

## AGROTOURISM AND RURAL TOURISM THE WAY OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS OF SIBIU COUNTY – ROMANIA

CĂRĂTUȘ STANCIU Mirela

**Abstract.** This paper presents the actual stage of development in the fields of agrotourism and rural tourism in Sibiu County. Using data provided by the Tourism Ministry of Romania and Sibiu Association of Tourism enabled us to analyze the number of units specific to rural tourism. It was conducted a sociological survey in 70 rural pensions from 15 localities situated in Sibiu County, between 2015 and 2016. The work instrument was a questionnaire with 24 items. Sustainable development is harmoniously combined with tourism development, especially the rural one.

**Keywords:** agrotourism, gastronomy, rural tourism, sustainable development, trends.

**Rezumat. Agroturismul și turismul rural, calea dezvoltării durabile a zonelor rurale din județul Sibiu – România.**

Lucrarea prezintă stadiul actual de dezvoltare în domeniul agroturismului și turismului rural în județul Sibiu. Utilizarea datelor oferite de către Ministerul Turismului din România și Asociația Județeană de Turism Sibiu a făcut posibilă analiza numărului de unități specifice de turism rural. S-a desfășurat o anchetă sociologică în 70 de pensiuni din 15 localități situate în zona rurală a județului Sibiu, între 2015-2016. Metoda de lucru a fost chestionarul cu 24 de itemi. Dezvoltarea susținută este armonios legată de dezvoltarea turistică, mai ales în zona rurală.

**Cuvinte cheie:** agroturism, gastronomie, turism rural, dezvoltare sustenabilă, direcții.

### INTRODUCTION

In Romania, at the end of 2014, there were 6,089 tourist units, and at the end of 2015, there were 6,821 tourist units, compared to 3,121 in 2000, the increase being of 195.1% in 2014, and of 215.5% in 2015, with an annual average increase of 434 tourist accommodation units until in 2014. The number of agrotourism pensions was at national level 1,918 units in 2015. In the same year, the number of the touristic pensions at national level was 1,527 units (IOVA et al., 2016; POPESCU, 2016).

As a general definition, agrotourism represents a concept that includes tourism activity organized and led by rural population and it is based on a close connection with the natural and human environment. Agrotourism is directly related to agricultural activities, supported by small farmers, their own household activity remaining the main source of income (CONDEI et al., 2016). Rural tourism is a general term, which can be defined as all forms of tourism practiced in the rural area. Agrotourism occurs on a working farm and not just in a rural area. Agrotourism is a more limited concept, making reference to several forms of tourism concerning agricultural activities and/or agricultural facilities. This particular form of rural tourism is organized by farmers, usually as a secondary activity, while agriculture remains their main occupation and source of income (TALESKA, 2015)

Rural areas are specific in many ways different from other tourist destinations, particularly in urban areas (BURGHELEA et al., 2016). Rural tourism and agrotourism developed significantly in Romania. Agrotourism should be regarded as an economic activity, generating additional income for rural households, meaning the capitalization of their economic potential by hosting activities and exploitation of local products (CHIRAN et al., 2016). Authors like CIOBAN (2016) found that Sibiu County together with other five counties, Brașov, Harghita, Argeș, Maramureș and Suceava, is one of the most representative regions for rural tourism in Romania.

Sibiu is one of the counties with an intense activity in the area of the Romanian rural tourism. The analysis of existing data on the website of the National Tourism Authority shows that, in 2016, in the county of Sibiu there were licensed to operate 493 tourist structures with accommodation function. In order to see how many of them operate in rural areas, from the total tourist structures with accommodation function classified and existing at county level, there were excluded those which operate in urban areas, in the mountain resort Păltiniș, the SPA resort from Ocna Sibiului, and all the hotels, hostels or motels. Data processing from the Tourism National Authority website allow us to say, that in rural areas of Sibiu county there are 250 tourist units classified by type: apartments for rent (4), bungalows (1), chalets (21), houses for rent (13), camping (2), agrotouristic pensions (19), touristic pensions boarding (167), rural guesthouses (5), cottages (18) (<http://turism.gov.ro/autorizare-turism>).

These rural touristic structures from the rural area have a total number of 2,063 rooms and an accommodation capacity of 4,518 seats. The localities with the highest number of touristic structures with accommodation function in the rural area of Sibiu County are Sibiul (28), Gura Râului (28), Rășinari (27), Cârțișoara (25), Poplaca (19), Avrig with the touristic zone of Valea Avrigului (14), Șelimbăr (14), Cristian (11).

