

## ANALYSIS THE ECOLOGICAL PREFERENCES OF TOURISTS FROM HAȚEG COUNTRY

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### **Abstract**

*More and more international organizations are seeing tourism through the idea of sustainability and integrated system at the level of national economies, focusing on the tendency to become an independent market segment due to the rising demand for educational holidays, in the middle of the nature. Thus, ecotourism is considered a component of sustainable tourism because it can induce positive effects both economically and socially, and in terms of environmental protection. In these circumstances it becomes opportune to know the ecological preferences of tourists from one of the areas with a rich ecotourism potential, namely Hațeg Country.*

**Key words:** *ecotourism, eco-guesthouse, protected area*

**JEL classification:** L83; Q56

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### **1. Introduction**

Currently, we are witnessing to a decline in biodiversity which requires as necessary and appropriate to provide forms of holiday whose environmental impact is as low as possible, generally known under the name "green tourism", "ecological tourism", "responsible tourism", "ecotourism".

Furthermore, studies conducted by the *International Ecotourism Society* (TIES) indicates that the international market of tourism based on nature is growing currently by 10-12% per year, and most of the expansion of tourism takes place in and around natural areas.

In Romania ecotourism finds all the "material" support that is needed, the not degraded nature, heritage, multiculturalism, diversity and finally

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organic food in rural areas. In this regard it should be pointed out that natural habitats, water quality, an environment free of pollution sources and also a whole range of cultural services, are part of the attractions offered by protected areas, attractions which enhances tourist traffic in these ecological sites.

At the same time, the rich ecotourism potential of Romania led in October 2014 to the certification of two ecotourism destinations, but also to the certification of certain national tour-operators, so most likely we may be witness in the next period to the ecological certification of other areas, among which is worth mentioned Hațeg Country.

Hațeg Country is the ideal holiday destination, due to the multitude of historical and natural attractions, which is why this paper aims to offer an overview of the ecological preferences of tourists from this area.

## **2. Theoretical and methodological aspects regarding tourists interest for ecotourism products**

In the current socio-economic environment, the main source of competitive advantage for tourist units is the quality of products and services and their ability to improve their environmental performance.

In a highly documented study Chafe (2005) showed that there is a close link between the eco-label and consumer behavior. Thus, 69% of Dutch tourists, staying in hotels certified Green Key Eco-Label, mentioned that they would be willing to pay more to benefit from establishment's services that have implemented an eco-label. The study conducted by Chafe also indicates that over 62% of Italian tourists and 42% of German tourists believe that environmental performance is an essential factor for a successful holiday.

At the same time, the largest travel site in the world – TripAdvisor – analyzed the eco travel options of more than 2,100 respondents from the USA. According to the survey, 23% of respondents have consciously made an eco-friendly travel choice in the past year, and 85% said that this made them feel more responsible about their journey (comScore Media Metrix for TripAdvisor Sites).

Ecotourism tries to raise environmental consciousness by exploring ecology and ecosystems and by providing environmental type experiences. Taking part in ecology actively and getting first hand impressions of how ecosystems work influence peoples' ways of thinking, which finally raises awareness of conservation and protection (Ecotourism – Sustainable Tourism in National Parks and Protected Areas, 2005).

Therefore, the main characteristics of an ecotourism business are the following (Patterson, 2002):

- Have a low impact upon a protected area's natural resources and recreation techniques.
- Involve stakeholders (individuals, communities, ecotourists, tour operators and government institutions) in the planning, development, implementation and monitoring phases of reducing the impact of tourism activity asupra mediului
- Limits visitation to areas, either by limiting group size and/or by the number of groups taken to an area in a season
- Hires local people and buys supplies locally, where possible.
- Respects the privacy and culture of local people.
- Supports the work of conservation groups preserving the natural area on which the experience is based.
- Recognizes that nature is a central element to the tourist experience, etc.

Ecotourism is a widespread phenomenon that causes a significant impact on the economy and there are many studies aimed at assessing the impact of sustainable tourism certification systems on the environmental, economic and socio-cultural performance of tourism products (Honey, 2002; Font, 2002; Blumer, 2007; Eriksen, 2007).

Taking this into consideration, it becomes important to know the ecological preferences of tourists arriving in one of the Romanian areas famous for its rich ecotourism potential, namely Hațeg Country.

