

EVALUATING THE ROLE OF RURAL TOURISM AND ECOTOURISM IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY OF WESTERN ROMANIA'S RURAL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract: *Rural tourism has become a vital means of economic development for vulnerable rural communities. Despite its growth, there remains limited research on the sustainability of development generated by tourism activities in these regions. In both our country and the European Union, rural tourism and ecotourism rank among the most dynamic forms of tourism, benefiting tourists and host communities alike. Historically, rural areas have depended on abundant natural resources, and now, sustainable development through tourism is both a necessity and a trend, particularly in Romania's Western region.*

This article reviews literature on sustainable rural tourism and employs a case study approach to explore rural tourism and ecotourism in Romania's Western region. The study's objective is to assess how tourism impacts the sustainable development of rural communities, with a focus on three indicators: demographic stability, access to public utilities, and socio-economic sustainability. Additionally, the research investigates the relationship between rural tourism, the need for sustainable development, and the preservation of local traditions, aiming to determine if a balance can be achieved between these aspects.

Results indicate a significant positive effect of tourism on rural areas, evidenced by improved values across all analysed indicators, underscoring its potential to drive sustainable growth and resilience in rural communities.

Key words: *rural tourism, ecotourism, sustainable development, rural communities, socio-economic impact*

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, rural tourism has gained recognition as a vital economic development strategy for vulnerable communities, particularly in rural areas. The Western Development Region boasts a rich and diverse natural landscape, featuring varied terrain, climate elements influenced by both continental and southern factors, a significant network of waterways, and abundant forest and wildlife resources, all of which make it a highly attractive area for tourism. Located along Romania's border with Hungary and Serbia, this region was established in 1998 and includes four counties: Arad, Caraș-Severin, Hunedoara, and Timiș. [15] From an economic perspective, the most developed counties are Timiș and Arad, characterized by predominantly flat terrain that supports primarily human-centered tourism activities. In contrast, the other two counties in the region, with their rich mountainous landscapes, offer tourism centered around natural attractions and resources. Consequently, Timiș and Arad are advantaged by favorable geographic features that enable the growth of diverse tourism types. The increasing interest in rural tourism and ecotourism reflects a broader societal shift towards sustainable practices that benefit both visitors and host communities. In Romania, especially in the Western region, rural tourism leverages the country's rich natural resources, cultural heritage, and traditional practices to create opportunities for local economic growth.

Despite the growth of rural tourism, there is a notable gap in research focused on the sustainability of tourism development within these communities. While various studies have explored the benefits of tourism, few have provided a comprehensive analysis of its

long-term impacts on community sustainability. This study aims to fill this gap by evaluating the effects of rural tourism on demographic stability, access to public utilities, and socio-economic sustainability in Western Romania. Agritourism, a form of rural tourism that integrates agricultural activities with hospitality services, has emerged as a significant driver of economic development and social revitalization in many regions worldwide. A study found that agritourism helps diversify farm income, supports local traditions, and mitigates the economic challenges faced by family farms in this hilly region.

This reinforces the idea that agritourism can significantly impact demographic stability, business environment improvements, and overall quality of life in rural areas. [4] Defining rural tourism seems, at first glance, to be very clear, but considering rural spaces, some specific problems related to the areas visited by tourists can appear. These problems are related to buildings and population density, the variate ways of using land, the types of ownership and the characteristics of households. [10]

Some studies have shown that tourism activities have a positive impact in various ways on rural areas, such as through economic growth, economic diversification, demographic stabilization, increasing the economic value of food products and stimulating agricultural development, improving socio-economic well-being, as well as creating or expanding new local businesses.

Tourism also contributes to the overall improvement in quality of life for residents, supports sustainable rural development, and reduces outward migration. In fact, tourism is a well-known mechanism for population retention, especially among young people (who are more vulnerable to migration), due to its ability to rapidly create new jobs with lower qualification requirements. Additionally, workforce reorientation into tourism is more financially accessible, as it draws from existing sectors (such as agriculture, light industry, or craftsmanship). [7]

A group of academics from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies defined "rural tourism as a form focused on destinations in rural areas, equipped with functional accommodation facilities and other heterogeneous services". [15] This definition was developed in an attempt to create a concise yet comprehensive ("mini-max") definition, consulted sources from English, French, German, and Spanish specialized literature, which they then harmonized.

