

ABSTRACT

Keywords: natural and anthropic potential, tourist zoning, protected areas, cycling tourism, marketing strategy, tourists perception

The rural tourism represents one of the newest forms of tourism that have been lately developed around the world, being well-known that it can significantly contribute socially and economically to the people's prosperity by offering extra sources of income, and also by making possible the efficient and sustainable use of the natural and anthropic resources.

The goal of the current Ph.D. paper is to analyze the rural market in Neamț County in order to identify new management and marketing strategies for developing the rural tourism, individualized on different types of rural tourism that are carried on along the county.

If before 1989 in Romania, the main type of tourism offers were the so-called “*treatment and recreation holidays*”, the current social period, both at national and international level, requires mainly tourist offers of active holidays which are pragmatically translated into offering to the tourist, along with optimum rest and relaxation conditions, of extra services which to allow the individual to carry out activities which are not accessible in his every-day, urban live. One of the most common rural activities that can be offered to the guests are the trips around the accommodation place; alpinism, climbing; exploring of wild places, sailing or rafting, skiing; riding, use of traditional animal-traction vehicles; bike tourism; equitation; nature sightseeing, photography; interaction with the rural patrimony, getting in touch with the members of the collectivity, rural feasts, fishing, hunting, nature sports (such as tourist orientation, North-walking, aerobic gymnastics, jogging etc.).

From this perspective, we consider that the strategies that are currently put into practice in Neamț County and the way they are dealt with should be revised and improved so they can meet the current European tourist standards.

Thus, one of the chapters of the paper goals to carry out a case study which to identify the way in which three different accommodation structures in Neamț County, representative for the three types of tourism practiced in the area, answer to the needs of the clients to whom they offer services. So, according to the study premises, the respondents accommodated at Buhalnița Chalet

manifested an increased interest for rest/treatment and trips in nature, which are specific to ecotourism, while the ones that booked rooms at Eden Boarding House were interested in visiting the monasteries in the area (which is specific to the cultural-religious tourism). The clients accommodated at Mariko Inn Hotel were mainly interested in transit tourism, business meetings/conferences, and also sports and festive events.

The data collected by means of questioners applied to the tourists accommodated at the above mentioned tourist structures reveals that the natural potential of Neamț county is not sufficiently touristy exploited by offering to the clients extra-services which to valorize the natural and human heritage of the area.

Thus, in order to emphasize this aspect, chapter 4 of the current paper had as its goal to create a zoning of Neamț county, which can be divided, from the perspective of the general tourist evaluation, in several tourist zones and sub-zones. The generally- recognized *tourist areas* which are mature from the tourist infrastructure perspective are *Ceahlău–Bicaz*, *Târgu–Neamț*, *Cheile Bicazului – Hășmaș* and *Piatra – Neamț*, and the *tourist sub-zones*, mainly developing after 2000, are *Lacul Izvorul Muntelui*, *Valea Tarcăului*, *Valea Muntelui* and *Roman*. The tourist areas mainly develop around the national parks Ceahlău and Cheile Bicazului – Hășmaș, and Vânători-Neamț National Park, but also around Piatra-Neamț municipality, being recognized both nationally and internationally. In most of the situations, the sub-zones are complementary to the above-mentioned tourist areas, being mainly appreciated at local and zone level. They attract numerous tourists from the main cities of the North-East Developing Area – Iași and Bacău. This new tourist zoning may represent a very useful element in carrying on a midterm development strategy for Neamț County in the period to come. This zoning process can generate information for a closer acknowledge of the tourist attraction elements that can be concretely used by local administrations or by tourist business entrepreneurs.

Another important element that must be considered in the future developing of tourist strategies is that of the protected areas. In the vision of many people, the concept of protected areas is still limited to the word's meaning of protecting and preserving certain natural zones clearly territorially delimited, in which exist a number of species that must be protected by law, creating real wild areas that contrast through their original natural equilibrium with the effervescence and the economic development of the industrial and consumerist communities. Though, there is little recognized the fact that the natural and semi-natural areas actually represents the support of life and implicitly, of social and economic development.

The ecologic tourism or the ecotourism is that form of rural tourism that promotes the travelling to rural destinations where the landscapes, the flora, fauna and the anthropic patrimony represent the main attractions. This is why we consider that the protected areas should be integrated part of the rural tourism, them being geographic zones collateral to the rural communities that can be sustainably touristic used through an ecotourism.