### **3. An overview on the ecological preferences of tourists from Hațeg Country**

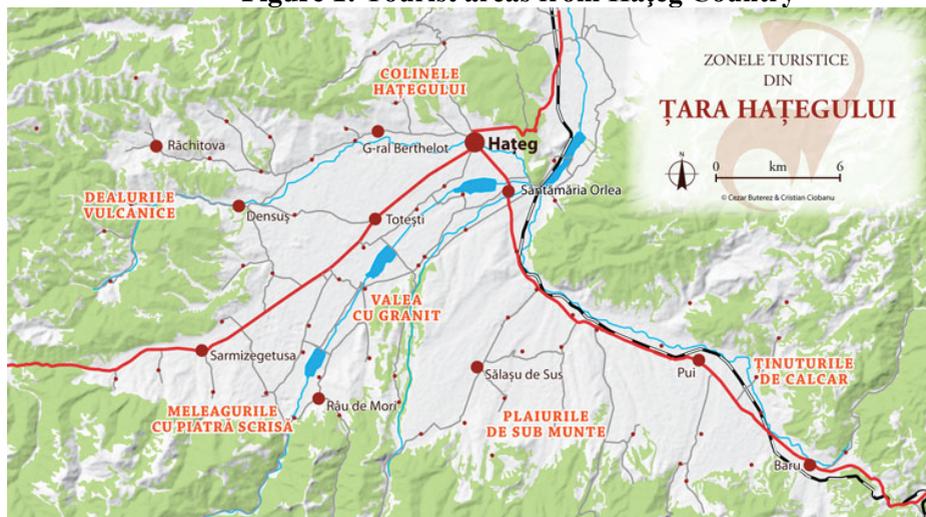
Worldwide there is a tendency for everything that means healthy lifestyle and our country has the potential to provide tourists unique experiences focused on organic products and responsible activities in the natural environment. Thus, for knowing and understanding the ecological preferences of tourists from Hațeg Country I used the inquiry as a research method and the questionnaire as a tool for quantitative research.

Hațeg Country is a protected natural area; it includes part of the National Park Retezat and on its territory was declared a UNESCO site – Dinosaurs Geopark. At the same time, in Hațeg Country can be find bison, 140 butterfly species, over 1,200 species of plants, 190 species of birds and a type of carnivore plant. In other words, tourists interested in Hațeg Country

can find the appropriate framework for the purchase of a variety of ecotourism products, from activities occurring in nature for observing flora and fauna, visiting Dinosaurs Geopark, to cycling and organic menus.

The survey was conducted among 100 tourists who arrived at guest houses from Rau de Mori, Sarmizegetusa, Densus and Upper Sălașu – settlements, which as can be seen in the figure below are part of Hațeg Country – and aimed at identifying their ecological preferences.

**Figure 1: Tourist areas from Hațeg Country**

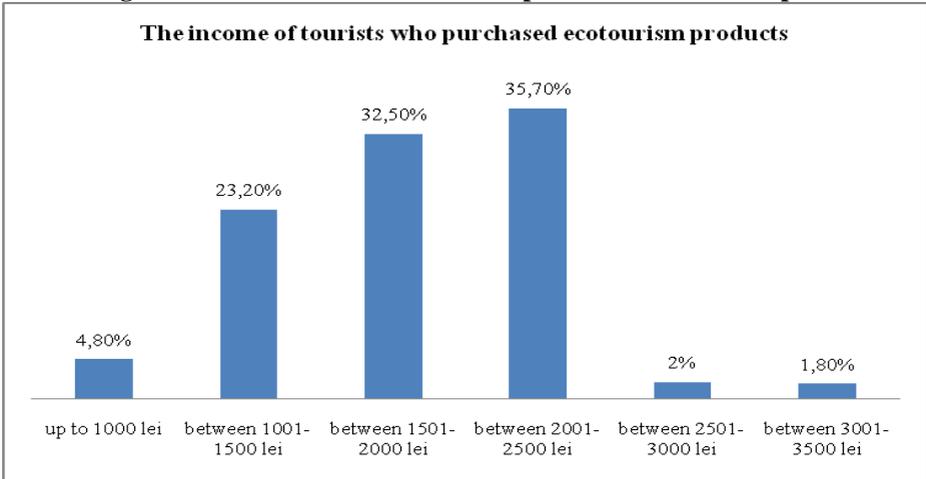


Source: <http://www.hategeoparc.ro/#>

The degree of professional training (level of education), indicates that of all respondents, 69.7% have higher education. At the same time, the structure by age reveals that 19.5% of tourists are under the age of 29; 25.3% have between 30-39 years; 33.2% have between 40-49 years; 18.1% have between 50-59 years, and 3.9% are over 60 years.

