

AN EXTENSIVE STUDY ON THE SUSTAINABLE EXPLOITATION OF SIBIU COUNTY'S AGRITOURISM POTENTIAL

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***Abstract:** This paper presents an in-depth investigation into the sustainable exploitation of agritourism potential in Sibiu County, probing the multifaceted dimensions of rural development, economic sustainability, environmental impact, and cultural heritage preservation. We dissect the mechanisms through which agritourism generates employment opportunities, stimulates local production, and fosters a sense of pride and identity among residents.*

Key words: rural development, environmental impact, economic sustainability, agritourism

INTRODUCTION

Agritourism, as a distinct form of rural tourism, has become increasingly relevant in the contemporary context, entailing significant implications for the sustainable development of the countryside. This innovative approach combines traditional farming activities with authentic tourism experiences, generating a range of beneficial effects on rural communities and the environment. Beyond simply offering accommodation in traditional farmhouses, agritourism distinguishes itself by promoting a lifestyle in harmony with nature, encouraging sustainable farming practices and preserving local traditions [7]. By attracting tourists to scenic villages, agritourism contributes to the revitalisation of rural economies. This interaction between agriculture and tourism becomes a key driver for economic development in rural areas, providing financial resources and supporting long-term sustainability.

Agritourism also promotes the preservation of the traditions and cultural heritage of rural communities. By involving tourists in traditional agricultural activities, such as harvesting or processing local products, strong links are created between visitors and local people. This cultural change encourages respect for the traditional way of life and contributes to maintaining the cultural identity of rural areas.

In the context of respecting and promoting the principles of sustainable development, tourism is a means of protecting, preserving and enhancing cultural, historical, folkloric and architectural potential. By adopting a sustainable tourism development strategy and imposing measures to protect the environment and the fundamental values of human existence (water, air, flora, fauna, ecosystems, etc.), tourism also has an ecological aspect.

This extensive study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the sustainable exploitation of Sibiu County's agritourism potential. It underscores the need for a balanced approach that maximizes economic benefits while safeguarding the environment and preserving the rich cultural tapestry of the region. The findings aim to inform policymakers, local communities, and stakeholders, offering insights for fostering responsible and sustainable agritourism development in Sibiu County and beyond. The future calls for types of holidays that require low energy costs, that minimise the use of existing resources and that contribute to the conservation and protection of the environment. Educating tourists and the local population about sustainable development plays a very important role in gradually adopting a way of life comparable to that of the West in terms of environmental protection, which is particularly useful for the

development requirements of future generations. Through forms of rural tourism, a number of elements specific to rural areas can be exploited and included in the rural tourism offer[2,6]:

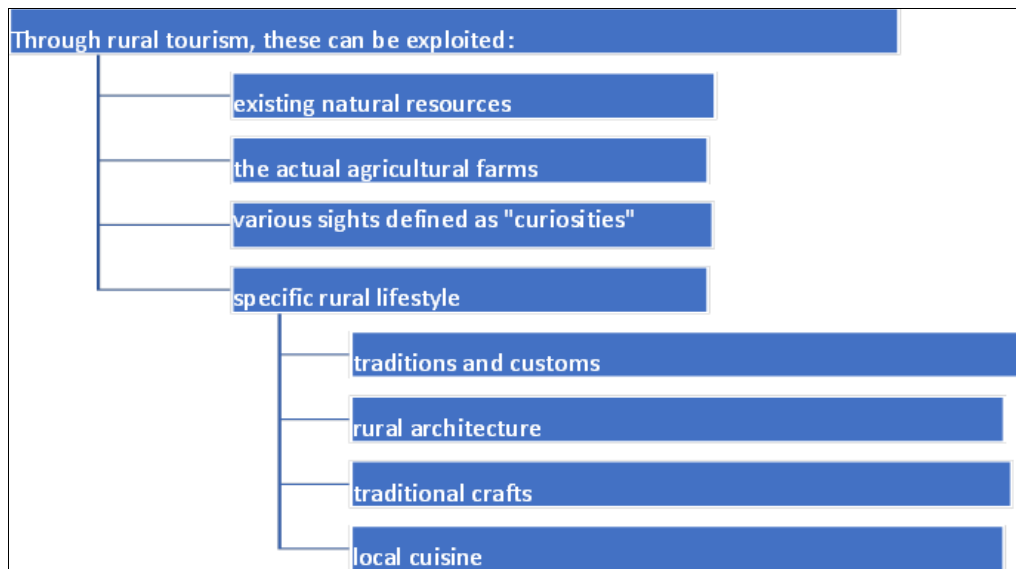


Figure 1. Specific elements of rural areas that can be exploited through forms of rural tourism

