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THE PRINCIPLES OF ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Ecotourism is an environmentally friendly form of tourism, based on appreciation of the environment and in which a conscious effort is made to reinvest an appropriate share of revenue in the conservation of the resources on which it is founded. At the same time, it is a form of sustainable tourism that benefits the local population and, in particular, the rural population.

Currently, ecotourism is a modern form of tourism in the Republic of Moldova, attracting all visitors with its respect and care for nature and local traditions. A critical ecological situation has emerged in the Republic of Moldova at the moment, largely due to changes in natural complexes and excessive anthropic activity, which requires an effective solution for environmental conservation and sustainable development. The priorities and challenges of ecotourism are addressed from the perspective of identifying new common routes with neighboring countries.

Key words: *tourism, sustainable development, environment protection.*
JEL: *Z33, Q51, F61.*

Introduction

The cohesion of ecotourism consists in ensuring the linkages of interest and other forms of tourism, as well as the protection of nature and culture, which shows an annual growth of 10-15% worldwide. Therefore, it is a pillar principle of ecotourism and is based on minimizing negative impacts on the ecosystem. Ecotourists involved and engaged in this activity are given recommendations to limit energy, heat and water consumption, use of public transport, etc. Ecotourism provides opportunities for nature experiences that lead to a better understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of discovering and protecting nature and local traditional culture for both visitors and the local community.

"Ecotourism" or "ecological tourism" involves the development of all forms of tourism, tourism management and marketing that respect the natural, social and economic integrity of the environment through the exploration of natural and cultural resources for the benefit of future generations.

Ecotourism is able to exploit the surplus accommodation existing in the rural households by involving tourists in the life of the household and offering services and activities (meals, accommodation, interaction with the socio-natural environment) specific to the rural household, without disturbing its specific nature. In the overall global tourism economy, ecotourism is defined as the tourist exploitation of some elements (Figure 1.) [1, p.18].

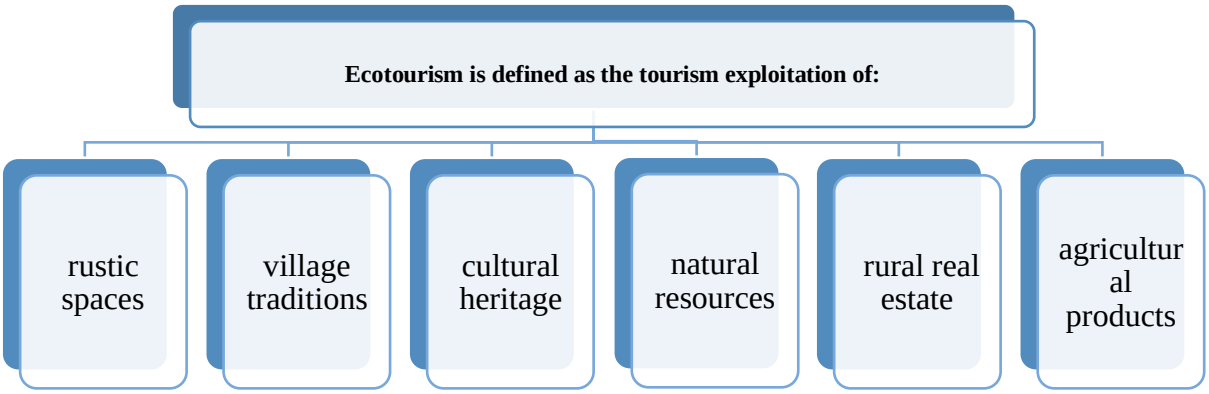


Figure 1. The specific characteristics of ecotourism
Source: Elaborated by the author based on source [1, p.18]

In general, ecotourism includes a range of activities, services, facilities offered by farmers and rural residents to attract tourists to their area, which generates additional income for their businesses. Ecotourism includes all tourism activities that are usually carried out in rural areas, with the aim of enhancing the natural and human potential of villages.

