



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM IN ȚARA HAȚEGULUI – RETEZAT IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC CRISIS

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At present, when the mobility of the population is restricted in the spirit of conservation against COVID 19, tourism and with it the tourist destinations lose, not in image, but in the number of tourists and the benefits brought by them. Travel restrictions, natural fears related to health safety, financial limitations in the pocket of every potential tourist will lead to redirections to safe, sustainable tourist destinations located nearby, thus avoiding long-distance travel. Such a phenomenon is specific to Romania in 2020, when we are witnessing a massive return of Romanian tourists to Romania's key destinations: the Black Sea coast, Prahova Valley and ecotourism destinations, among which the destination Țara Hațegului-Retezat. The "opportunity" to relaunch the Romanian tourist areas in full pandemic, forces us to a safe tourism (Safe Tourism), with similar destinations, with tourists motivated to return to sustainable destinations in Romania.

Key words: destination, tourism, ecotourism, COVID-19 Pandemic, sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

"Sustainable development requires fundamental economic and social change to improve human well-being while reducing the need for environmental protection. In sum, sustainable development must be a different kind of development. It must be a proactive strategy to develop sustainability."¹

Tourism is a growing market, even more so in Romania, where it has started to take bolder wings. This means that there is room for everyone, but the best are pursued. The difference no longer lies in the hotel offered to the tourist or in the program. The tourist is more and more educated, more responsible and has more travelling experience. The tourist knows what to ask for and to appreciate the offer. That is why the difference lies in attitude, awareness, the ability to listen and problem solving.

In Romania, sustainable development principles have many outcomes on every aspect of the hospitality industry. Beside relating with the environment, they also relate to the way business and marketing interact with society, culture and economic stability.

Nature conservation is becoming a part of tourist markets, this being the basic element of ecotourism. Furthermore, urban functions associated

to tourism involve the commodification and privatization of natural areas, where conservation becomes only a complement.

Tourism intensifies the use of natural resources, so hospitality, travel and ecotourism include a multitude of activities that contribute to deepening systemic environmental contradictions. In Romania, for several years now, tourism has become one of the most important economic sectors with a meaningful potential to play a further role in Romania's economic revival.

Accustomed to living in a time when we had privileges that facilitated favorable living conditions, having rights and freedoms obtained after great trials in which mankind was put as a result of the two World Wars that overshadowed world society in the early and mid-20th century, behold, we have been put in a new bad state, namely the outbreak of the current pandemic, and implicitly, the inability to be free, as we were used to living.

COVID-19 managed what until recently seemed to be a joke situation, namely the positioning of man on the same wavelength with the animals that no one but the one who has overzealously appropriated the blessing of being the master over all the creatures of heaven and earth, he found that the place of some of them is

behind the bars, being held captive most of the time for recreational and amusement purposes, all to the delight of the eyes of our fellow men. Thus, the flowers that barely bloomed in nature had no one to delight, because the dreaded COVID-19 virus was beginning to change our perception of life. I don't want to create controversies of any kind through the analogy of "human-animals", but I think that only in this way will we wake up from the false reality that each of us has created and after that we tend to make a purpose of our existence, namely the fact that we are the best, masters of all that surrounds us, the masters of this wonderful Earth. Isn't a change necessary in each of us, an indispensable awakening to reality, a sincere reflection on our position in this world?!

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodology used in this paper is based on quantitative and qualitative statistical data provided by consulting well-known web pages, such as: World Travel & Tourism Council, or World Health Organization, and on a very in-depth documentation of the content of specialized books. However, given the current approach to an ongoing situation, in which there are uncertainties about the evolution or decrease in the spread of the COVID-19 virus, the statistical data can be difficult to interpret, as they are more indicative, estimative. In any case, for a good clarification of the impact that the COVID-19 virus generated at the beginning of the pandemic in Romania, especially in the tourism sector, statistical data were collected and analyzed, making personal observations in order to obtain a much more detailed picture of the subject under analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The reality we all live in has been characterized by major changes, driven by the need to slow the spread of the current COVID-19 virus among the population. The states of the world have been severely affected by this pandemic, the repercussions being visible in most economic sectors, tourism being no exception. And as the virus that everyone is talking about, day by day, has not ceased from its fierce spread, here we are in the position to spend not only spring in his difficult "company", but also the first summer, autumn, and as the current situation tends to

acquire a repetitive character, from month to month, and the first winter. The COVID-19 pandemic is an exogenous shock for almost the entire world, hitting countries unevenly in terms of citizens' health². In fact, according to Guangyue Nian and collaborators, this pandemic is most felt in the world's major cities, where exist a big problem due to the pressure generated by the tens of millions and high-density populations³. So, what can we do, as long as practicing tourism is the "good virus" that was not discovered to us overnight, but we were born with it, being as a primary need of our existence?! In the absence of vaccines and antivirals, we need to rely on classical public health measures to curb the epidemic generated by this enemy⁴. So, the primary goal of public health measures is to prevent person-to-person spread of disease by separating people to interrupt transmission⁴.