This form of tourism, which is so appropriate in the absence of the huge sums of money required for the construction of tourist accommodation infrastructure, will provide an opportunity for financial accumulations which will probably be absorbed by the need to improve the tourist offer. In the long term, however, it will help to raise the standard of living of those with this initiative. In addition, it will create or maintain the craft industry, which is almost naturally attached to rural tourism [4,10].

Integrated tourism in rural areas and towns is an alternative way of solving problems that concern the village on the one hand and the town on the other. Rural tourism contributes to the dynamisation of local socio-economic life and the spiritual life of the village through multiple advantages [3,12,13].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was conducted in Sibiu County, Romania, a region renowned for its picturesque landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and significant agrarian traditions. Sibiu County's diverse topography, encompassing plains and mountains, provides a unique backdrop for exploring the sustainable exploitation of agritourism potential.

The approach combines qualitative as well as quantitative analysis methods. In particular, a secondary study of specialized literature and statistical data was used.

The agritourism offer in Sibiu County and the growth of the tourist accommodation structures in the county's Center Region were two examples of statistical analyses that were used to find correlations between different variables like economic indicators, environmental impact, and community involvement. This allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the sustainable exploitation of agritourism in the specified area, as well as the formation of relevant findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

ANALYSIS OF THE AGRITOURISM OFFER IN SIBIU COUNTY

The potential of farms located near rural areas can be exploited through the agritourism sector within Sibiu County by creating and implementing accommodation services, particularly through the localization and valorization of goods derived from these farms. The consumption of fresh, organic food products by tourists from farms has a significant role, but we may also discuss the rediscovery of various crafts from the region under study [8]. The evolution regarding the number of agritourism guesthouses in Sibiu County is shown in the figure below:

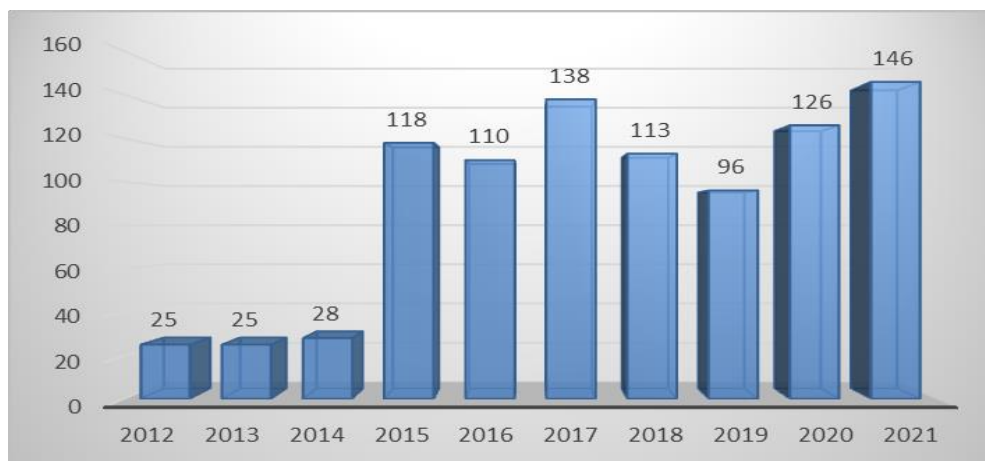


Figure 2. The evolution of agritourism guesthouses in Sibiu County

The indicator analysed in the next figure, of the offer, is linked to the evolution of the tourist accommodation capacity utilization index at the level of agritourism guesthouses in Sibiu County.

