

ASSESSING THE AGRO-TOURISTIC POTENTIAL OF BANAT HILL AREA

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Abstract: *Agro-tourism means valorising natural landscape, lodging offers, and services supplied by rural households and agro-touristic farms with the aim of getting an income. Agro-touristy households get basic incomes from agricultural activities, while part of the incomes are from agro-touristic services. The coordinates of sustainable rural development should start from a triple analysis – economical, social, and ecological. We selected the most representative localities in the hill area from the point of view of economic development and of natural and man-made potential (Fardea, Tomesti and Margina). We analysed the natural, social and geographical potential and tried to present the agro-touristic offer, favouring and restrictive elements necessary for the development of the agro-touristic potential in the hill area. Set and maintained by the demand-offer mechanism and by a proper management, the agro-touristic activities can lead to benefice effects on both the economic and social levels.*

Keywords: *agro-tourism, rural development, Banat, hill*

INTRODUCTION

In the last years, the E.U. has been targeting rural development and aiming to apply integrated policies of sustainable rural development that allows valorising all types of potential in the rural space. Analysing Romanian rural space, we can see that it has preserved an invaluable thesaurus of historical sites, of architecture and art, historical vestiges, and a true ethno-folkloric patrimony of unprecedented value and purity.

In agrarian modernising strategies, agro-tourism ranges first in Austria, Switzerland, France, Germany, Spain, and Italy. Rural space as a central point in the E.U. is considered a very important asset of the whole continental area, its development being beneficial for the whole Union. This area is more and more the focus of specialists as environmental protection campaigns showed the indestructible link between the two, harmony and balance in rural space implying also a proper protection for environment. Nowadays, rural space is considered the most important human life and culture reserve.

Agro-tourism in Romania can develop in all rural areas, with particularly favourable conditions in the hill and mountain area, where it can be a professional and economic dimension of households, capable of ensuring labour occupancy and supplementary incomes.

We selected the most representative localities from the point of view of economic development and of natural and man-made potential in the hill area (Fardea, Tomești, and Margina).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

As a method of analysing the agro-touristic potential of Banat's hills, we started with mapping the whole area and following certain criteria. We first identify the plain, hill and mountain area with assessing the natural, cultural and historical potential. Of great importance was indexing the touristic site groups along with their attractiveness index, the access routes and accessibility of each site individually. The environmental pollution

degree was assessed, as well as the urbanising degree and the available human resources in the area.

After SWOT analysis of agro-touristic potential we identified targeted strategic objectives for the development of agro-tourism in the Banat plain area. In order to best implement the agro-touristic strategic objectives, we needed to observe three major elements: the economic agents, the agro-touristic programmes and find a proper management in organising.

RESEARCH RESULTS

1. Touristic mapping of the Banat`s Hills

Immediately under the Poiana Rusca Mountains, along Mures, Bega and Timisului rivers the Banat`s Hills unfold, as a part of the Western Hills. At the foot of the mountains we can find the Surducului and Fagetului Hills, then a narrow land in the south-west of Timis County - the Tirolului Hills. At an altitude of 300-370 m, heavily fragmented by rivers lies the Lipovei Hills. Other hills include the Bozoviciului Hills, the Fagetului Hills and the piedmont Oravitei Hills.

Table 1

The highest peaks in Poiana Ruscă Mountains

Peaks	Height (m)
Padeș	1374
Rusca	1355
Lotrului	1266
Boului	1243
Mesiuța	1238
Cioaca Strigoanei	1217
Aredei	1215

1.1 The Lipovei Hills

Occupying the interfluvium between Mures in the north and Bega in the south, the Lipovei Hills are situated in the northern area of the Timis County with 4 localities: Pischia, Masloc, Bogda and Alios.