In Sibiu County there are still very well kept local traditions, especially those related to the shepherds in many of the 18 localities that make up the famous area "Mărginimea Sibiului" (STANCIU et al., 2012, 2014; BLAJ, 2014).

The tourism resources of Sibiu County, such as environmental and human resources, represent the basis for the development of tourism domain. This kind of resources generates specific forms of tourism that complete each other in different types of destinations (SIMTION & LUCA, 2013).

At the county level, various associations have contributed to the implementation and development of rural tourism and agrotourism, such as Sibiu County Tourism Association, which proposes five trails of discovery of Sibiu County: (Făgăraș trail - Olt Country; Nature trail – Hârtibaci Valey; Cheese trail – Mărginimea Sibiului; Fortifications trail – Târnavă Valey; Salt trail – Secașe Valey); Transylvanian Rural Tourism Association; National Association for Rural, Ecological and Cultural Tourism in Romania – Sibiu branch; "My Transylvania" Association, etc. (CĂRĂTUȘ STANCIU, 2016a, b, c).

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

In order to know the reality on the ground there was conducted a sociological survey in 70 agrotouristic pensions and rural pensions in Sibiu County in the following localities: Arpașu de Sus, Cârțișoara, Porumbacu de Sus, Valea Avrigului, Bradu-Avrig, Gura Râului, Sadu-Tocile, Rășinari, Sibiul, Săliște, Biertan, Bazna, Blăjel, Buzd.

The study objective was to know the situation of the rural pensions and rural guesthouses from the rural area of Sibiu County. The hypothesis from which it started was that most of the rural tourism structures from rural area are agrotouristic guesthouses and are managed by the owners. The main work instrument was a questionnaire with 24 items, administered to the pension owners or their managers, applied by six interviewers during July - August 2015 and July - September 2016.

The chosen items targeted to know the motivation for such activities, accommodation capacity and comfort level, average length of stay, origin of tourists, their average age, identification of other activities in the touristic structure, ways of spending free time in touristic pensions, local events and in the surroundings, workshops and other activities organized, identification by the managers /owners of touristic pensions the types of tourism resources existing in the area, the agricultural activities of the pension and production of traditional foods.

We also wanted to know what kind of traditional food is served in the rural pensions, the perception of the owners and the motivation of tourists in choosing traditional products and traditional culinary preparations. We also were interested in aspects related to the workforce from the rural pension and its qualification. We wanted also to know the future intentions of the owners of rural pensions, job satisfaction in relation to the effort and difficulties encountered.

## RESULTS

Following the sociological survey conducted in 70 rural pensions from Sibiu County in 2015 and 2016, and the processing of data obtained from questionnaires, there were obtained more results. Over 90% of the rural pensions in which the study was conducted, have more than 10 years of experience in rural tourism.

The rural tourism and agrotourism have a motivational base, represented by: return to nature; knowledge of tradition and culture, creation of various rural communities; health care; playing some sports - hunting, fishing, climbing, etc.; consumption of natural food and fresh fruit (IOVA et al., 2016).

Among the motivations that have led the owners to start such activities as: hospitality, the desire to obtain additional income, attractiveness and reputation of the area, entrepreneurship, the existence of accommodation surplus capacity, the desire for personal development and the desire to promote the village and traditions.

The average size of rural pensions from Sibiu County is between 6 and 10 rooms in 43% of cases, while approx. 30% of pensions, usually those which are family pensions, were under 5 rooms.

## DISCUSSIONS

At national level, regarding quality standards, the trend of the agrotourism pensions comfort level, in the interval 2007-2014 shows us that the share of agrotourism pensions with one and two flowers decreased from 78% in 2007 to 38% in 2014. The difference up to 100% is represented by agrotourism pensions with 3 stars/flowers (50%) and pensions with 4 stars/flowers representing 11% of this study (CONDEI et al., 2016). In the analyzed rural pensions from Sibiu County, comfort level falls at a rate of approx. 83% on 2 and 3 stars/flowers, the 4 and 5 stars/flowers pensions representing the difference.

The average length of stay of tourists in these rural pensions is approximately 2-3 days in 61% of the cases. There is a positive correlation between length of stay and level of comfort. The average age of tourists is between 20 and 50 years old in approximate 67% of the cases. All owners of rural guesthouses have identified the existence of natural, cultural and historical touristic resources in the area where it is located the guesthouse. These are major attractions for tourists.