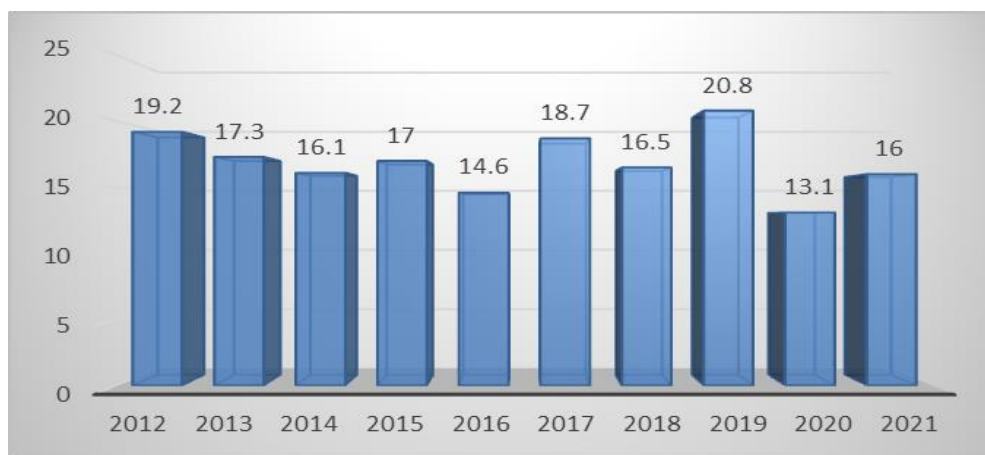


Figure 3. Tourist accommodation capacity availability index for agritourism guesthouses in Sibiu County

It can be seen that the year with the highest capacity occupancy rate of agritourism guesthouses in Sibiu County was 2019 with a rate of 20.8% while the opposite was 2020 with a rate of 13.1%. The highest number of existing accommodation places in agritourism guesthouses in Sibiu County was in 2021, namely 2558 places, followed by 2017 with 2458 places [15].

THE AGRITOURISM'S POTENTIAL AND THE NATURAL TOURIST RESOURCES OF SIBIU COUNTY

Sibiu County, an area located in the centre of the country, offers geographical contrasts and a special variety of landscapes, customs and traditional costumes, historical and architectural monuments, old traditions in terms of economy, culture and civilization. An important natural resource is the forest, which covers 37% of the County's area, and the pastures, meadows and agricultural land with rich flora and fauna are an important natural resource for shepherding. Mountains covered with deciduous and coniferous forests, hills covered with meadows and orchards, plains, rivers, lakes with fresh water and salt lakes, all these gifts given by nature to this county are an attraction for tourism in this region.

RURAL SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH AGRITOURISM

The development of rural tourism will lead to the sustainable economic development of rural localities, due to the multiplier effect of this activity, with a positive impact on the environment, agriculture, transport, construction, processing and food industries, and services in various fields [1,5].

Integrated tourism in rural areas and towns is an alternative way of solving both village and urban problems. Through rural tourism it will be possible to solve problems of spatial planning policy, of town-settlement balance, thus shaping a social change that offers the possibility for the urban population to rediscover their roots, cultural values, physical relaxation, peace and quiet that have been lost or forgotten [9,11]. The development of rural tourism is needed in the countryside, both economically and socially.

CONCLUSIONS

The practice of agritourism in Sibiu County can lead to a better exploitation of the potential of local farms in rural areas, by developing and implementing accommodation services and especially the valorisation of products obtained from these farms or at local level. An important role is played by the consumption by tourists of fresh, organic food products from local farms, as well as the rediscovery of local crafts.

This extensive study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the sustainable exploitation of Sibiu county's agritourism potential. It underscores the need for a balanced approach that maximizes economic benefits while safeguarding the environment and preserving the rich cultural tapestry of the region. The findings aim to inform policymakers, local communities, and stakeholders, offering insights for fostering responsible and sustainable agritourism development in Sibiu County and beyond. Furthermore, the study explores the cultural dimensions of agritourism, highlighting its role in preserving and promoting local traditions and heritage.

By engaging tourists in authentic agricultural experiences, there is a potential for fostering cultural exchange and understanding between visitors and the vibrant communities of Sibiu County.

The purpose of this study was to determine the evolution of several tourist indicators both related to the agritourism offer in the analyzed area and those related to the agritourism demand in the Central Region and Sibiu County in particular.

Regarding agritourism demand at the level of the Central Region and Sibiu County, we analyzed the evolution of the following 4 types of indicators:

- tourist arrivals by category in tourist reception structures within the Center region;
- the arrivals of tourists staying in agritourism guesthouses in Sibiu County;

- overnight stays by category of tourists in tourist reception structures within the Center region
- overnight stays by category of tourists in agritourism guesthouses in Sibiu County.

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