Romania is a country with a high biological diversity, both at the level of the ecosystems and the level of the species. This is why, when adhering to the European Union, *The European Community benefited of a large infusion of natural capital*. Neamț County detains a rich patrimony of protected areas comparative to other counties in Romania. The 31 natural areas of national and local interest existing in the analyzed county, spread on a surface of 56.880,20 ha, which represents 9,6% from the total surface of Neamț County. From all these, the most representative and visited by the tourists are *Parcul Național Ceahlău*, with a surface of 7.742,5 ha and *Parcul Național Cheile Bicazului - Hășmaș*, with a surface of 6.937 ha. Another protected area of national interest is *Parcul Natural Vânători - Neamț* with a surface of 26.380 ha.

Being part of the niche tourism and having its origins in the adventure tourism and common links with ecotourism, bike tourism represents an important element that must be considered when creating a tourist strategy and this because this type of tourism attracts more and more supporters, registering an annual average increase of 4% at the level of European Union.

Currently, bike tourism in Romania is still very little developed from all the perspectives: number of practitioners, specific infrastructure quantity and quality, informative and promotional materials etc. On another hand, the Romanian bike tourism potential is very high from all points of view, both for road cycling tourism and mountain cycling tourism, which offer substantial development premises.

The territory of Neamț County has a *relief favorable to biking*, being diverse, not excessively mountainous, appropriate for biking for all the categories, and not only for the well-trained, offering alternance of distances that imply reduced effort (flat road – the Eastern area of the county) or without effort (climbing-down) and higher effort (climbing-up – the eastern mountain area). Also, the landscaping of Neamț area is varied and attractive for bike riders: diverse but discontinuous forests, with openings, grass lands with isolated trees, meadows, traditional agricultural areas pleasant for the tourists' eyes, mountains of different heights, gaps and gullets, caves, waterfalls, lakes, streams, traditionally-designed village etc. Thus, the monotony is easy to avoid. Another reason in favor of biking in Neamț County is the special natural patrimony, containing a variety of sightseeing: *protected areas*, natural monuments, geomorphic spectacular elements, hydrological and biological elements, spread all over the country. This is why, long-way rural biking is attractive also for the tourists especially interested in nature and not only in the sports and cultural aspect of cycling tourism.

Velotransmontana is a project that supports the idea of integrating cycling tourism in the tourist marketing strategies as they offer the possibility of promoting four national parks (Cheile Bicazului National Park– Hășmaș, Ceahlău National Park, Călimani National Park and Rodnei National Park) and a natural park (Vânători - Neamț). The project continuous the promoters' idea of creating cycling main roads on Romanian territory, by developing a new complex network of mountain and forest bike roads with a large geographical spread (the region of the Eastern Carpathians). Furthermore, the proposed bike road represents an incursion in the history of the

place, sometimes the bike road identities with the old boarder of Moldavia with Austro-Hungarian Empire. This is why in Bucovina area this route is known under the name *Maria Tereza's Road*.

The basic idea of this project appeared according to the law project that proposed the setting up of a methodology regarding the organization of a National Network of Tourist Biking Roads around Romania. By creating the cycling main roads network in Romania, it was made possible the creation of a connection of the asphalt bike roads with the neighbor countries. The idea of the project developed thanks to the need of developing biking roads around Romania, especially in the areas with special natural and anthropic potential within protected areas and the main resorts located in the Eastern Carpathians.

By analyzing the mp of the Romanian biking roads and also the one of the protected areas and forest roads, one can observe that the zone of the Eastern Carpathians offers a special potential from the perspective of mountain cycling roads. The access to this biking roads will be made from the biking main roads situated in Miercurea – Ciuc area, respectively Bucovina area, and the getting in and out points will offer connection to different means of transportation, according to the law in force.

Taking into account that in the area of Eastern Carpathians there are 4 national parks (Rodnei, Călimani, Ceahlău și Cheile Bicazului - Hășmaș), and also a continuous connection of protected areas, we consider that proposed biking roads may represent new alternatives of tourist promotion, in ecological and ecoturistic stile. Two of the above mentioned national parks, to which Vânători – Neamț Natural Park must be added, are situated in Neamț County.

The proposed biking roads will respect the Rumanian and European laws in force, the next step being their classification and integration in the national cycling circuit.

The 19 rural cycling roads proposed for being set up in Neamț County sum altogether *over 2.000 km* and have as main objective the mapping by using a GPS device of the main rural tourist areas in the above mentioned county which fit to biking tourism (the mountain area Ceahlău, Giurgeu, Hășmaș, Budacu, Bistriței and Stânișoarei, Târgu-Neamț, Valea Bistriței, Valea Tarcăului, Valea Cuediului, Valea Tazlăului areas and others).

On the background of the economic world crisis, the bicycle, as conventional means of transportation ca, may represent a viable alternative, ecological and efficient for visiting the the natural and anthropic potential in the area, and also the protected areas of Romania which promote the tourists' access by using non-polluting means of transportation.