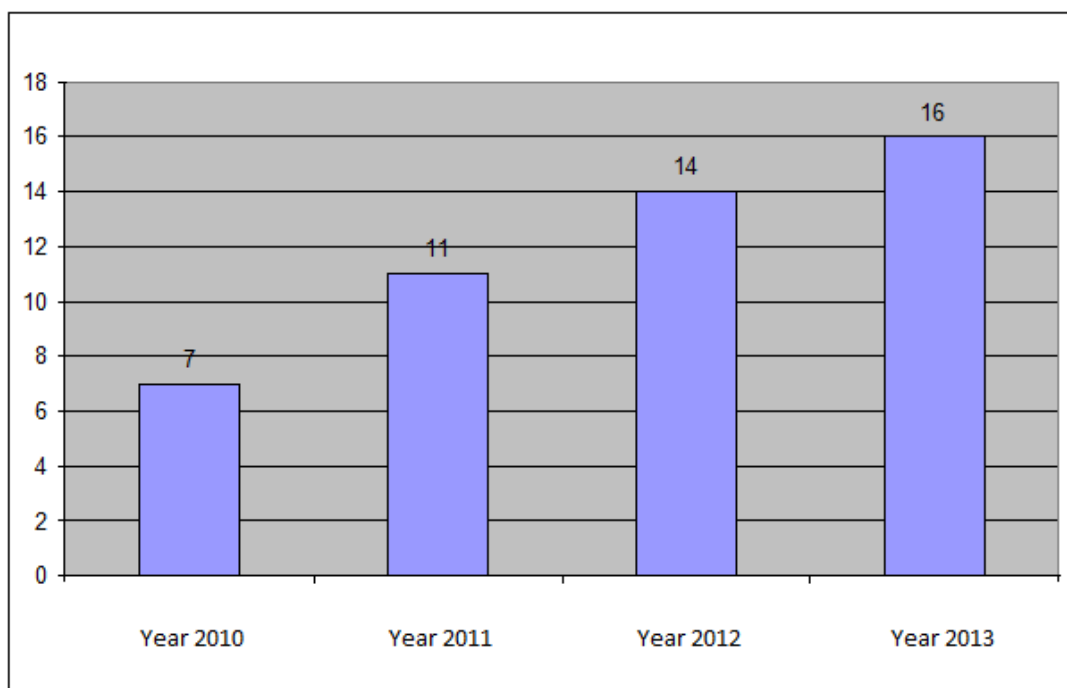
A very attractive subarea of the landscape is Bogda, with the following villages (Bogda, Charlottenburg, Altringen, Buzad, Sitar, Cornea) where the Piedmont Banat Association leased approximately 90 land to build small cottages for recreational use. Unfortunately, the archeological and medieval attractions are poorly represented due to its location between three major strongholds: Timisoara, Arad and Lipova.

The only protected natural reservation is the Murani swamp with a 200 ha surface, administrated by the Pischia commune. Here you can practice fishing and there is pheasant farm with a hunting cabin nearby.

Among the protected or rare species of fauna in the Murani swamp we can find turtles (*Emys orbicularis*), Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*), Pygmy Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax pygmaeus*) in the passage, in addition to characteristic fauna and forests of the high plains of Timis.

The abundance of wildlife creates very favorable conditions for the practice of hunting sports in all seasons except summer.

The touristic potential is based on two locations: the Calacea baths and the youth camp at Bogda. The camp has three vilas with a total of 260 acomodations, a footbal and tennis court, and a swimming pool.



The number of agrotourist guesthouses

The main attraction are the Calacea Baths, that have thermo-mineral waters, and that represent an entire balnear complex, with a 16 ha forest and park, a 150 m² lake with water-lillies and ducks.

The resort treats rheumatic disease, chronic and traumatic orthopedic diseases, digestive disorders and kidney problems. The treatment usually consists of:

- cabins for hydrotherapy treatment, mineral and galvanic baths;
- cabins for electrotherapy;
- cabins for thermotherapy;
- cabins for respiratory therapy;
- cabins for physiotherapy.

1.2. The Poganisului Hills

The touristic area comprises a number of six villages and two cities, a total of eight administrative territorial centers: Lugoj, Buzias, Boldur, Racovita, Great Chevereu, Nitchidorf, Stiuca and Gavojdia. Here, a third of the population lives in rural areas but the natural population growth has been stagnant lately mainly due to the economic and social situation.

The area is particularly rich in archaeological and architectural monuments due to its ancient settlements, confirmed by old documentary attestation. Among the archaeological remains we have the Herneacova village, a fortified settlement from the Iron Age, the Recas commune dated I B.C., the Paleolithic settlement from Izvin village from the V-th century B.C. and the medieval ruins of Lugoj stronghold from the XV -XVI century.

In Tapia we can find the old ruine of Tapae settlement, the place of a daco-romanian battlefield. In this area we can find two protected areas, the Buzias resort with the Dumbrava Forest and the Buzias Park, an area protected due to its mineral water resources and vegetation.

The Dumbrava Forest is an old oak forest, well looked-after, where the worm-feeding with oak leaves was first experimented, following the chinese model.