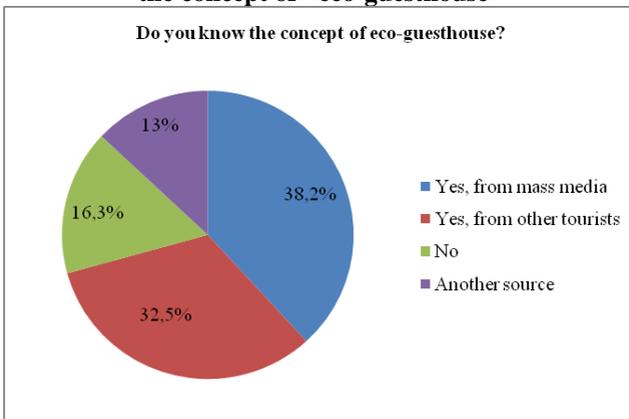
Regarding the income of tourists who purchased ecotourism products, analyzing the figure below, we see that 35.7% of tourists have incomes between 2001- 2500 lei, 32.5% have incomes between 1501-2000 lei, 23.2% have incomes between 1001-1500 lei and only 4.8% of tourists have incomes of less than 1,000 lei; from where we can conclude that of all tourists who have purchased ecotourism products from the guesthouses located in areas referred the vast majority have medium-high incomes.

**Figure 2: The income of tourists who purchased ecotourism products**



Regarding the extent to which tourists are familiar with the concept of "eco-guesthouse" I could see from the data processing that 38.2% of respondents know the concept from mass media, 32.5% have heard from other travelers, 13% found out from other sources, while 16.3% have not heard of "eco-guesthouses" as it results from analyzing Figure 3.

**Figure 3: The degree to which tourists are familiar with the concept of "eco-guesthouse"**



In this regard it should be noted that most of the tourists that participated in the survey (54.1%) stated that a guesthouse can be considered environmentally friendly if it meets the following criteria: the menu consists of organic products, environmental pollution is reduced, heating is based on environmentally friendly technologies and waste is sorted and recycled; 43.7% considers necessary for a "eco-guesthouse" to have the menu consists of organic products, based on traditional recipes; and 41% mentioned that the environmental pollution must be reduced in the area where the guesthouse is located.

Furthermore in the top preferences for ecotourism products are the organic menus – 52% of tourists choosing to purchase them from the guesthouses from Hațeg Country – closely followed by trips on thematic routes (42%), activities with the host in nature (35%) and cycling tourism (20%).

Regarding the thematic routes it should be noted that on the territory of Dinosaurs Geopark – Hateg Country are landscaped five such routes:

- "The Dinosaurs Valley", on the route Sanpetru – Ohaba Sibișel, with a duration of 2 hours and a length of 2.5 km; the route includes paleontological and geological sites of special significance, not forgetting the places connected with the history and culture of the region.
- "The Volcanoes road" on the territory of Densus, with a duration of 2 hours and a length of 2 km; the route includes sites of geological significance (Cretaceous volcanism in Transylvania), combined with observation points of animate nature (birds, butterflies, plants).
- "The Upper Sălașu – Nature and medieval history" on the territory of Upper Sălașu with a duration of 3 hours and a length of 2.5 km; the route is a combination of sites illustrating the medieval past of the Hațeg Country with sites representative for the endemic flora and fauna of the region.
- "Volcanoes of the age of dinosaurs" on the territory of Densus, with a duration of 1.5 hours and a length of 2.3 km.
- The route around the Tower of Răchitova, with a duration of 1 hour and a length of about 1.5 km.

At the same time, accompanied by the host tourists have visited the following botanical reserves, protected area of 4th category: Peșteana Marsh, the Narcissus Hay Fields, the Bison Forest and the Hay Fields from Pui.

Not least, for practicing cycling tourists were given the possibility to choose among several routes specially designed for this activity, summarized in the following table:

**Table 1: Cycling trails in Hateg Country**

No	Route	Traveled distance (Km)	Estimated time (hours)	Attractiveness of the route
1.	Sălașu de Sus – Bărăștii Hațegului – Săcel – Sânpetru – Sibiușel – Ohaba Sibiușel – Nucșoara – Mălăiești – Upper Salasu	26,8	3	The medieval church St. George in Sânpetru; In the village Ohaba Sibiușel tourists will meet an old water mill and a whirlpool.
2.	Sarmizegetusa – Breazova – Peșteana – Densuș – Hățăgel – Totești – Păcliaș – Sânpetru – Unciuc – Cârnești – Ostrov – Ostrovu Mic – Sarmizegetusa	40,6	5	The route passes close to several cultural sites: the medieval churches of Peșteana, Densus, Sânpetru and Ostrov; the Peșteana Reformed church; the Hațegan Village Museum in Peșteana.
3.	Sarmizegetusa – near the Păucinești villiage – Culmea Ceașului – DF Valea Hobiței – Hobița-Grădiște – Sarmizegetusa	27	4	The route reaches a high altitude (1400 m), offering a wonderful belvedere on Hațeg Country.
4.	Upper Sălașu – Mălăiești –Mălăiești – Piatra Măței – Coroiești – Paroș – Zăvoi – Upper Sălașu	Citadel	4-5	The Mălăiești citadel and the traditional villages with old houses and stone fences.
5.	Râu de Mori – Brazi – Valea Râului Mare – barajul Gura Apei (Tomeasa) – Valea Lăpușnicului Mare – Gura Bucurii – retur	91,6	6-7	It is one of the few options of Retezat to enter with the bike so much in the mountain.