The origin of tourists from rural guesthouses show that approximately 68% of those are Romanian tourists in 75 % of cases, and foreigners, in 25 % of cases. The owners of rural guesthouses related that the local authorities organizes events to attract visitors and tourists, but the level of involvement is different in the rural area of Sibiu County.

Local authorities from localities like Gura Râului, Rășinari and Tilișca organize numerous events that have reached a lot of editions. They highlight the traditions, customs, folklore and local gastronomy.

Among the most important events taking place in the rural areas of Sibiu County, we mention "Folkloric Festival of Peony", held on the first weekend of July, "Meeting of shepherds from Tilișca", held on August 15, Folkloric Festival "Up on Jina Mountain", held on the last Sunday of July and "Cheese and Plum Festival", which takes place in the last weekend of August. Craft workshops are not well represented at local level and old crafts tend to disappear.

In the future, the craft workshops must enter into rural tourism circuits. For leisure, there are proposed various activities: hiking, cycling, horse-drawn carriage or sleigh, sightseeing tours in the area, engaging in games or team sports, horseback riding, renting ATVs, folklore evenings, evenings dedicated to traditional cuisine, visit sheepfolds, wine tastings, etc. Only about 23% of the investigated pensions have farm animals. Generally, the owners have orchards. Over 80% of those who are food producers share their products exclusively through pensions. Those who do not produce food, generally purchase it from other authorized agricultural producers in the area. The main local and traditional products for tourists are dairy products (73%), sausages (61%), vegetables and fruits (59%), and other traditional products (25%).

Gastronomy is one of the elements incorporated in a new concept of cultural heritage and cultural tourism, driven by growing trends of a wellbeing lifestyle, authenticity, environmental protection and the need to have a high-quality experience. Tourists increasingly want foods, which emphasize the heritage and culture of a place, which assist the preservation of traditional forms of agriculture and cultural heritage (CĂRĂTUȘ STANCIU, 2016b)

The traditional culinary products offered to the tourists are cold cuts of pork and beef, polenta with cheese, cabbage rolls, Transylvanian soups, mutton stew, dishes based on trout, fish soup, traditional pies, homemade cakes, jams and fruit syrups, homemade bread, cheese and cow, sheep or goat curd, yoghurts, homemade wine and brandy. Owners say that tourists prefer traditional culinary products because they consider that they are tasty, fresh and healthy.

The work force from rural pensions was represented in 49% of cases only by the family members. More than 90% of pension owners have the qualification of pension administrator. The workforce have the following qualifications: cook, waiter, bartender, maid, receptionist.

If in year 2015, approximate 73% of owners said that they have no intention of further development of the pension, in year 2016, only 30% of owners said they want to maintain activity at current levels. The others owners want further development. Over 80% of owners are satisfied with the results obtained in relation to the effort.

The difficulties encountered are poor legislation, too high taxes, the overall infrastructure of poor quality, poor promotion of the area, too often controls, tourists behavior, lack of support from the local authority, the need for permanent investments, competition.

## CONCLUSIONS

The rural tourism represents an important opportunity to promote Romania at international level like it happens in other countries. Touristic and agrotouristic pensions play an increasingly important role in Romanian tourism.

Sustainable development is harmoniously combined with tourism development, especially the rural one. In rural tourism, the offered food and environmental specificity represent an advantage for attracting potential tourists, the changing quality of life, economic growth, as much as sustainable development (ANDREI et al., 2012).

Gastronomy is one of the elements incorporated in a new concept of cultural heritage and cultural tourism, driven by growing trends of a well-being lifestyle, authenticity, environmental protection and the need to have a high-quality experience.

Gastronomy, as a tourist resource, is appreciated not only for its own sake, but also for its ability to generate rural development. Gastronomic tourism helps to increase rural revenue sources and improve income levels and employment of local labor (especially women).

Tourism development will involve the development of other domains in economic and social areas (transport infrastructure, cottage industries, Agrofood industry, various services) generating a multiplier effect in the local economy.

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Cărătuș Stanciu Mirela

“Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu, Faculty of Agricultural Sciences,  
Food Industry and Environmental Protection, Sibiu, Romania, str. Dr. Ion Rațiu no.7-9, Sibiu, Romania.  
E-mail: mirela\_stanciu2008@yahoo.com

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