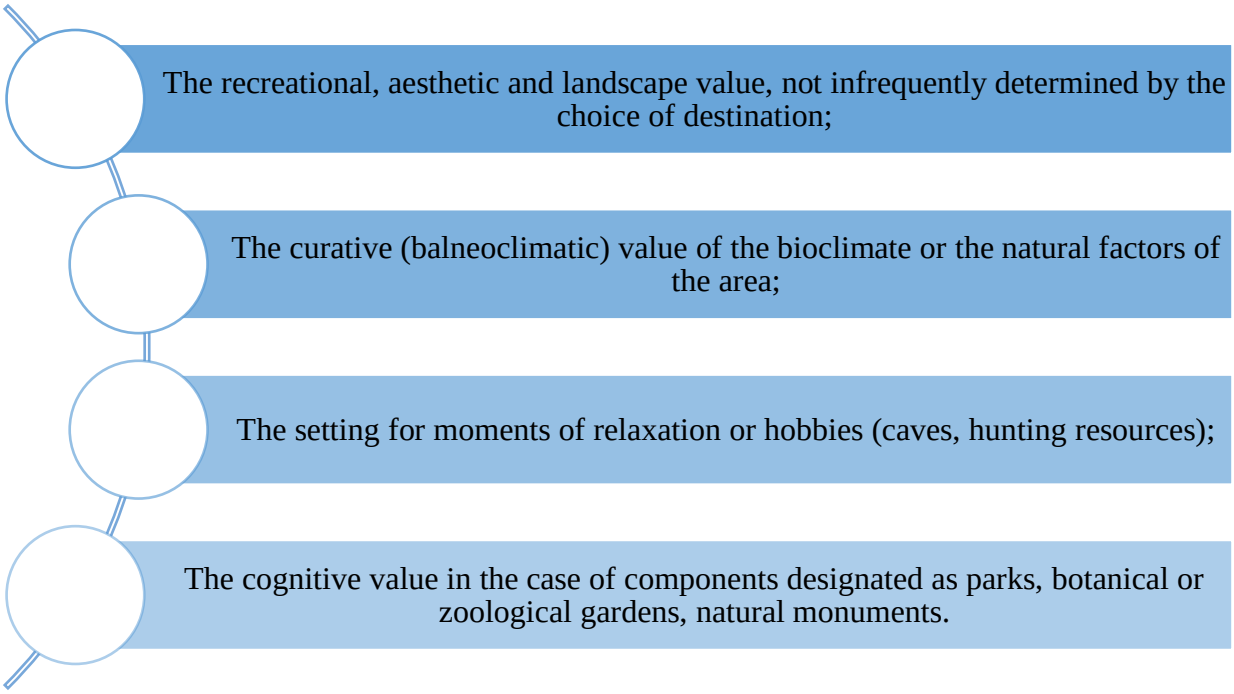


Figure 2. The main elements exploited in the development of ecotourism
Source: Elaborated by the author based on source [4, p.36].

This form of tourism includes two major components: the tourist activity itself, which consists of accommodation, meal services, leisure (travel, fishing, horse riding) and other current services, and, furthermore, the economic (agricultural) activity provided by the owner of the host ecotourism farm (guesthouse), which involves the production and primary processing of eco-food products in the household and marketing them directly to tourists or through other commercial networks [1, p.24].

As tourism activity has developed and increased, it has also branched out, depending on the demands of tourists, the characteristics of the landscape and the structure of services. There are a number of key elements to be highlighted (Figure 2).

Transport, access roads to the rural environment are essential to guarantee a continuous flow of tourists; Accommodation and meals, even though they do not meet certain hotel standards, must be of high quality and generously provided; Interest in natural and ethnographic beauty, novelty, charm and events specific to country life.

The ecotourism activity is based on three essential elements, which must be carefully observed (Figure 3.).