Because of the carbon dioxide fumes in Buzias Park, the air ionization is pronounced (like in the mountains) phenomenon that has favored the growth of species of plants with ornamental role making the local landscape a very pleasant ambience. An attraction to those who want to visit the Buzias Park are the two mineral springs which due to their high iron content, they have a special taste.

The touristic potential of the area is oriented towards two directions: the first direction is the classic tourism, organized in specialized centers (Lugoj, Buzias, Cheveres) and the second is derived from the agricultural character of the area. This area is famous for its wine production derived from three cultivation centers:

- Buzias-Silagiu-Bacova: white wine (Feteasca, Riesling, Muscat Otonel);
- Recas: Red wine (Merlot, Burgundy, Cadarca);
- Lugoj: wine mixed

This type of tourism is based on highlighting potential viticultural areas mentioned above (Buziaș Recaș, Lugoj) and by organizing wine tastings in the cellars of these famous vineyards.

1.3 The Surducului Hills

The area is situated in the eastern part of the Timis County. It has a great number of villages and communes (over 50), some in economical and demographic regression.

The whole area is attested since the XIII-XIV century, with a paleolithic settlement in Romanesti village and the ruins of Fagetului stronghold. Romanesti also holds the „Miron`s spring” Abbey and an ancient neolithic settlement in a cave.

Surduc lake is a protected area, founded in 1975 and it is the largest stretch of water from the west piedmonts (362 ha.). The lake has the biggest fishing potential in the area, with the possibility of duck hunting and boat rides on the lake. It also houses the some rare species of fauna like the raven (*Corvus corax* L.) in Radmanesti, the lynx (*Lynx lynx* L.) in Faget and, not least, the Carpathian bear (*Ursus arctos* L.) with two existing bears in the area. The most interesting flora species is the daffodil (*Narcissus stelaris* how) encountered in Batesti.

The touristic potential in the area is diverse and strong, mainly consisting in youth tourism, recreational tourism on Lake Surduc and classical tourism in camping sites and hotels. Regarding the youth tourism, there are a number of three large camps (Nadrag, Poieni village and Poieni Strambu) located in Poiana Rusca Mountains at an altitude of 312 m with all the facilities of a modern camp.

The alternative recreational tourism on Lake Surduc is well developed with small holiday homes all along the lake, many inhabitants offering accommodation at low prices. The reservoir lake ensures the drinking water of the whole Timisoara area (thanks to Bega duct).

2. Agro-touristic potential of selected localities in the Banat's Hills

2.1. Fardea

From high above the hills, Fardea looks like a natural stronghold, with six villages (Hauzesti, Matnicul Mic, Dragsinesti, Gladna Montana, Gladna Romana și Zolt). It is situated in the Gladnei Valley and appears to have a smooth surface, with altitudes of maximum 274m. The area is crossed by three small streams: Hauzeasca, Munisel and Gladna and Lake Little Surduc with its dam occupies this territory.

All along the commune we have protected areas, like Lake Surduc (considered a recreational area with fishing, hunting, water sports, hiking, motocross) and the daffodils grasslands area from Batesti.

The cultural and historical objectives are the main elements of identity and appreciation of an area. Here we have the medieval ruins of Roman Gladna, a construction exclusive made of wood and there was also pottery found, serving as storage vessels. The fortress was built on top of a hill on the outskirts of a village settlements, for a single family refuge.

Near Fardea lies Traian Vuia village where you can visit the Cultural Centre, the small museum that has an aircraft model exposed designed by Traian Vuia, along with photos and documents.

Craftsmen of Fardea made wheels for carts, various construction and hemp fiber processing was an important occupation for women. Home textiles and fabrics for clothing are made from hemp fiber. Such processing are inherited from parents. Agriculture represents the predominant economical activity in Fardea, most of the land being cultivated with corn, wheat and oat.

There is a possible future development in the rural tourism as the commune has natural and anthropogenic elements and an outstanding rural architecture. The main activity of the area is the agriculture and the livestock, most of the farms are developed and well equipped. The area offers many recreational opportunities (fishing, hunting, biking, motocross, sports, hiking) and the lake at Surduc enables leisure and recreation.

2.2. Tomesti

In the eastic part of Timis county, the Tomesti commune lies on a mountainous and hilly landscape. Based on the results of archaeological excavations it is assumed that the Romanesti cave was inhabited since the Neolithic era. They found numerous tools and pottery of the Paleolithic era. The area is rich in vegetation as well as fauna. Here we can meet the fox, the wolf or the brown bear.