The help came from the authorities by imposing all sorts of safety measures, all in order to slow down the infection rate. In fact, as expected, the measures came with the negative side, not just with the positive part, the protective one. The suffering in the field of tourism was best observed in the case of SMEs (Small and medium-sized enterprises) and the hospitality industry - HoReCa (Hotels-Restaurants-Cafes), but also among employees in the tourism sector. Bars, restaurants, hotels, tourism SMEs and more have powerlessly closed their doors in front of customers. Stopping the infection with the new virus is the biggest goal to be achieved by 2020, worldwide. The figures provided by well-known sources draw our attention to the current gloomy pandemic situation that seems to have quickly overwhelmed global tourism, but also to scenarios, which if managed well, we will return to our beloved travel habits.

We recall that the decline of international tourism in terms of export earnings is expected to be 60% to 80% compared to 2019, which translates into losses between 840 and 1.1 trillion EURO⁵. According to the World Tourism and Travel Council (WTTC), "in 2019, the Travel & Tourism sector grew by 3.5%, surpassing the growth of the global economy by 2.5%, for the ninth consecutive year."⁶

Oxford Economics predicted that in Europe, the current pandemic would be responsible for reducing travel by 38.5%, so 287 million fewer international arrivals in 2020 than in 2019⁵. The same source mentioned the idea that 2021 will be the one in which a rapid return of the entire tourism sector will be required, tourist arrivals in

Europe increasing by up to 31.75% (Figure 1)⁷. However, losses in 2019 and 2020 will not be recovered until 2023⁷.

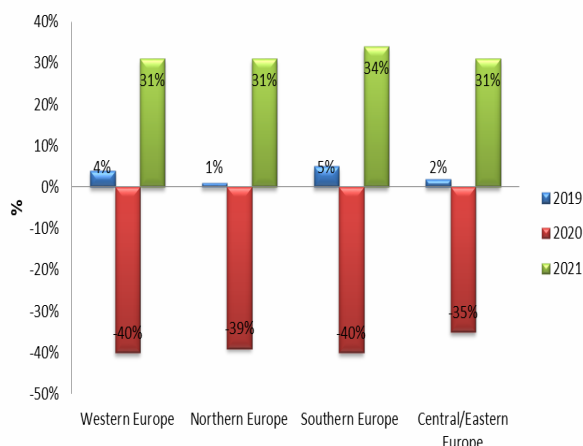


Figure 1. Tourist arrivals from Europe, by destination region.

Source: Data taken from⁷

On the other hand, according to the data provided by the Romanian Government, on the mioritic lands, the date of March 16, 2020 would be historical, because at that time, the President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis signed the decree on establishing the state of emergency throughout the territory for a period of 30 days, and on April 14, following that a new decree will be adopted for the same purpose⁸. Until the documentation of this article, Romania was in a new pandemic stage, namely the imposition on June 17, 2020 of the second month of alert on the entire territory of the country⁸. Admittedly, this type of decision from the authorities was intended to be seen as a “breath of fresh air” for the country's industries, industries that had come to be on the edge of an abyssal chasm.

Small businesses in the field of tourism, hotel chains and Romanian restaurants, as well as those abroad, have suffered the most from the Coronavirus, being totally or partially closed. According to official data found on the HoReCa Romania website, since June 1, when more than 85% of restaurants reopened their doors, according to the 54,7% of respondents to case study registered losses of at least 80% of the turnover of 2019⁹.

The tourism in Țara Hațegului – Retezat is a sensitive topic at the moment, in times of pandemic, but this trend has been known and cultivated over time, so the industry analyzed in this paper failed to align among similar destinations in terms of of the tourist potential.

“Țara Hațegului – Retezat is a unique destination”, would say the majority of those who visited it, fact for which the officials from the tourist environment should insist on a series of priorities, otherwise, the tourism here will remain in the shadow of indifference. But, unfortunately, our destination was also affected by the pandemic like the rest of the world, the number of cases being increasing day by day.

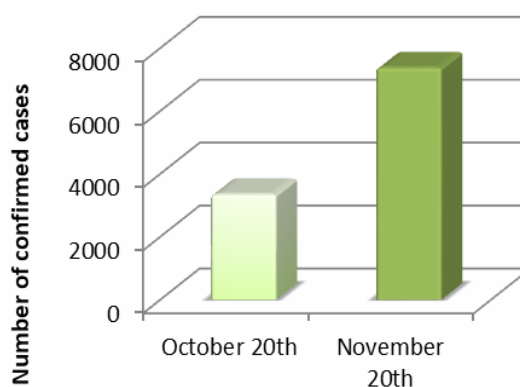


Figure 2. The increasing number of cases in a month in Țara Hațegului – Retezat.