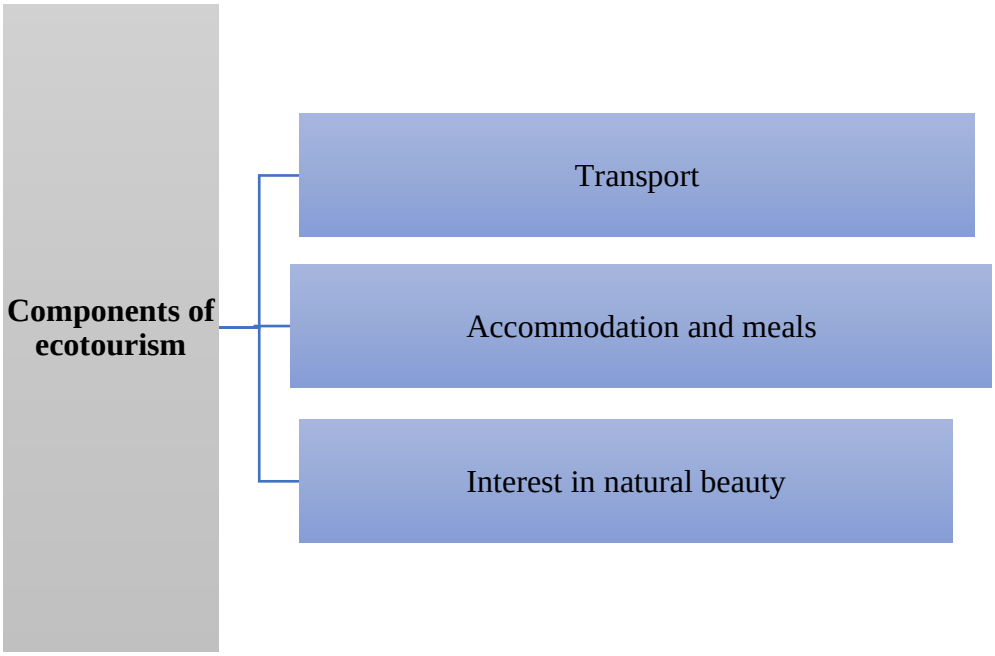


Figure 3. The core components of ecotourism
Source: Elaborated by the author based on source [4, p, 43].

The major principles of sustainable ecotourism development are:

✓ sustainable use of tourism resources (optimal exploitation, conservation);
✓ reducing consumption and waste of tourism resources;
✓ maintaining the natural, cultural and social diversity of the rural area;
✓ integration of ecotourism into national, regional and local development strategies (development of supply, promotion, organization and development of general and technical infrastructure);
✓ supporting the local economy in the socio-economic development of the community as well as in the protection of nature and cultural values;
✓ involvement of local communities in the tourism sector by supporting initiative groups for the development and promotion of the local tourism offer, for the protection of the environment and cultural values of the area, as well as the role of local organizations as tourism service providers;
✓ specialist and public consultation in the development of ecotourism and the local economy to avoid conflicts of interest between government, regional and local policies;

✓ sustainable development of ecotourism must be supported by vocational training, qualification, advanced training, civic and sociological training;

✓ promotion of ecotourism marketing;

✓ research and monitoring of tourism action as well as conservation and protection of the environment and tourism resources [4, p.43].

Ecotourism has developed due to both the market's continuous search for more diversified ways of spending holidays and government initiatives. In general, ecotourism is seen as a factor in the renewal of rural economies and, at the same time, as an element of rural conservation. However, it is well known that this rural environment is especially fragile and easily fragmentable, and tourism as a powerful agent of change could affect the particular appeal of rural areas. The incentives of tourists who choose these areas as destinations are related to the very good quality of the environment, the lack of air pollution, and the peaceful ambience [3, p.23].

Ecotourism is a result, but also a precondition for the development of the rural economy. It can contribute significantly to the balance of the country's territorial development. In this regard, the following can be considered: the possibility of becoming a support for new businesses and jobs; the encouragement of traditional local activities, especially crafts, but also those that can lead to the development of a specific trade and the creation of new jobs; the increase in the income of the inhabitants of rural settlements resulting from the exploitation of local resources and organic eco-food products for consumption by tourists.

Ecotourism can contribute to sustainable development at local, regional and national level through several elements (Figure 4.).