6.	Sarmizegetusa – Poieni – Valea Criva – Densuș – Peșteana – Brezova – Sarmizegetusa	29,1	4	Densuș and Peșteana medieval churches, the Peșteana Reformed church, the Hațegan Village Museum and the Volcanoes Valley.
7.	Sălașu de Sus – Paroș – Coroiești – Râu Alb – Zăvoi – Sălașu de Jos – Sălașu de Sus	16,7	2	The route passes through several villages that still retain traditional elements; In the churchyard of Paros tourists will find several stone crosses with old Romanian script and even with characters of transition from Cyrillic to Latin alphabet;

Source: <http://www.turismretezat.ro/?id2=000200030001>

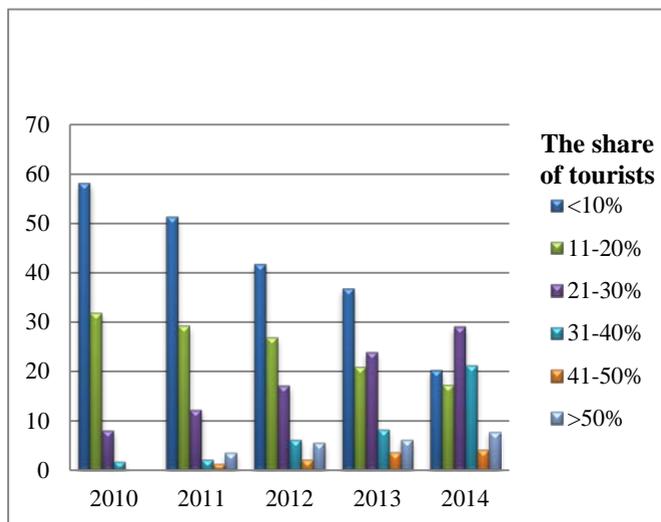
Regarding the share of tourists who purchased ecotourism products (as it can be observed from the analysis of Figure 3.) in 2010, 58.2% of tourists purchased less than 10% ecotourism products of the total tourism products purchased; 31.9% between 11-20%; 8.1% between 21-30%; and 1.8% between 31-40%.

Four years later, in 2014, the percentages have changed significantly, tourists becoming more concerned about environmental issues, healthy eating and eco-friendly choices. Thus the share of tourists who purchased less than 10% ecotourism products of the total tourism products purchased declined by more than 37 percent reaching 20.7%, while the share of tourists who purchased between 21-30% ecotourism products reached 29.1%. Increases were also recorded on other segments, so that in 2014, 21.3% of tourists purchased between 31-40% ecotourism products – of all tourism products purchased – which means an increase of approximately 19 percent compared to 2010 and 13 percent compared to 2011

Thus, there is a growing interest of tourists for the purchase of ecotourism products in the past four years, which means that this small industry tends to develop also at national level. The rich ecotourism potential of Hațeg Country makes it a unique holiday destination for both Romanian and foreign tourists. In addition, some of the tour operators are certified by the

Association of Ecotourism in Romania and most likely in the next period we will assist to the certification of this area as an ecotourism destination.

**Figure 3: The share of tourists who purchased ecotourism products from guesthouses**



Furthermore, the results obtained at empirical level show that ecotourism as the main manifestation of sustainable tourism is a widespread phenomenon, an important segment of the tourism industry contributing to economic development and social progress of our country.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Hațeg Country is a striking example of the possibility of sustainable development of tourism; thus, the descriptive analysis of data that were at the basis of the empirical study shows that ecotourism is preferred by a growing number of tourists, motivated by the desire to spend time in nature and try out various specific experiences, such as hiking, cycling, nature photography, bird watching etc.

In this context, the minimum requirements for the development of ecotourism in Romania are: supporting the diversity of ecosystems; conservation and rational management of natural resources; finding ways to

reduce uncontrolled population growth as well as unification of national decisions concerning the environment and the economy.

Not least is required a strenuous promotion, at national and international level, of the areas with rich ecotourism potential in conjunction with the development of sustainable tourism packages, that would provide an authentic experience.

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