriculture should add also different non-commodity products and services; it is influencing socio-cultural conditions and fostering economic development.

In an attempt to identify the appealing aspects of diversity, Kasparek (2007) contested that planned agrotourism contributes to the safeguarding of endangered flora and fauna. That is why more emphasis should be put in recognition of regionally important animal species and vegetation varieties to develop the agrotourism in less advantaged countries. Besides that, cultural heritage of the use of these animals and vegetation should be promoted and nurtured, if we design development of agrobiodiversity and conservation of diversity.

No one player can create a sustainable destination. Collaboration is needed to make it happen between government, industry and communities. Following Draper & Murray (2008) recommendations:

- For governments and tourist boards: a sustainable destination idea can become the basis for development of agrotourism assets. Governments should help create a vision of sustainable tourism in their region or country to plan sustainable strategies and investment decisions.
- For rural developers: development should be guided within environmental limits, using local staff for long-term opportunities, building strong links with the local community, infrastructure should be created and built in a way to support sustainable living, and creating long-term financial value.
- For tour operators: one of the most important issues is to ensure the sustainability level of marketed places. CSR policies and practices should be increasingly incorporated into operators offer.

- For the rural communities and destinations: rural communities should hold governments and industry stakeholders accountable. Sustainable rural tourism could be the future if stakeholders would take a proactive, collaborative approach, contributing also to their own success.

When assessing the contribution of this paper to past studies, it could be emphasized that it is a small scale comparative study, based on several subjectively chosen case studies trying to put a holistic picture of sustainable agrotourism, which clearly identified differences in the perception and definition of agrotourism for selected CEE countries. The latest available numbers on percent GDP from agriculture in CEE countries; approaches to foster sustainable agrotourism and some development trends have been analyzed. The importance and potential of responsible agrotourism for sustainable development of CEE countries has been shown. The importance of agrotourism in remote country areas is also clearly visible where there are scarce resources for living and employment and a joint effort of many stakeholders needed. In order to keep nature intact and a attractive way of life, that draws stressed visitors to the country in order to enjoy a calm and simple way of living, the number of visitors should be limited, clear rules should be established about the construction permissions in protected zones, protection of water reserves and other important issues should be taken under strict regulation.

Finally, we could say that agrotourism represents a viable future for the rural development; it is related with the economic support of these areas; it improves the development of infrastructure and other related services in rural areas; and that cooperation with neighbouring countries in border areas is very important. Multifunctional activities in sustainable agrotourism could contribute to the sustainable development of rural regions of CEE countries. It could become the opportunity for more stable rural development by reducing poverty and increasing farm income. In addition, multifunctionality of agriculture may stabilize the social and economic life in rural area and protect the environment in CEE countries.

Razvoj trajnostnega agroturizma v državah srednje in vzhodne Evrope

Povzetek

Turizem, kot ena najhitreje rastočih industrij, je dobil dodaten zagon z globalizacijo. Hitro širjenje informacijsko-komunikacijskih tehnologij, odlična infrastruktura, spremembe vzorcev preživljanja prostega časa ter pobeg pred mestnim stresom so dejavniki, ki pozitivno vplivajo na razvoj agroturizma. Današnji turist je pripravljen plačati za ohranjanje naravnih in družbenih okolij, ki si jih želi raziskati. Agroturizem je mehkejša oblika trajnostnega razvoja turizma na podeželju, ki ga poznamo tudi pod izrazom kmečki turizem; definiramo ga lahko tudi kot obliko podeželskega turizma, povezanega s kmetijstvom. Obiskovalci se spoznajo s kulturno krajino, lokalnimi izdelki, tradicionalno kuhinjo, vsakdanjim življenjem prebivalcev, s kulturnimi elementi ter avtentičnimi značilnostmi področja, ob izkazovanju spoštovanja do okolja in tradicije. Agroturizem mobilizira proizvodne, kulturne ter razvojne sile področja s tem, da prispeva k trajnostnemu, ekonomskemu ter družbenemu razvoju podeželja. V referatu želimo raziskati pomembne implikacije in smernice razvoja trajnostnega agroturizma v osrednjih in vzhodnoevropskih državah (CEE). Turizem kot hitro rastoča industrija mnogim državam omogoča integracijo kulture, pokrajine, kmetijskih izdelkov ter dediščine kot delov strategije privabljanja turistov v te države. Razumeti moramo, da je ravno tako, kot turizem potrebuje globalizacijo za rast industrije, po zaslugi turizma globalizacija postala pomemben vidik interakcij med kraji in državami. Najpomembnejši izziv agroturizma je spodbujanje rasti podeželskega gospodarstva ob zagotavljanju dolgoročne zaščite družbenega in naravnega okolja.

Ključne besede: agroturizem, srednje- in vzhodnoevropske države, Slovenija, trajnostni razvoj

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