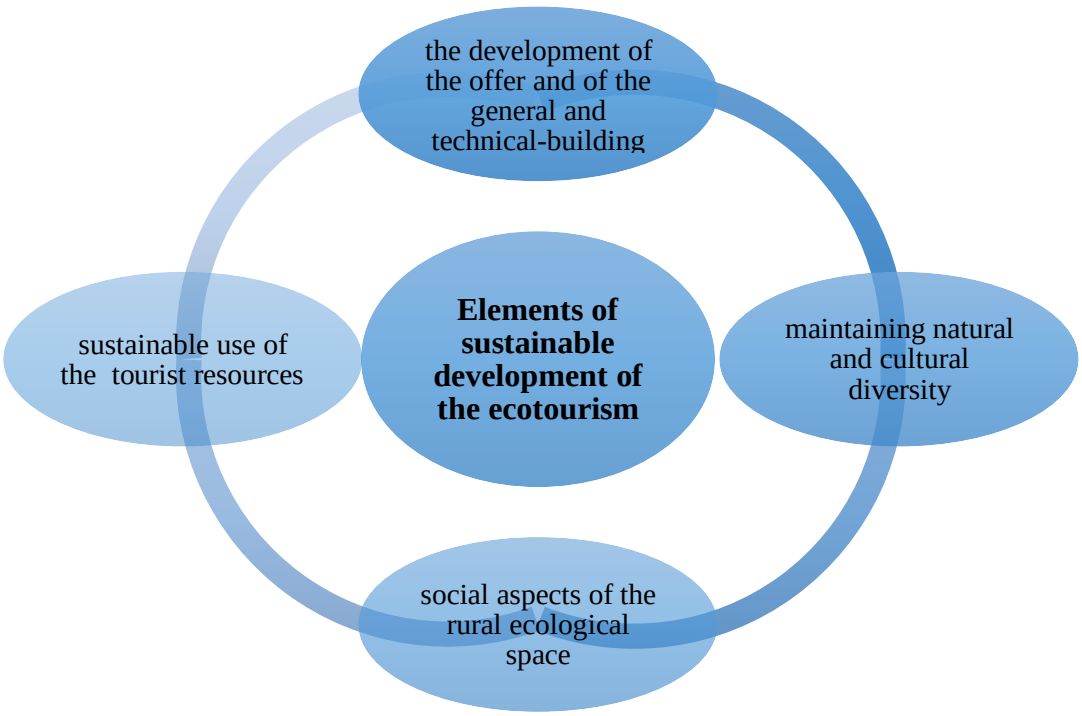


Figure 4. Sustainable development elements of ecotourism
Source: Elaborated by the author based on [2, p.27].

Ecotourism offers the low-income tourist population the possibility of rest and comfort, leisure, holidays, weekends, in the scenic landscape of the rural environment, with cultural-educational values and distinctive hospitality;

It does not require very large investments for the development of tourist infrastructure or superstructure or for other related facilities;

It is not compatible with mass tourism;

Ecotourism has the greatest implications for the exploitation of local tourist resources and for raising the standard of living of the inhabitants, for the socio-economic development of the rural locality and, ultimately, for the protection and conservation of the rural and built environment, in the context of an economic activity based on ecological principles;

Ecotourism is a form of tourism in which people are the essential and central element;

Local associations and farmers can ensure the attractiveness of this form of tourism through the quality of hospitality, knowledge of the local natural, cultural and historical environment and the authenticity of the products;

Farmers' associations facilitate the development of offers, market monitoring, promotion and sales, which could not be done by one person alone;

It is a "diffuse" tourism due to the specificity of its diversified offer and its widespread use in space; hence, apparently, it does not cause too much damage to the natural and built environment [5, p.15-17].

The specialized literature distinguishes three principles of sustainable development (Figure 5.).