Another definition, which this time avoids the geographical aspect, claims that: "Rural tourism is a concept encompassing tourism activities organized and conducted by the local population, based on a close connection with the surrounding natural and human environment."

This definition appears to be more comprehensive, with its only shortcoming being the omission of the involvement of organizations or individuals from outside the local community (such as tour operators, investors, etc.) in rural tourism activities.

According to the World Tourism Organization and many European rural tourism organizations, rural tourism is "a form of tourism that includes any tourism activity organized and conducted in rural areas by the local population, utilizing local resources (natural, cultural-historical, and human) as well as tourist facilities and structures, including guesthouses and agritourism farms."

UN Tourism understands Rural Tourism as "a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/culture, angling and sightseeing. Rural Tourism activities take place in non-urban (rural) areas with the following characteristics: i) low population density, ii) landscape and land-use dominated by agriculture and forestry and iii) traditional social structure and lifestyle". [17]

In Romanian tourism legislation, "rural tourism" lacks a specific definition. However, Government Ordinance no. 58/1998 defines tourism as a priority branch of the national economy, encompassing a range of activities aimed at producing goods and services for tourists, highlighting its complex functions and multisectoral implications. [18]

The European Commission does not provide a specific definition of rural tourism. However, the European Parliament's Think Tank describes rural tourism as originating from agritourism and farm stays, typically involving experiences unique to the countryside. This form of tourism often includes nature-related physical activities, is generally small in scale, and involves numerous small private businesses. [19]

Additionally, the European Environment Agency defines rural tourism as activities where individuals travel and stay in rural areas, excluding mass tourism, for less than one consecutive year for leisure, business, or other purposes, without engaging in remunerated activities within the visited location. [20]

These descriptions highlight that rural tourism encompasses a range of activities and experiences centered around rural lifestyles, nature, and small-scale operations, contributing to the economic and social sustainability of rural areas.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study approach, focusing on selected rural communities in Western Romania known for their engagement in rural tourism and ecotourism. In this study, information was collected about rural tourism and ecotourism in the sustainable development of rural communities in western Romania. The study was conducted in a specific context, focusing on identifying the impact of these forms of tourism on the local economy, environmental protection, and socio-cultural development.

The analysis of rural tourism and ecotourism on sustainable development was conducted using an analytical framework based on three main pillars:

1. Economic dimension: analysis of the contribution of tourism to the development of the local economy, job creation, diversification of income sources, and support for local businesses.
2. Social dimension: the impact of tourism on social cohesion, quality of life for residents, as well as the ability of tourism to reduce the migration of young people from rural areas.
3. Environmental dimension: assessment of how rural tourism and ecotourism contribute to the conservation of natural resources, protection of biodiversity, and implementation of sustainable ecological practices.

Three key indicators were chosen to assess the impact of rural tourism:

1. Demographic Stability: Analyzing population changes, migration trends, and the retention of younger generations.
2. Access to Public Utilities: Evaluating improvements in infrastructure, including water, electricity, and transportation.
3. Socio-economic Sustainability: Measuring changes in employment rates, business growth, and overall economic well-being.

Data analysis involved both descriptive and inferential statistical methods to identify trends and correlations, providing a comprehensive view of tourism's impact on sustainable development.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Sustainable tourism is often defined as tourism that meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It incorporates ecological, social, and economic considerations to ensure that tourism can be sustained over time.

Other researchers have employed a quantitative approach, utilizing tourism indicators to assess and monitor the impact of rural tourism development and its sustainability. To address sustainability in tourism studies, recent reports have classified tourism impact indicators into economic, social, and environmental categories, focusing on intensity indicators such as tourism density, intensity ratio, and tourist specialization. [7]

Rural tourism and ecotourism are specific branches that focus on nature-based experiences and community engagement, fostering an appreciation for local culture and environmental conservation. Previous research has identified various benefits of rural tourism, including job creation, increased local income, and improved infrastructure. However, studies also highlight the potential challenges, such as environmental degradation and cultural dilution, particularly when tourism is not managed sustainably. The relationship between tourism, sustainability, and local traditions remains complex, necessitating further investigation.