Source: Data taken from⁸

The figure above is not only showing us the increasing number of coronavirus cases, but also it show us the difficulties that our destination is going through, not only in terms of healthy but also in terms of tourism.

Regarding the situation and the combined planning, we acknowledge the importance of planning for the tourism sector, especially in these circumstances when we look forward to building a strong economy.

It built on strong scientific foundations of modern sophistication. Integrated tourism industry has come to include planning, investment, construction, marketing and promotion of sustainable destination in hategan tourism. This is also one of the best provided approaches that include the involvement of all major interest groups that have an interest in establishing sustainable local development rule. It is simply defined as a tool of development and conservation¹⁰. In recent years, the eco-tourism sector, as a subset of the tourism industry, plays a great role in improving the economy of developed countries and their local people¹¹.

But ecotourism should be balanced in terms of a clean environment without polluting and spoiling the natural beauty and also does not harm the surrounding population¹².

Ecotourism is a type of tourism that continues to preserve the natural and cultural resources¹³⁻¹⁵, providing various facilities in areas with tourist attractions, relating to either the attraction of the

natural environment or the ecology made through the modernization of physical and social infrastructure in the region to become one of the economic activities that contribute to the national income besides being able to improve the living standards of local communities.

The re-launching of tourism from Țara Hațegului – Retezat, of the tourist ecodestinations and the attraction of a larger number of foreign tourists could bring supplementary benefits, but with many necessary changes, in the tourism managers' opinion.

Table 1

Factors Influencing The Demand For Sustainable Tourism

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE DEMAND FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM	
IN THE GENERATING AREA ⚡ Personal income ⚡ Income distribution ⚡ The exchange rate ⚡ Demographic variables (age, education, family) ⚡ Holidays ⚡ Taxes and fees	IN THE DESTINATION AREA ⚡ Price ⚡ Competition ⚡ Governmental involvement (restrictions, visas, air)
Other factors: Efforts to promote the destinations, health, security and safety, time and cost, seasonality	
TOURIST FLOWS PUSH & PULL FACTORS	
PUSH FACTORS ⚡ Economic development stage ⚡ Mobility ⚡ No. of holiday days ⚡ The opportunity to go on holiday ⚡ Unfavourable climate	PULL FACTORS ⚡ Destination attractions ⚡ Accessibility ⚡ Facilities ⚡ Cost ⚡ Destination marketing and promotion

What are the efficient strategies in 2021? What do consumers want from the ecotourist destinations and what do the latter oblige them to respect once arrived at their destination?

Well nowadays people has become skeptical about travel, fear taking deep roots in mentalities everywhere, but as the need to meet new people and places is uncontrollable, the resumption of tourism in maximum safety for the health of each of us is vital. In this regard, the European Commission launched on 13 May 2020 the strategic plan “Tourism and transport in 2020 and beyond”, which aims to ensure the health of citizens by increasing confidence that travel can again be a safe and enjoyable activity, but also the recovery of transport and tourism⁵.

Fortunately, the face mask can not prevent our eyes from staying focused on the beauty that is revealed to us everywhere, so in order to practice

safe tourism, the European Commission has implemented a series of measures in this regard (Figure 3)⁵.



Figure 3. What “safe travel” means during the COVID-19 pandemic. Source: Data taken from⁵

What is the purpose pursued by the European Commission, I highlighted it in the figure above (Figure 3), but I consider it auspicious a brief review of each measure implemented.

Step 1. “Restoring safe movement without restrictions and reopening internal borders”: After all, the tourism sector, without tourism potential and in the absence of the human factor, would no longer exist. However, we can add to this general conception the free movement of the tourist masses in safe conditions, both inside a country and outside its borders. The COVID-19 pandemic imposed a restrictive measure to close the borders of certain countries, in order to prevent infection with this dreaded virus, but at the same time, the question “We keep the state borders closed, but until when?”. The current restriction would affect not only an economic sector, that of tourism, the negative impact being on the chain for most industries in the world. A reopening of borders, safe for citizens, supported by other measures with a similar purpose, meant the naturalness of a society worthy of these times dominated by human freedoms and technological-scientific progress.