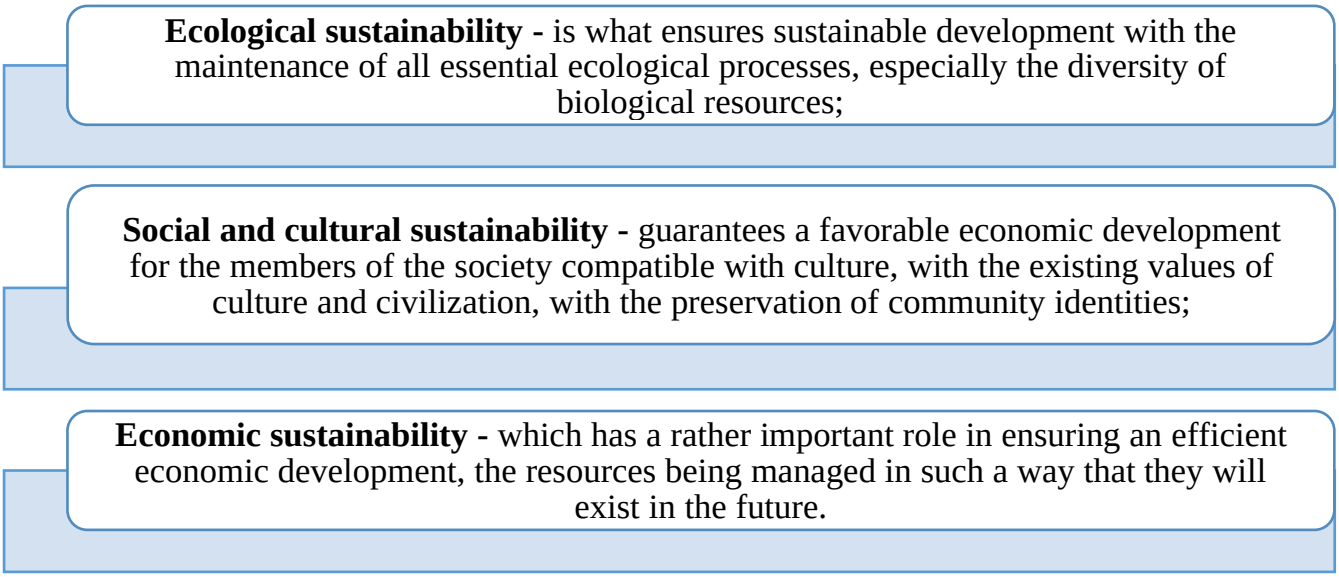


Figure 5. Sustainable development and its principles
Source: Elaborated by the author based on [3, p.15-17].

The economic sustainability of ecotourism is defined as a development model that ensures:

Preserving the quality of the environment, an essential element for visitors and hosts;

Improvement of the quality of life in human settlements receiving tourists;

The possibility to provide visitors with high quality experiences [4, p.51].

Entrepreneurs should therefore pay quite a lot of attention to the development approach. Often, the desire to earn as much as possible, as quickly as possible, leads to overcrowding in rural areas.

Ecotourism contributes to the economic life of villages in several ways (Figure 6.).

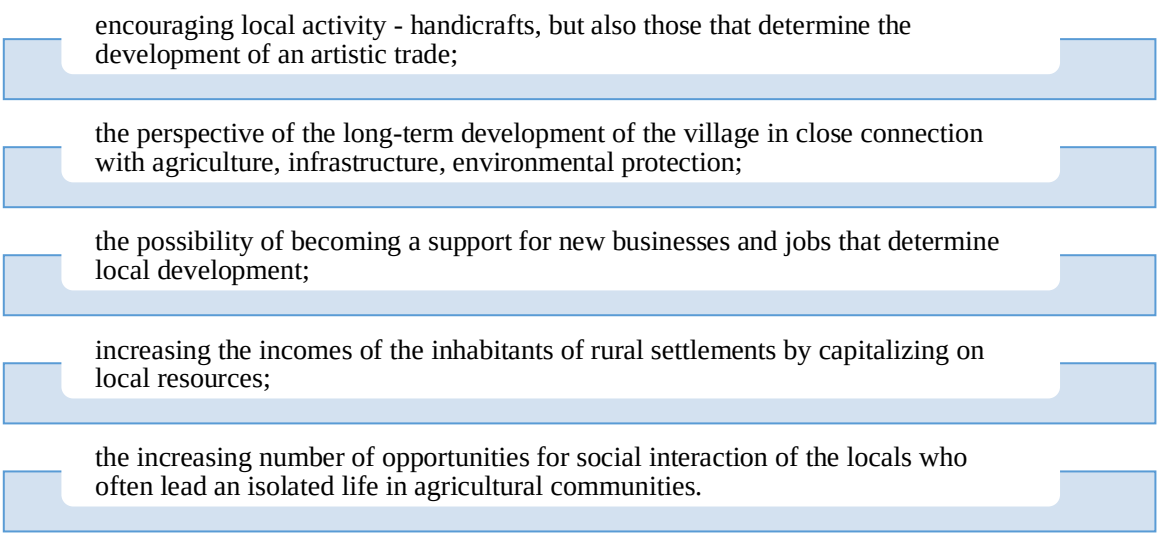


Figure 6. Particular features of ecotourism development in rural environments
Source: Elaborated by the author based on source [1, p.54].