This literature review provides a framework for understanding how rural tourism can promote sustainable development, specifically examining case studies from other European regions that have successfully integrated tourism with local community development.

Demographic Stability. Findings indicate that rural tourism has a stabilizing effect on local populations. Many younger residents express a renewed interest in staying in their communities due to increased job opportunities in tourism-related sectors. This demographic shift contributes to a more balanced age structure and mitigates the effects of rural depopulation. [9]

Access to Public Utilities. The influx of tourism has led to significant improvements in local infrastructure. Investments from tourism-related businesses have enhanced access to public utilities, including reliable water supply and better road networks. These improvements benefit not only tourists but also local residents, enhancing their quality of life. [14]

Socio-economic Sustainability. Tourism has stimulated local economies, resulting in increased employment opportunities and income levels. Many residents have started small businesses catering to tourists, such as guesthouses, restaurants, and artisanal shops. This economic diversification is crucial for building resilience in rural communities. [4]

Development Region has been driven and continues to be supported by the existing natural resources, which have a diversified relief and include the plains of Timis and Arad counties, the hilly areas with important mineral resources, as well as an important segment of the Southern and Western Carpathians, which includes one of the most significant natural parks in Europe, namely the Retezat National Park. Therefore, it can be said that, at the moment, we cannot speak of a full exploitation of the existing natural and man-made resources within the Western Development Region. [1]

Balancing Development and Tradition. While tourism presents numerous benefits, it also poses challenges regarding the preservation of local traditions. Efforts to balance tourism development with cultural heritage are essential. Romanian villages are rich in traditions, customs, and crafts that deserve recognition, with one way to develop and highlight these resources being through the concept of a tourist village. Given the fact that tourism enhances the value of the Romanian village, the focus lies on leveraging those resources with the highest tourism appeal. Villages may thus be shaped by historical,

fishing, or fruit-growing characteristics, which also help to define the types of tourism that evolve around them. [1] Many rural areas have embraced tourism as a source of pride, providing livelihoods and additional income. Rural tourism development contributes to the sustainable economic growth of these communities. A key aspect is that residents of rural regions should play a central role in driving agritourism activities. The focus of the local community's interest in building agritourism for the future should be on creating a strategy or development plan rooted in current conditions and aimed at long-term sustainable development. [9]

Many communities are adopting strategies to promote local traditions, ensuring that tourism development does not compromise their cultural identity.

While rural tourism provides economic and social benefits, it also brings environmental challenges that require careful management. The increase in visitors can place stress on natural resources, particularly in areas with limited capacity for waste disposal, water management, and habitat preservation. [4] Sustainable tourism practices, such as establishing visitor caps, promoting eco-friendly accommodations, and encouraging responsible behaviors among tourists, are crucial to mitigating these impacts and preserving biodiversity in rural areas. [9] Sustainable rural tourism places emphasis on involving local communities in decision-making processes. [12] Engaging residents in tourism planning fosters a sense of ownership and enables them to advocate for practices that align with their values and cultural heritage. Empowerment through tourism also includes training programs for residents, equipping them with skills in hospitality, marketing, and eco-friendly practices. By promoting locally owned enterprises and cooperative models, communities are better positioned to benefit economically while retaining control over how tourism shapes their environment and lifestyle. One of the challenges in rural tourism is managing the seasonal nature of tourism demand. Many rural areas experience fluctuations in tourist numbers, leading to seasonal employment patterns and income instability for residents. To counter these effects, some regions have diversified their offerings to include off-peak activities, such as winter sports, cultural festivals, and workshops focused on traditional crafts. [14] Additionally, initiatives aimed at encouraging domestic tourism have proven effective in creating a more stable flow of visitors throughout the year, reducing reliance on high-traffic seasons and fostering a more resilient local economy. Rural tourism and ecotourism often include educational components that foster environmental awareness among both tourists and residents. Workshops, guided tours, and interactive experiences not only enrich the tourist experience but also raise awareness about the importance of conservation efforts and sustainable practices. By integrating environmental education into tourism activities, communities are cultivating a culture of respect for nature and reinforcing the value of preserving local landscapes and biodiversity. This approach contributes to the long-term sustainability of tourism in rural areas and promotes responsible behaviors among future generations of both tourists and residents. The Western Development Region has an area of 32,034 km² (13.4% of the country's area) and is organized into 42 cities (of which 12 municipalities) and 276 communes (318 territorial administrative units). From the perspective of tourist resources and the types of tourism practiced, the West Region is characterized by variety and heterogeneity, primarily determined by the distribution of relief forms in the territory, which allows for the division of the region's counties into two main categories. Thus, the most economically developed counties, Timiș and Arad, have a predominantly plain relief, making tourism based on anthropogenic objectives predominant. In contrast, the less economically developed counties, Caraș-Severin and Hunedoara, which enjoy a predominantly mountainous relief, have a tourism activity based on natural resources and objectives.

