

RURAL TOURISM ASSET DEVELOPMENT. MARAMUREȘ COUNTY AS CASE STUDY

DEZVOLTAREA ATURILOR TURISMULUI RURAL. STUDIU DE CAZ: JUDEȚUL MARAMUREȘ

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Abstract: Maramureș County has many attractions, but only some of them can generate a significant number of foreign visitors and can be considered tourism assets. Most of them and all the supporting infrastructure need further development. Common identified problems include a high number of facilities that are less developed, lack of proper marketing and tourism interpretation. The existing businesses of rural tourism that may serve this tourist market could improve their products in order to capture a larger share of visitors, overnights and spendings. Overall, the lodging establishments, mainly the rural boarding houses, which are dominant in the area, record a number above the national average level with no need for construction of new establishments as the hotels; the tourist flows are dominantly national. Rural tourism proves to be vitally important to the economy of the county, the visitors spending having a high impact in most of the communities. The tourism development should focus on a better system for implementation of marketing and interpretation programs such as thematic routes, common marketing strategy, county collaboration and creation of common web, mobile and print materials. All these measures can help and revitalize the family businesses in the rural areas of Maramureș.

Key-words: *rural tourism, tourism asset, marketing, Maramureș.*

Cuvinte cheie: *turism rural, atuu turistic, marketing, Maramureș.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Natural setting plays a very important role in the development of tourism through the diversity of landforms, hydrography, variety of flora and fauna. Lately, a lot of researches focused on the rural areas that can develop tourism and can interconnect with other types of tourism such as leisure and recreation, mountain and cultural tourism. All these are complemented by the local dishes and hospitality.

The interest in the countryside relaxation intensified in the 20th century, starting with the '50s, especially in states with an advanced industry, in response to the stress caused by the process of urbanization and industrialization.

Even if tourism in rural areas attracts only 10-15% of tourists, it is no longer targeted only for people with low incomes; nowadays, it is an

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alternative, a way of recreation away from polluted cities and the agglomeration of large resorts (Simon et al., 2009).

Rural tourism capitalizes the natural environment, contributes to the local development of rural areas. The rural product includes a variety of natural, cultural-historical and ethnographic resources, accommodation and services that are characteristics of the rural environment. Thus, it contributes to the balance between tourism and nature, local culture, traditions, and between development and conservation of rural characteristics. Although this type of tourism is affected by seasonality because the tourists concentrate mainly in the warm period of the year in rural areas, there was observed a tendency to diversify the rural supply in all seasons, especially during winter and Easter holidays in Romania. Rural tourism can provide also additional income to the local communities in charge with these activities (Simon et al., 2009).

The main objective of rural tourism is to create a link between nature and economic resources, so that it is able to maintain and improve the quantity and quality of existing natural resources, to protect the environment, to increase the life level of inhabitants in the rural areas and to stop rural exodus. The development of this type of tourism must be done gradually, without becoming a "mass" phenomenon, aiming to be a complementary activity to agriculture and not to replace it (Henche, 2004).

Rural tourism is the type of tourism in rural areas, which integrates harmoniously the natural and cultural heritage, involves the local population in tourism, preserves the traditional activities of the area, highlighting specific resources, less promoted, without losing cultural authenticity. All these are features that actually form the rural tourism supply (Fig. 1).

According to Căndea&Simon (2006), rural tourism is characterized by certain aspects, mainly by the fact that it must be located in a rural setting with specific rural accommodation units as boarding houses, and it must be viable and help maintain the particular rural characteristics of the region, using local resources. It must be considered a potential tool for preservation and sustainability and not a tool for urbanization and intense development.

Some researchers consider that "the fundamental equation of the rural tourism product is: farm accommodation = vacation spent in the village + leisure in the countryside" (Bran et al., 1997).

Regarding the motivation of people who travel to rural areas, one can identify a number of needs that persons in urban areas are increasingly expressing: the need of relaxation to achieve a physical and spiritual comfort and to consume fresh and healthy food, the desire to return to nature, the curiosity and desire to discover local dishes, crafts and traditions of villages (Park&Yoon, 2009; Devesa et al., 2010; Tsephe&Eyono Obono, 2013).

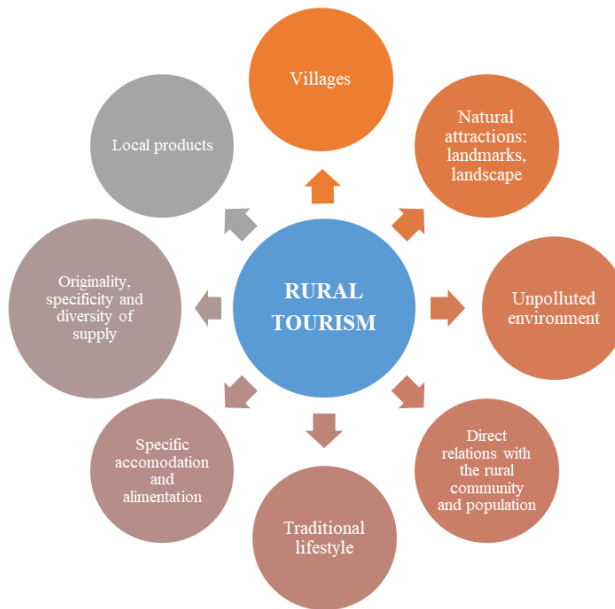


Fig. 1. The features of rural tourism that form the rural tourism supply

Attractions remain the main reason why people visit a place. Only after their quantification, questions about their potential for further development and supporting services appear (Garrod et al., 2006). The visitor experience is most of times neglected in the rural areas that want to develop tourism (Clarke et al., 2001). In the long run this practice leads to failure because rural tourism marketing must focus on the assets of the territory or the developed activities with the widest appeal and not on all activities that do not really contribute to that experience (Lane, 2005). Technology is changing the tourism marketing that has less control over the message because the online feedback has greater impact on people and on how tourists interact with attractions.