In the village of Romanesti, attested in 1464, is the historical monument of Miron spring Abbey, this place of worship beeing built in 1912. On the monastery ground, there are surfacing thermal waters, one of them called the Hot Pond. There is also an accesible cave of 340 m and an interior space named „The bat hall” that hosts every year a simfonic concert.

The region has a rich yet untapped potential, and with minimal material costs hiking itineraries can be acheived. Here tourism has some ancient traditions in the area called "Seven Springs", with a Tourism Monument beeing raised in 1936. Households are neat and clean, with the opportunity to receive tourists, especially during the concerts. The local people are hospitable, keeping the generations recipes for preparing meals and plum brandy. A key attraction is the area is the Tomesti Glass Factory where you can admire the ingenuity and flexibility of glass forms that comes out of the hands of skilful craftsmen

2.3. Margina

Attested since 1365, the Margina commune is situated in the north-east part of Timis County. The forests have a rich fauna, and a peaceful setting for recreation while Bega river offers fishing and entertainment. It has 9 villages Margina, Sintesti, Breazova, Costeiu de Sus, Grosi, Zorani, Nemesesti, Cosevita and Bulza, and a total of 2356 inhabitants.

Its historical objectives are the church in Bulza from the XVIII century and the one from Margina, dating 1737. It has an arable are of 1820 ha mostly cultivated with corn and wheat.

CONCLUSIONS

In assessing the touristic areas and its potential we took into account the territorial grouping of the touristic patrimony, the possibility of travelling between certain touristic sites and its accessibility, and the geographical homogeneity of the Banat hill area. Thus, areas are not strictly limited by rigid boundaries or geographical characteristics, but rather the touristic concentrated areas. We are further analysing the three communes described above, that we consider to have an important role in discovering, enhancing and preserving the touristic attraction in the area.

First we analysed the favouring and restrictive elements of Fardea commune. Its geographic elements make it a feasible attraction site, with Surduc storage dam, that is a particularly attractive feature. Here there are holiday homes and many opportunities for recreation and leisure (fishing, hunting, water sports, cycling, motorcycling). In Traian Vuia the community center is a mini museum dedicated to the man who made the world's first mechanical flight.

On the negative side, Surduc storage dam lacks a development plan, with parking and toilets. This gives the lake an inhospitable aspect, most tourists that come here camp totally chaotic. There are no information points and no facilities for water sports and no local promoter to inform the visitors properly.

The Tomesti locality is situated on Bega river in a very delightful environment. Near we can find the Romanesti Cave where symphonic concerts are held and a section of the Glass factory can be visited and the tourists can actively participate in the process of making glass. Unfortunately the population in the area is old and poor due to reduced activity in the Glass factory. There are no plans to promote the area or to develop the rural area.

In Margina commune there are many old churches and historical monuments, the houses are well-looked after and there are several agro-touristic households where the tourists can have a nice meal and spend the night.

Existing resources in an agro-touristic household and farm are offered through agro-tourism programmes: traditional menus from natural food and with a high biological value, participating in a series of activities in the household and in traditional customs in the locality and in the area (socials, dances, dedication days, village markets, folklore shows etc.). Agro-tourism should benefit from a management capable of harmonising natural landscape and rural household with the aim of meeting a modern tourist's requirements.

We suggest that the town hall should directly involve in agro-tourism by building holiday houses or by remodelling the existing ones (e.g., France and Portugal, where it was done with the help of local authorities), reclaiming dilapidated ones and turning them into modern agro-touristic farms that tourists can rent for shorter or longer periods of time,

paying a sojourn fee to the community; Land resource shows a great share of agricultural lands in the area, private property in the District of Timis being one of the greatest in the country. Agricultural land quality ranges the Districts of Arad and Timiș among the best in Europe.

In order to protect and valorise the architectural and historical monuments and integrate them in a touristic circuit, we first need to modernise the access routes and mark the sites and areas of interest, employ urban and rural administrators so that they can begin to valorise the existing monuments from all points of view.

Banat's hill area has a great geographical complexity, with many existing ecosystems that are preserved in a genuine state with the originality of animal and vegetal associations still intact.

By promoting agro-tourism in the hills of Banat, the economic and social potential will increase and will provide the local sustainable development answering needed for the recreation of modern society in a social cohesion of the urban-rural type.

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