In order for these features to fit in well with the concept of ecotourism, the accommodation capacity of the village and the surrounding area must be taken into account, especially in the context of a tourist stay in the summer months: facilities, amenities, related services, relationship with the local population.

In recent decades, from the end of the 20th century and onwards, there has been a trend towards the development of the tourism industry, with a return to nature and authentic cultural values, especially in highly industrialized countries. The basis of this form of tourism is the act of spending a holiday or a vacation in an original natural and anthropogenic environment, enjoying the presence of outstanding sights. They are more than potential tourist destinations; they represent major keys to sustainable tourism, which are intended to prepare the consciousness of every tourist thoroughly in order to preserve them intact for future generations.

Ecotourism is defined as a form of tourism in which the primary motivation of the tourist is the observation and appreciation of nature and local traditions linked to nature and which must meet the following conditions: conservation and protection of nature; use of local human resources, educational character, respect for nature and local communities; minimal negative impact on the natural and socio-cultural environment.

The World Tourism Organisation has decided on the concept of "ecotourism" to reflect "all forms of tourism in which the main motivation of the tourist is the observation and appreciation of nature, which contribute to the conservation of nature and which generate minimal impact on the environment and cultural traditions".

A strategy for this kind of tourism, which protects tourism resources, was published by Mexico's National Tourism Secretary in collaboration with the World Alliance for Nature and subsequently adopted by the World Tourism Organisation.

It includes key ideas for balancing nature and tourism, including:

- ✓ areas where ecotourism is practiced should be considered of continental or global interest and be part of the planet's tourism heritage;
- ✓ ecotourism seeks to minimize negative impacts on the local and natural environment and the local population;
- ✓ ecotourism should contribute to the management of protected areas and improve relations between local communities and those responsible for managing protected areas;
- ✓ this form of tourism should bring economic and social benefits to the inhabitants of tourist areas and ensure their participation in decisions on the type and volume of tourist activities;
- ✓ new tourism can foster genuine interaction between the host population and tourists and a genuine interest in the sustainable development and protection of natural areas;
- ✓ ecotourism seeks to broaden the spectrum of traditional economic activities (agriculture, animal husbandry, beekeeping, fishing) without marginalizing or replacing them;
- ✓ ecotourism activities should provide specific opportunities so that local inhabitants and employees in the tourism industry can use natural areas in a sustainable way and appreciate the valuable natural and cultural sites that are major tourist attractions.

"Ecotourism" was born in the mid-1980s as a result of the growing demand for wildlife-focused tourism in the most restricted and fragile places on the planet. There is a complex relationship between tourism and the environment, with the links between them manifesting in both directions. They represent, to one extent, the basic resources of tourism and, to another, tourism activity has an influence on the ecological environment, changing its component elements.

The practice of ecotourism involves protecting tourist areas or resources, which are intended for study, admiration, recreation and physical and mental recovery, not destruction. The real meaning of ecotourism includes the modernisation of infrastructure, the sustainable development of rural-urban areas, the use of unconventional forms of energy and non-polluting technologies.

The concept of marketing has a special place in the field of ecotourism. The importance of proper marketing is widely recognised throughout the tourism sector and is a key component in tourism destination planning and product design. Conservation organizations and other non-governmental organizations can play a major role in promoting directly or indirectly, through environmental consumer education, those products and destinations where ecotourism development is achieved in a substantial way.

The tourism-environment relationship is irreconcilable and the practice of ecotourism can ensure the appropriate use of tourism resources through 'sustainable tourism'.

Various interest circles have defined the concept of 'sustainable tourism' as 'the development of all forms of tourism, tourism management and marketing that respect the natural, social and economic integrity of the environment, ensuring the exploitation of natural and cultural resources for future generations'. The components of a sustainable tourism strategy have been established, the requirements of this activity being:

- ✓ respect and care for the living environment of human communities;
- ✓ raising the standard of living of human habitats;
- ✓ reducing the exploitation of exhaustible resources and preserving the carrying capacity of the planet;
- ✓ preserving the Earth's ecosystem, and human biodiversity;
- ✓ changing individual attitudes in favor of sustainable development;
- ✓ creating opportunities for communities to conserve their own environment.

