Sustainable development of Mărginimea Sibiului, Romania through ecotourism and cultural tourism

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Mărginimea Sibiului has become during the last years a famous tourist attraction, visited by thousands of foreign and Romanian tourists, an established brand. Most of the villages in the area have retained strong spiritual and folk traditions, giving these communities a special physiognomy. The delightful geographical framework, the purity of nature, the accessibility of places, the richness and diversity of cultural heritage, make Mărginimea Sibiului an area with great tourism potential.

Mărginimea Sibiului area holds more than 30% of the total accommodation capacity available in Sibiu. Although it is a rural area, tourist offer is diverse (active tourism and recreation, traditional cuisine, cultural tourism and business segment coverage through specific facilities, all these in addition to the multitude of leisure), and the degree of comfort is increased.
The development of ecotourism and cultural tourism in the area contributes to:

1. Preservation of natural heritage and biodiversity of SCI Frumoasa; respect for socio-cultural authenticity of the local community;

2. Preservation of cultural heritage and traditional values of the area, contributing to inter-cultural knowledge;

3. Facilitating sustainable long-term economic activities which bring socio-economic benefits equal to all local actors, including stable employment and opportunities to achieve financial incomes and social services for communities, thereby contributing to the prosperity of the area.
Using the experience with Sibiu - European Capital of Culture and Mărginimea Sibiului - the most romantic ecotourist destination, the main objective of the paper is to unfold a pattern for promoting cultural ecotourism for local communities regarding Sibiu area.

Mărginimea Sibiului was awarded in 2009 with the "Golden Apple" trophy, the equivalent of the Oscar in tourism.

The motivation for the choice comes out of the wish to render profitable in a superior manner the huge cultural and ecotouristic potential of this region.
Ways of promoting cultural ecotourism for local communities outlines scientific solutions that back the social development and contribute to the improvement of its human condition.

The tourists’ guidance towards cultural circuits is more and more evident (according to studies made by Euromonitor). As a result for this phenomenon in order to attract visitors it is at a world level that the promotion of cultural and natural trumps is made.

Statistical data on the evolution of tourism indicators in Mărginimea Sibiului, in 2018-2020, shows increasing interest manifested both among tourists from Romania and abroad, even in pandemic situation.
With an original offer, a unique one Sibiu county can be successful in tourism and mostly in cultural ecotourism. By using the experience gained in the project “Sibiu Cultural European Capital” we consider that cultural ecotourism is an opportunity for Sibiu to become ecotouristic and cultural destinations on the European touristic map, not only for foreign visitors, but for Romanians too.

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Establishments of tourists' facilities in functions of tourist accommodation, such as guesthouses and agro type in Mărginimea Sibiului (no. days/tourist)
From the analysis of this data, it is obvious that tourists are increasing demands for tourism products in the Mărginimea Sibiului, especially in summer, but it is evident that the tourist came almost constantly each month of the year.

That means that the environment, gastronomy, traditional festivals and the unpolluted environment represent serious motives for the tourist to choose Mărginimea Sibiului as holiday destination. This reality is reflected for the growing up of the touristic data.

Tourist arrivals in units with functions of tourists' accommodation guesthouses and agro type in Mărginimea Sibiului

![Chart showing tourist arrivals in Mărginimea Sibiului from 2018 to 2020.]
The ecotourism sector’s development and prosperity will lead simultaneously to increases in other sectors of the economy: food, trade, transport, etc.

As the demand for ecotourism is permanent and on a steady global growth, and as a continuing trend that influences the tourism market and local communities, it is the interest of local communities to promote the creation of sustainable development models.

The positive effects or what determines the correct application and implementation of quality management in any establishment providing travel services are more likely to repeat visits, increase financial performance, given that attracting new customers is 5-10 times more expensive than keeping customers at existing costs and avoiding complaints; better employee motivation, positive external effects chain (promotion, consistency in business and winning new markets).
Tourist overnight in units with functions of tourists' accommodation guesthouses and agro type in Mărginimea Sibiului
The cultural ecotourism represents an important step in education on eco-economic and bio-economic principles for the population in order to be aware of the value regarding the cultural and ecotouristic patrimony: cultural events and the ethno folklore activities, traditional products, other creative activities.

The touristic products like cultural ecotourism represent the best alternatives among economy, culture and environment protection and are meant to be adequate financial economic instruments for a permanent promotion of touristic actions, of turning into account the cultural patrimony in the ecotouristic areas.
Rural tourism and ecotourism represent an alternative for employment for labour force in the countryside, a way to diversify rural economy and bring income source for the inhabitants within the rural area.