CONCLUSIONS

This study highlights the significant positive impact of rural tourism on the sustainable development of Western Romania's rural communities. By enhancing demographic stability, improving access to public utilities, and fostering socio-economic sustainability, rural tourism demonstrates its potential as a driver of sustainable growth. Ecotourism is a type of tourism driven primarily by tourists' interest in observing and appreciating nature and the local traditions connected to it. According to the World Tourism Organization, ecotourism should meet several key criteria: conserving and protecting natural environments, utilizing local human resources, fostering an educational component that promotes respect for nature and raises awareness among tourists and local communities, and minimizing negative impacts on the natural and socio-cultural environment. [4]

Recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders include developing strategic plans that integrate tourism with local development goals, promoting responsible tourism practices, and encouraging community participation in tourism initiatives. Further research could explore longitudinal impacts of tourism on rural communities and compare findings across different regions.

Rural tourism offers substantial potential for sustainable development by promoting economic growth, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship. However, achieving these goals requires a balanced approach that addresses the inherent challenges. Effective management practices, community engagement, and supportive policies are essential for ensuring that rural tourism not only meets current needs but also contributes to the long-term well-being of local communities and ecosystems. Further research, particularly comparative studies across different rural regions, will be invaluable in refining strategies for integrating tourism with sustainable community development in diverse cultural and environmental settings.

Although the region has a great variety of tourism resources, the West Development Region is not known as a tourist region in Romania. The main reason for this is the lack of promotion of the tourist offer, with emphasis on the development of those tourist sectors that have a great natural and anthropic tourist potential. The West Development Region ranks 6th out of the eight regions at national level in terms of the number of tourist accommodation facilities. At the level of the region there is an increase in the number of tourist accommodation facilities, a similar situation is recorded at the level of the counties in the region, with the exception of Timis county, which in 2022 had 140 accommodation units. Timis county, even though it has the fewest accommodation units, attracts the most tourists in the Western Development Region. Tourism is the most vulnerable sector when it comes to threats related to a medical, economic or military crisis. [1] The development of rural tourism, agritourism and ecotourism contributes to changing the image of the rural environment and brings a series of benefits for the rural community, among which we mention: the preservation and enhancement of the natural and anthropogenic tourist heritage; creating jobs and improving the professional and digital skills of people involved in services; the generation of incomes complementary to agricultural ones; improving the general appearance of localities; conservation of biodiversity; promoting local gastronomy; the direct exploitation of local products or those registered on different national or community quality schemes, supporting the local economy and creating short food supply chains. [14] Supporting local communities has thus become a fundamental aspect of sustainable tourism. The foundation of sustainable tourism development typically lies in ensuring lasting economic, social, and cultural benefits for both the community and its surrounding environment. [13]

Tourism development strategies must be integrated with various policies in the social field (quality of trained human resources), economic field (quality of roads, accessibility), as well as with the protection of natural and human resources, and also their promotion worldwide. [9]

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