

## SUSTAINABLE TOURISM PRACTICES IN ROMANIA'S RURAL COMMUNITIES

GORDAN MARIUS-IONUȚ<sup>1</sup>, IANCU TIBERIU<sup>1\*</sup>, PASCARIU ANKA<sup>1</sup>,  
ADAMOV TABITA-CORNELIA<sup>1</sup>, PET ELENA<sup>1</sup>, MILIN IOANA-ANDA<sup>1</sup>,  
POPESCU GABRIELA<sup>1</sup>, MERCE IULIANA<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*University of Life Sciences "King Mihai I" from Timișoara, Faculty of Management and Rural Tourism*

\*Corresponding author's e-mail: tiberuiiancu@usvt.ro

***Abstract:** This paper examines sustainable tourism practices in Romania's rural communities through a case study approach. The research employs a combination of document analysis to assess economic impacts, environmental conservation strategies, and the socio-cultural transformations occurring in these regions. The selected case studies reveal that local heritage, traditional knowledge, and abundant natural resources serve as key catalysts for promoting tourism. However, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited stakeholder collaboration, and insufficient regulatory frameworks continue to constrain the full potential of these initiatives. Based on these findings, the paper advocates for enhanced policy support and, targeted capacity-building programs, to secure the long-term resilience and sustainability of rural tourism in Romania.*

***Key words:** Romanian rural tourism, sustainable tourism, sustainable tourism development, case study*

### INTRODUCTION

Sustainable tourism is playing a growing role in rural development by striking a balance between economic growth and environmental and cultural preservation. In Romania, rural communities hold significant potential in this regard, offering rich local heritage, traditional practices, and natural landscapes. As demand for responsible tourism rises, understanding how these communities adopt sustainable practices is increasingly important. While promising examples of community-led initiatives are evident, structural challenges, such as fragmented stakeholder engagement, limited infrastructure, and regulatory shortcomings, hinder broader implementation.

From a theoretical standpoint, the specialized literature on sustainable rural tourism emphasizes community-based and heritage-led models that integrate the triple bottom line—economic viability, environmental impact, and socio-cultural concerns - often mediated through local small enterprises [3, 5, 8, 9, 10]. In the context of Romanian rural tourism specifically, authenticity, craft preservation, and landscape conservation emerge as key sources of competitive advantage for rural destinations [3, 4, 5].

This article advances the discourse by assembling a Romania-focused, multi-site cross-case synthesis across six emblematic rural settings (Gura Râului, Sâncraiu, Viscri, Mălâncrav, the Mureș Floodplain Natural Park, and the Via Transilvanica corridor) and by incorporating post-2022 developments surrounding the Via Transilvanica route [7, 17, 18, 20]. Using systematic document analysis, we highlight common enablers and constraints and translate them into policy- and capacity-building implications tailored to rural communities.

This research aims to inform future policy and planning efforts by highlighting both the achievements and constraints faced by rural communities as they strive to align tourism development with sustainability objectives.

To guide the analysis, the study pursues three objectives:

- (1) map the sustainable tourism practices adopted in the selected communities;
- (2) evaluate their economic, environmental, and socio-cultural outcomes as reported in recent sources;

(3) identify enablers, barriers, and actionable recommendations to strengthen the long-term sustainability of rural tourism in Romania.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper employs a case study approach grounded in structured document analysis of Romania's rural destinations. Case selection comprised Gura Râului (Sibiu County), Sâncraiu (Cluj County), Viscri (Braşov County), Mălâncrav (Sibiu County), the Mureş Floodplain Natural Park (Arad County), and the Via Transilvanica corridor linking Putna Monastery (Suceava County) to Drobeta-Turnu Severin (Mehedinţi County). We analyzed peer-reviewed articles and scientific papers ([1]–[20]). Sources were analysed by their economic, environmental, and socio-cultural focus.

### RESEARCH RESULTS

The analysis of sustainable tourism practices in Romania's rural communities reveals several noteworthy initiatives that have successfully integrated ecological, cultural, and economic sustainability:

- Gura Râului, Sibiu County: This mountain village exemplifies best practices in sustainable rural tourism [1, 3]. A study involving 360 tourists indicated that Gura Râului is increasingly attractive to rural tourism enthusiasts, serving as a model for other mountain villages in Romania [14]. The village's success stems from its commitment to maintaining traditional architecture, promoting local crafts, and offering authentic culinary experiences. Community involvement plays a crucial role, with residents actively participating in tourism-related activities, ensuring that economic benefits are distributed locally. Additionally, Gura Râului's proximity to natural attractions, such as the Gura Râului Dam, enhances its appeal to eco-tourists seeking sustainable travel options [15].

- Sâncraiu, Cluj County: This Transylvanian village has implemented transformative rural tourism strategies contributing to sustainable development. The community's efforts have been recognized for promoting local culture and traditions while enhancing the quality of life for residents [8]. Key to Sâncraiu's approach is the promotion of local culture and traditions. The village offers eco-tourist workshops related to local cultural heritage, such as traditional trades, wood carving, and embroidery, run by villagers in collaboration with local leaders. These activities preserve cultural practices and diversify residents' income sources [2, 19].