Step 2. “Safe restoration of transport”: We remind the fact that the essence of epidemic control measures is to restrict the movement and gathering of people which can normally be conducted by travel restrain³. With the establishment of fear

among the population, was felt the need to instaurate the feeling of preservation of one's own health. To this end, limiting the interaction between individuals and maintaining social distance have encouraged travel by personal means of transport, to the detriment of public transport. In any case, for a better understanding of the current pandemic phenomenon, we mention that public transport users have dropped by more than 90% in some European cities^{16, 17}. Avoiding crowded places is a priority during this period, and maintaining a social distance of at least 2 meters between individuals is certainly a visible problem among those who are constrained to use public transport for travel, means of transport that seem unsafe from this point of view¹⁸.

However, the European Commission has encouraged travel, many of which being made for tourist purposes, even through the use of public transport⁵. However, the relaunch of a safe transport for the health of each of us, meant the orientation towards adopting a preventive behavior, by wearing a protective mask, disinfecting hands before and after touching objects inside public transport, but also disinfection of the interior of the respective vehicles.

Step 3. "Resumption of tourist services with minimized health risks": The courage to overcome this bad moment, in this way this measure would be best interpreted measure proposed by the representatives of the European Commission⁵. In tourism, and not only, the gradual economic recovery was indispensable, because otherwise, the financial collapse would take over the entire market economy worldwide. The resumption of tourist services, in a gradual way, without endangering the health of tourists, but also of all staff working in the tourism field was the revitalization of tourism in 2020.

Step 4. "Use of digital technology": The tourist must always be responsible, the period of crisis generated by the current pandemic is no exception. In this sense, a rigorous prior information is required, usually using the digital means that each of us has in different forms. Thus, it must be quickly known information such as: areas with a high risk of infection, travel recommendations, availability of tourist reception structures, travel restrictions etc.

Furthermore, Wang D. *et al.* say that mobile technology is touted as the next technology wave that can fundamentally change tourism and hotels¹⁹, while other researchers affirm that mobile technology is playing an increasing role in the travel experience, and increasing travel research is concentrated in this field²⁰.

Step 5. "Protecting people's rights": We travel, but we also, in addition to the responsibilities we

have, we also have some rights, isn't it?! In this regard, the European Commission encourages those tourists who have purchased certain travel packages in advance, and who have been canceled, to use the advice provided through the network of European Consumer Centers⁵. Even if the current pandemic has generated a very delicate situation, the relationship between the tourist and the actors in this field should remain a balanced one. A negative feedback in the present period, correlated with the fear of contacting the COVID-19 virus with the movement from one area to another, would mean the collapse of tourism by reducing tourist arrivals.

Tourism, severely affected by this current crisis, must overcome this difficult period, with the focus on new directions aimed at the niche of sustainable tourism. Why sustainable? Improperly said, but if it were necessary to think about whether there is something good about this pandemic, in addition to increasing concern for one's own health, sustainable tourism is in a position to embrace as many tourists as possible.

Sustainability has not been a topic of interest to most tourists so far, addressing a well-defined typology. However, I believe that through the current difficult situation in which all mankind finds itself, we can bring to light the feeling that has been left in the shadows in our hearts, namely the good relationship between man and nature. In fact, this connection represents a condition of human existence, because what man would do without the environment, but also vice versa, because everyone has a well-established place on this Earth, as a well-cohesive continuous circuit, in other words.

CONCLUSIONS

Travel and tourism industry have outpaced the global economy for the ninth consecutive year in 2019, accounting for 10.3% of world GDP. It employs 330 million people – representing 1 in 10 jobs on the planet²¹. Although its economic impact is widely acknowledged since it makes many positive contributions to host destinations, the tourism and travel industry faces much criticism because it also has a negative impact on both local communities and the environment through pollution or overcrowding. These problems can have an impact on the destination and on its inhabitants, affecting the well-being of the community. Through the years, the industry has made many attempts to be more responsible by addressing sustainability issues in order to promote more positive long-term benefits, and the core of these efforts often focuses on increased community

involvement²². However, we still do not know much about the impact of these sustainable activities on the well-being of communities, and their contribution to a long-term community.

And as the COVID-19 pandemic surprised each of us, scenarios regarding the outbreak of such a threat to humanity have been brought up in recent years, but until we were confronted with the fact, we remained indifferent to this danger. The current circumstance is a new one, in which the current generations have not taken part until now, and tourism is also put to a difficult test, apparently, more than six months after the introduction of the COVID-19 virus.

We hope that the global tourism sector will return to its promising pre-pandemic form, and in terms of tourism and sustainable tourism in Țara Hațegului – Retezat, this is certainly the right time to revalue it and increase confidence in the ecodestination's natural potential. In fact, the social distance will culminate in the tourist's desire to avoid areas with increased passenger traffic, so rediscovering their roots through sustainable tourism will become dominant. This is the time when the tourist will realize the richness of sustainable tourism, so we can commit to making the following prediction: sustainable tourism will become in the coming years the main reason why tourists will feel at ease when traveling.

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