The way of life for rural population is connected with a rich material and immaterial patrimony that confers specific identity for the village. These elements of originality must be preserved and turned into account in a superior manner.
Cultural ecotourism will contribute to the increase of rendering visible Mărginimea Sibiului that can become landmark in intercultural and multicultural tourism, with benefits on local communities within the rural environment.

Backing culture can be done by developing ecotourism and mutually too, the ecotouristic potential can be turned into account through culture. Since 2007, it is clear that visitors to the city have been visiting an even wider range of attractions.
As Sibiu has developed its tourism and cultural product, the visitor experience has improved as well.
The ECOC in 2007 did not in itself produce an increase in the quality of the experience, but it seems that the legacy of the event is a notably increased visit quality.

The image of Sibiu has remained fairly positive since 2007.
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The latest surveys on consumer concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic show that the intention to operate outside the home varies by country. Most respondents opt for walking, cycling or private car use and avoiding crowded places. Telework and flexible working hours could also influence choices about residence and work, diminishing the trend towards urban sprawl that has been observed in recent years, the study shows.

Habits developed during the pandemic period predominate - travel is shorter and shorter, the demand for private transport increases, the passenger air transport sector could have some recovery, while rail transport would be more pronounced.
In the case of the tourism sector in Mărginimea Sibiului, three scenarios are foreshadowed:

- Rural tourism returns to the pre-COVID-19 situation. Vaccination will encourage people to travel - first domestically, then internationally, the study shows, noting that insurance policies will certainly be a sine qua non for traveling;

- Rural tourism uses the crisis as a catalyst for change and rebuilds more resiliently; the transformation of the industry towards a greener, smarter (digital) and more inclusive tourism is the second scenario.

- Rural tourism remains at a low rate, the return being lasting. In this scenario, domestic tourism will remain popular in the long run, and travel abroad will be significantly reduced. In most cases, business travel will be replaced by virtual meetings through the use of new technologies. The number of tourism companies and jobs in the sector will decrease significantly. The effect is that as fewer tourism players compete in the marketplace, the price of tourism products will increase.
The key criteria in choosing the holiday destination in 2021 will be first and foremost: health security, non-congested areas, quality, sustainability, ecotourism, with holiday homes and apartments, guesthouses and smaller hotels preferred.

The strategy of major service providers in terms of the quality of provided services is limited to the following three steps:
- First, to divide the market very carefully and develop services to meet customer needs as they noticed that not all customers who buy the same product or service have the same needs;
- Second, they realized that only the client knows what he wants, so they pay attention to what the consumer says;
- Third, they are careful to meet customer expectations at optimum levels; they promise less and offer more.

Service providers should not try to guess the wishes of the customer, nor his / her expectations, but must try to determine them as accurately as possible, by referring directly to the consumer in connection with his perception of quality, satisfaction, value of tourism product - through surveys. The next step is to harmonize this data with the quality perception of the management team to improve service quality.
The eco-pension is an important link in the chain ecological agriculture – ecological food – conservation of biodiversity bio and eco-economic development. Ecotourism is a tourism which directly or indirectly promotes and supports sustainable economic development. Ecotourism can generate financial support for the formation, management and protection of natural areas.

The geographical and climatic conditions of Mărginimea Sibiului are to favors the development of tourism in an ecological environment. Therefore, Mărginimea Sibiului should follow the example of other regions with very rich natural and ecological reserves such as alpine region on Austria or Swiss, for which ecotourism has become an important source of income.
Promoting the concept of eco-pension among the administrators of the pensions which are selected as having eco-tourist potential and the highlighting of the profitability in time of this activity offers the advantages of experiencing a new model of tourist activity, the only one viable, and we are counting on the perceptiveness of the administrators of pensions in Sibiel, which will in this way be able to keep Sibiel on the top of rural tourist destinations.

Evaluating and directing the activities from the field of tourism in relation to the ecotourism criteria will allow the exploitation of local natural and economic resources through the certification of eco-tourist products and that of destinations and accommodation structures, in order to guarantee the eco-tourist quality.

Ecotourism is to integrate tourism development and to share the benefits at the community level. Nature conservation can easily become counterproductive if local people are against it. Each tour product should in the best possible way contribute to the local economy by local sourcing, purchasing as much as possible in the area. Ecotourism is a vehicle for striking the balance of local economic development and the conservation of biological and cultural diversity.
Thank you!