The success of Sâncraiu's tourism model is further supported by a network of small touristic units that cooperate locally while competing globally. This collaborative approach enhances the village's competitiveness in the global tourism market [9].

- Via Transilvanica Trail: Inaugurated in October 2022, this 882-mile trail traverses Romania from Putna Monastery in Bukovina to Drobeta-Turnu Severin by the Danube [17, 18, 20]. Designed for hiking, cycling, and horseback riding, it aims to promote ecotourism and revitalize over 400 traditional communities that have been impacted by depopulation and economic challenges [7]. The trail has provided new economic opportunities for lesser-known cities, towns, and villages, offering a clear prospect of development. By emphasizing environmental, social, and heritage values, Via Transilvanica contributes to sustainable local development while preserving and nurturing heritage along its path [12].

- Viscri and Mălâncrav, Braşov and Sibiu Counties: These villages have benefited from restoration projects initiated by the Prince of Wales, aimed to preserve the unique way of life in these villages and promote sustainable tourism [4, 10]. Similarly, in Mălâncrav, the restoration of the Apafi Manor by the Mihai Eminescu Trust has contributed to the conservation of cultural heritage and the promotion of agro-tourism [6]. The restored guesthouses provide authentic experiences while supporting local economies.

These initiatives have transformed the villages into popular tourist destinations, attracting visitors interested in authentic cultural experiences. However, the influx of tourists has also led to challenges, such as overcrowding and the need for infrastructure improvements to accommodate increased visitation [11].

- Mureș Floodplain Natural Park: Established in 2005, the park promotes eco-tourism through activities such as guided canoe trips and bicycle rentals [5]. It also emphasizes cultural preservation by protecting historical monasteries within its boundaries. The park offers over 100 kilometers of eco-tourist routes accessible by bike, foot, or kayak, providing opportunities for visitors to engage with the natural environment [13]. Additionally, the park features cultural attractions, such as the Hodoș-Bodrog Monastery, dating from 1177, and the Bezdin Monastery, dating from 1539, which are integrated into the eco-tourism experience [16].

Despite these successes, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited stakeholder collaboration, and insufficient regulatory frameworks continue to constrain the full potential of sustainable tourism initiatives in Romania's rural areas.

Overall, our cross-case findings align with prior studies that highlight community participation, heritage valorization, and small-scale networking as principal drivers of sustainable rural tourism in Romania [3, 8, 9, 10]. The route-based development potential documented along Via Transilvanica is consistent with recent analyses and early evaluations of traveler experiences and local effects [7, 17, 20] as well as emerging perceptions captured among route users [18]. Our evidence of congestion pressures and infrastructure needs in Viscri echoes heritage-tourism cautions raised in community-based tourism work for the village [4, 10]), while the coupling of recreation with religious heritage in the Mureș Floodplain Natural Park parallels earlier research on religious-site marketing and eco-tourism opportunities in Romania [5, 16]. The added value of this study is a unified synthesis spanning across heritage villages and a national long-distance trail, coupled with clear policy and capacity-building implications drawn from the cross-case perspective.

## CONCLUSIONS

The integration of sustainable tourism practices in Romania's rural communities reflects both remarkable potential and persistent structural challenges. The case studies analyzed—Gura Râului, Sâncraiu, Via Transilvanica, Viscri and Mălâncrav, and the Mureș Floodplain Natural Park—demonstrate a growing commitment to aligning tourism development with environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and local economic growth. These communities have leveraged their unique assets—be it Saxon architectural heritage, traditional crafts, ecologically rich landscapes, or spiritual landmarks—to create tourism models rooted in authenticity and sustainability.

Sustainable tourism in Romania's rural communities demonstrates significant potential to support local development, preserve cultural identity, and protect natural environments. However, persistent challenges, such as weak infrastructure, insufficient policy support, and fragmented stakeholder coordination, limit broader implementation. To overcome these challenges and enhance the resilience of rural tourism, several strategic directions are needed. First, national and regional policy frameworks must prioritize rural tourism not only as a cultural and environmental goal, but as an economic development tool. This includes funding programs, incentives for eco-certified businesses, and investment in sustainable infrastructure. Second, capacity-building programs should be expanded to strengthen the ability of local communities to manage tourism autonomously, including digital marketing, customer service, and environmental monitoring.

Ultimately, the future of sustainable tourism in Romania's rural regions hinges on the balance between preserving local identity and adapting to global expectations. If nurtured properly, these communities can serve as living laboratories of sustainable development, offering both residents and visitors a model of how tourism can regenerate, rather than exploit, the rural world.