Ecotourism is, in fact, the most valuable manifestation of sustainable tourism. Sustainable development must take into account the arrival pattern and interests of hosts and visitors in a given region.

Once the importance of ecotourism as a support for sustainable tourism development has been established at the level of world organizations, it has gained acceptance in more and more countries. Following the World Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the World Tourism Organisation developed a programme to adapt Agenda 21 to the need for sustainable tourism development.

Supporting and promoting ecotourism in all tourist areas will only be possible by adopting and implementing the following key requirements:

✓ a detailed inventory of current and potential resources and an assessment of their condition and use;

✓ identification of the tourism products that can be produced and the markets, in relation to future trends, for the selection of products;

✓ drawing up plans for the manufacture of tourism products, customizing development frameworks for each tourism product;

✓ attracting and organizing joint actions with all stakeholders who can participate in the production and development of the selected tourism products;

✓ creating legal structures to ensure the appropriate institutional and financial support to back up the capitalisation and development plans.

Worldwide, the growing diversity of forms of tourism has led to the inclusion of protected natural areas in the tourism heritage of many countries as potential underused tourism resources.

The ecological development of tourism in protected natural areas is mainly focused on four aspects:

Economically, by increasing the degree of exploitation of resources, especially the lesser-known ones, in order to reduce pressure on the more intensively exploited ones.

Ecologically - by ensuring the rational use of all resources, with the reduction and disposal of household waste and residues, the conservation of recycling and environmental protection.

Social - by increasing the number of jobs, retaining traditional jobs or qualifications in tourism.

Cultural - through the enhancement of unique and original elements of civilisation, art, culture, which are the expression of a certain cultural identity that can develop a sense of tolerance through tourism.

Our country currently has a rich natural heritage, which is protected by the state. The total area taken under state protection is 66467.3 ha or 1.96% of the country's territory. Currently, within the structure of the fund of protected natural areas, landscape reserves comprise 34200 ha or 51.5% of this fund (Trebujeni, which includes the medieval town Orheiul Vechi, Șipova, Saharna, Rudi-Arionești, Brânzeni, Fetești, Butești etc.) and 19378 ha or 29.4% scientific reserves with a special protection regime. Other categories of protected natural areas are: nature reserves - 8009 ha, resource reserves - 523 ha, multifunctional management areas - 1030 ha, botanical gardens - 104 ha, monuments of landscape architecture - 191.1 ha. The most important areas of the Republic which can constitute, by their natural and anthropic framework, a real and attractive offer for ecological tourism are: the "Codrilor" area, the "Toltrele Prutului" area, the middle and lower Nistru area, the Tigheci area.

In recent years, a great deal of attention has been devoted to protected natural areas as essential spaces for the protection and conservation of the environment and for maintaining biodiversity and the national gene pool.

Conclusions:

For the practice of "green" tourism it is necessary to involve several decision makers, first and foremost the state, through its economic development policy, by developing sustainable development plans with the provision of quality services to reduce the excessive and inappropriate exploitation of natural and cultural heritage. A significant role is also played by the voice of local inhabitants in the development of tourist areas and their participation in these economic development programmes.

Green tourism involves modernizing the infrastructure for sustainable rural-urban development, using non-conventional forms of energy and less polluting techniques. At the same time, it requires effective marketing, a good knowledge of the tourist destination sites and efficient macroeconomic development that avoids overexploitation of certain areas and active pollution.

Failure to preserve tourist destinations leads to their degradation and, consequently, to the disappearance of destinations and attractions, and to a reduction in tourist flows and tourists. Going beyond the present moment, the outlook is for tourism products that are not necessarily new, but certainly cleaner and more equitable. Although some of the prospects are alarming and manage to frighten some of us, the symptoms are not of the end, but of a new beginning, a beginning marked by accountability, education, responsibility towards hosts and guests and towards all that belongs to future generations.

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