

# “TOURING NATURE: THE PAN-EUROPEAN ROUTES TO RURAL ECOTURISM – A GLOBAL METAPLAN AND IT’S LOCAL INFLUENCE”

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*Abstract: Romanian tourism can compete and win a lot if the rural tourism component will be develop. Our paper considers this perspective, analyzing the possibility of implement the meta-plan: “Touring Nature: The Pan-European Routes to Rural Ecotourism” – as a pattern of sustainable development in the rural tourism zone from the North-West of Romania.*

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Tourism development in North-West side of Romania is, in our opinion, firmly connected with the sustainable development which implies, as we know, the gratification of tourist products consumers supply, taking into account the necessities of future consumers generations without affecting the natural environment and the tourist resources through this activity<sup>179</sup>. We suggest an incorporated meta-plan: ***Touring Nature: The Pan-European Routes to Rural Ecotourism*** – as a pattern of sustainable development in the rural tourism zone from the North-West of Romania. This plan should be understood as a corroboration form of the efforts of all who are implied in the tourist activity from a certain territory, taking into account the tendencies which exist on the international market, the potential markets and the potential tourism of that certain region. The formula imagines the training in the tourist sustainable development project of at least 100 economic agents from a certain region, who have agreed to continuously improve the quality of their activity, so that the destination as a whole could be recognized, classified and finally included in the process of the destinations which are known through the Touring- Nature system<sup>180</sup>. All people should cooperate so as to develop a challenging destination based on specific, original and authentic elements. We are talking about a quality guarantee and a development of the destination mark!

This system adherence and its use as a strategic point, the construction of its structures and the subordination of the integration elements necessary for a coherent action and, in the same time, for an

economical local politics constitute, in our opinion, the chance of the rural tourism from the North-West side of Romania.

The Pan-European Route creator for the Rural Ecotourism is The European Regions Association (ERA), a non-governmental association which has its headquarters in Strasbourg and Brussels and has 255 member regions from 30 countries. This initiative could be placed in the spirit of the 21 Agend' s objectives concerning the sustainable tourism for the period between 2007-2013. The ERA is looking for partners (local groups of action, rural district groups, etc) for an international long-term cooperation which should imply the rural communities so as the sustainable development should happen through the local existent resources gathered together, creators of synergic effects. Actually, it plays the role of the coach who trains the beneficiaries to "play" as well as they can, and to become successful in the competitive system of the market economy.

Shortly, ERA proposes:

- An education process which should imply the economical agents/ local professionals from tourism in supporting the sustainable development actions
- A permanent evaluation of the territory so as to satisfy the visitor's quality demands
- A succession of actions with international visibility which should promote the material and cultural inheritance of the territory but also the local professionals

A successful example is that of Tisza Lake region, from Hungary, certificated after a 3 years long case, which counts 73 states and 149 local professionals. What were the conclusions?

- The promotion of region's identity through a sustainable tourist development
- The appearance of a sustainable development through rural ecotourism
- The active and articulate involvement of the local professionals, of the regional authorities and, generally speaking, of all the people interested in regional cooperation
- The development of the rural area into a sustainable way, using the local resources
- A proper promotion at international level through the inclusion in The Pan-European Routes to Rural Ecotourism
- The chances of an excellent destination in the rural ecotourism
- Incomes of 4,8 millions euros/a year
- About 139.500 visitors during the 4 seasons.

The affiliation to the Pan-European Routes implies obtaining the Village+ mark previously, the guarantee for the services and the specialty reference for the potential tourist, who is usually the possessor of a tourist experience and he is, obviously, wise and expert. This tourist is connected with the rural ecotourism offer through web at [www.touringnature.com](http://www.touringnature.com) and has the possibility to:

- Conceive his own holiday
- Compare different destinations
- Find all the information they need: where to eat, where to sleep, what to visit, where to find different sources of entertainment, local artisans, etc.
- How much money one needs in order to obtain the mark, so as to be included in the Pan-European Routes of Rural Ecotourism?

During a three years time, that is the accreditation period, the certification costs are about 50.500 euros and the ecotourism and all the other actions designated for the sustainable development financing in the territory is about 100.000 euros/a year.<sup>181</sup>

At a first sight, the sums are significant, but they should be judged through the effects they create taking into account that the rural ecotourism market is growing annually between 10-30% while the common tourism market will not exceed an annual growth of 4%.

For a proper continuation of the certification process, ERA has signed a partnership agree with a consultancy society, Pluris Consultants, which monitorizes the whole process into two distinct stages:

#### **A. Before obtaining the mark**

Pluris Consultants collaborating as any professional consultant with the people in the region:

- Examines and controls the forming mode of the system which contains at least 100 professionals (the predicted period is between 3-12 months). Actually, it validates the ones who want to aggregate to these actions of sustainable development and controls how they involve in protecting the environment and eco-tourist development of that certain territory.
- Makes a territory audit, stressing the high and low points of the action.
- Brings a territory progress report, so as to determine the improving possibilities and the prioritized directions concerning the sustainable eco-tourist development. People from the territory will have three years in order to improve the situation.

These three elements are compulsory and are important not only for the economic agents/professionals but also for the local authorities so as to make them reality. It is the only way they could have access to the Touring Nature Routes, they will receive the Village+ mark, and a diploma for each of the economic agents/ professionals.

#### **B. After obtaining the mark**

The certification process is not over after receiving the Village+ mark, it continuums with a monitoring process of the quality, and the reevaluation of the mark is compulsory once at every three years. The monitoring process is conceived for each year like this:

- In the first year the participation grade of the professionals/local economic agents which are using Village-mark is evaluated . Practically, the number of the economic agents who had signed the adherence to mark, developed activity, the conceiving and utilization of the promoted materials is controlled and suggestions from them are collected.
- In the second year, the evaluation of the consumers perception is stressed, especially their perception regarding the territory, the professionals, the mark and the Pan-European route. Suggestions from visitors, automobilist clubs, associations, etc are collected now.
- In the third year the evaluation of the supporting engagements of the sustainable development actions, of the professionals and local authorities initiatives takes place .

We consider it a viable solution first of all thinking at the European funds, and the identified needs of the tourism suppliers from the North-West region are:

- Elaborating and supplying large services wedges which could satisfy the actual needs of the visitors.
- Knowing to conceive this wedges in report with the resources each firm has and in concordance with the demand .
- Making a promotion of these wedges by concentrating on the target public.

- Beneficiating of a regional consultancy which could objectively understand the interests of all the suppliers, through their inclusion in different programs.
- Improving the attractiveness of the tourist programs through the development of two different cultures: Romanian and Hungarian.
- Using the experience and the knowledge of the partners in domains where they exceed.
- Filling the blank generated by the absence of regional, active organisms in the development and promoting of the tourism.
- Having a greater force in development and promoting as a result of the growth of the number of the ones who are implicated.
- Offering tourist wedges which combines the geographical and natural advantages of certain districts.
- Beneficiating of a destination mark, of a regional identity on the European tourist market.

Just a few elements can make from a visit in a common region an unforgettable experience and it could generate certain effects in tourist services consumer's mind: the harmony of the destination, the quality perceived after consuming the tourist product of the region, the association between the region and a certain idea, and the trust for that region (that is the fact that the tourist is motivated to come again in that region).

If the strict definition of tourism, seen as sustainable economical activity, implies the utilization of these tourist resources, which are recyclable and could be reutilized without affecting the future potential of those resources, then, from a pragmatic point of view, it is imposed that the identification and promoting activity of a tourist destination to be the personalized combination for a certain region of those three regions: economic, natural environment and social environment.

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