## REFERENCES

- [1]. **ADAMOV TABITA, IANCU TIBERIU, PEȚ ELENA, POPESCU GABRIELA, ȘMULEAC LAURA, FEHER ANDREA, CIOLAC RAMONA**, 2023, Rural Tourism in Marginimea Sibiului Area—a Possibility of Capitalizing on Local Resources, Sustainability, 241
- [2]. **CIOANCA LIA-MARIA**, 2023, The Impact of Rural Tourism Development on the Local Community. Case Study: Sâncraiu Village, Cluj County, Romania, New perspectives on multiculturalism: Literature and dialogue
- [3]. **COROȘ MONICA MARIA, PRIVITERA DONATELLA, PĂUNESCU LOREDANA MARIA, NEDELICU ADRIAN, LUPU CRISTINA, GANUȘCEAC ALEXANDRU**, 2021, Mărginimea Sibiului Tells Its Story: Sustainability, Cultural Heritage and Rural Tourism—a Supply-Side Perspective, Sustainability, 5309
- [4]. **CORSALE ANDREA, IORIO MONICA**, 2014, Transylvanian Saxon Culture as Heritage: Insights from Viscri, Romania, Geoforum, 22-31
- [5]. **DRAGULANESCU IRINA, ADRIANA I**, 2011, Ecotourism: Important Segment of the Romanian Tourism, Annals of Dimitrie Cantemir, 125-134
- [6]. **FERNOLEND CAROLINE**, 2020, Can the Enhancement of Cultural Heritage Contribute to the Revitalisation of Rural Communities?, Transsylvania Nostra,
- [7]. **FLOREA CORNELIA**, 2024, Via Transilvanica: Who Is on Whose Territory? What Is Like to Be a Traveller in the Proximity of a Sheepfold?, Martor. Revue d'Anthropologie du Musée du Paysan Roumain, 101-113
- [8]. **GICA OANA ADRIANA, COROS MONICA MARIA, MOISESCU OVIDIU IOAN, YALLOP ANCA C.**, 2021, Transformative Rural Tourism Strategies as Tools for Sustainable Development in Transylvania, Romania: A Case Study of Sâncraiu, Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes, 124-138
- [9]. **HAVADI NAGY KINGA, ESPINOSA-SEGUÍ ANA**, 2020, Experiences of Community-Based Tourism in Romania: Chances and Challenges, Journal of Tourism Analysis: Revista de Análisis Turístico
- [10]. **IORIO MONICA, CORSALE ANDREA**, 2014, Community-Based Tourism and Networking: Viscri, Romania, Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 234-255
- [11]. **MARCUTA LIVIU, POPESCU AGATHA, TINDECHE CRISTIANA, SMEDESCU COSMINA, SMEDESCU DRAGOS, MARCUTA ALINA**, 2024, Analysis of the Perception of Romanian Consumers Regarding the Practice of Creative Tourism and Its Role in Sustainable Local Development, Scientific Papers Series Management, Economic Engineering in Agriculture & Rural Development
- [12]. **MARQUES LÉNIA, OLIVEIRA MARIANA**, 2023, Promoting Cultural Sensitivity in Higher Education: An Educational Approach to Sensitizing Young Travellers for Local Cultures, Evolving Pedagogy
- [13]. **PETROMAN CORNELIA, RISTA IOAN, PEȚ IOAN, PETROMAN IOAN**, 2018, Possibilities for Practicing Adventure Tourism, SCIENTIFIC PAPERS ANIMAL SCIENCE AND BIOTECHNOLOGIES, 214-214
- [14]. **STANCIU MIRELA, POPESCU AGATHA, CORMAN SORINA**, 2024, A Model of Good Practices in Sustainable Rural Tourism from the Mountain Area—a Case

Study" Gura Raului", Sibiu County, Romania, Scientific Papers Series Management, Economic Engineering in Agriculture & Rural Development

[15]. **STANCIU MIRELA, TĂNASE MARIA, GĂUREANU MONICA**, 2014, Issues Concerning the Typology of Rural Touristic Pensions Form Marginimea Sibiului, Sibiu County, Romania, Scientific Papers Series Management, Economic Engineering in Agriculture & Rural Development

[16]. **STRĂMBU-DIMA ANDREEA**, 2021, A Model of Marketing Product in Religious Heritage Sites: Case Study for the Monastery of Hodos-Bodrog, Annales Universitatis Apulensis-Series Oeconomica

[17]. **TĂTAR ALEXANDRU MARIUS**, 2024, Demographic and Social Analysis of the Habitational Axis Along the Via Transilvanica Tourist Route in Bistrița-Năsăud County, Revista Universitară de Sociologie

[18]. **TEODORESCU CERASELA, BOURIAUD LAURA, RIMOLI RICHARD**, 2025, Forest Management in Nature-Based Tourism: Opinions and Perceptions of Tourists Using the Via Transilvanica Route, Bucovina Forestieră

[19]. **TOADER VALENTIN, SOFICA A, PETRESCU CD, NEGRUSA AL, BALINT CRISTINA**, 2013, Best Practices in Developing Rural Tourism in Cluj County, Romania, Journal, 513-517

[20]. **ȚICHINDELEAN MIHAI, TILEAGĂ COSMIN, OPREANA ALIN, BODI FLAVIA, BECA DELIA, RUS OANA, ENE IOANA-AMALIA**, 2022, Experiencing a Region's Beauty Via a Cultural Route: Via Transilvanica, CREATING CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING THROUGH TRAVEL, 79