This paper includes a study of the suitability of rural tourism in the Maramureş County, focusing on the main attractions seen as assets of the area, but also on the economic, social, natural, cultural and ethnographic features that can support tourism in the area.

The development of tourism in Maramureş is based especially on the existing tourist resources and is dependent on the methods of promotion that are used only locally or nationally. Currently, the county is known as a tourist destination, where rural tourism and agrotourism have a large share of tourism market, thing also proven by the large number of agritourism boarding houses, which have developed over time in villages.

The objectives of the paper include highlighting the existing attractions of the county, which represent assets of the area and which can increase visitation,

creating new route to improve the tourist experience and offering some insights for a better marketing of rural tourism in the area.

Some questions arise when assessing tourism products: is the landmark unique within the county, does it have broad appeal and is it prepared to receive tourists? All these questions are explored in this study which tries to present Maramureş tourism assets, the landmarks that have ability to draw more visitors to the area, and their needs for development by proposing a marketing approach, which focuses on these identified assets and not on all of the tourist landmarks of the area. Lastly a route of these identified rural tourism assets with high potential is presented.

Taking into account the travellers trends in the last years, preference for local flavour, craftsmanship and places that are unique (local heritage, dishes and local products) and desire to experience, take part in tourism activities and interact with people, rural tourism can supply these needs. A higher demand for quality of accommodation, food, visits, experience can be taken into consideration when developing rural tourism. This type of tourism can interact very well with outdoor recreation which is popular all year-round. Maramureş represents an alternative to urban tourism, it proves to support many of the popular outdoor activities and also rural tourism.

II. DATA AND METHODS

The methodology used for this research consisted of four components:

- a social and economic analysis of the county was conducted to identify the place and importance of the local economy and the context of its development based mainly on the data from the National Institute of Statistics from Romania
- statistical data was collected on tourism within the county, including number of beds, accommodation capacity, visitors' arrivals; official tourism webpages of the county were consulted
- two field trips and observations of the county were conducted in 2019 and 2020, on its communities and the attractions within them (during this tour, the perceptions of the visitors and local businesses were noticed)
- the tourism assets of the county were selected and mapped based on the observations and tourism data processing. Then linkages were studied to identify the main theme and create an itinerary/route to promote attractions and extend the duration of visits. When developing this route, the selected assets, distances between them along with targeted geo-demographic markets were taken into consideration.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Study area characteristics

The Maramureş County is located in the northern part of Romania (between the parallels of 47°20'00" and 48°00'15" northern latitude and the meridians of 22° 52'30" and 25°07'30 " east longitude), being delimited in the west by Satu-Mare County, in the south-west by Sălaj, in the south by Cluj County, in the south-east

by Bistrița-Năsăud County, in the east by Suceava, and in the north by the border with Ukraine (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. The geographical location of Maramureș County at national and regional level

It has an area of 6,215 km², representing about 2.6% of the country's surface, occupying the 15th place among the country's counties surfaces. The distance between the western and eastern points of the county reaches up to 160 km, and between the northern and south reaches up to 60 km, thus the county having an elongated form.

The landforms of Maramureș belong to distinct geomorphological units: the central and eastern areas are part of the Northern Group of the Eastern Carpathians, including Gutâi-Țibleș volcanic mountains, the crystalline mountains of Maramureș, Rodna and Maramureș Depression; the southern and western area has a lower altitude and include Baia Mare and Lăpuș Depression, which are part of the Depression of Transylvania (Fig. 3). The altimetric analysis shows that from the total area of the county, 2,655 km² (43%) belong to mountain areas, 1,873 km² (30%) are hills, plateaus and piedmonts, and the remaining 1,687 km² (27%) are depression areas with meadows and terraces. The morphological analysis shows a complexity of landforms with the highest peak of Pietrosu (2,303 m), in Rodna Mountains, the maximum altitude recorded in the county.

The dominance of mountains and altitudes ranging between 200 and 2300 m determines that the catchment areas of the Maramureș county (the Tisa and the Someș) to have a length of approximately 3,000 km and a density between 0.5 and 0.9 km/km². The tributaries of the Tisa have their springs on the southwestern slopes of Maramureș Mountains and the north of Rodna Mountains, but also numerous streams descend from Gutâi and Țibleș Mountains. The Someș is the largest river in the southwestern part of the county, with two important tributaries:

the Sălaj and the Lăpuș. The varied landforms with unique features represent important tourist resources that can be capitalized within rural tourism.

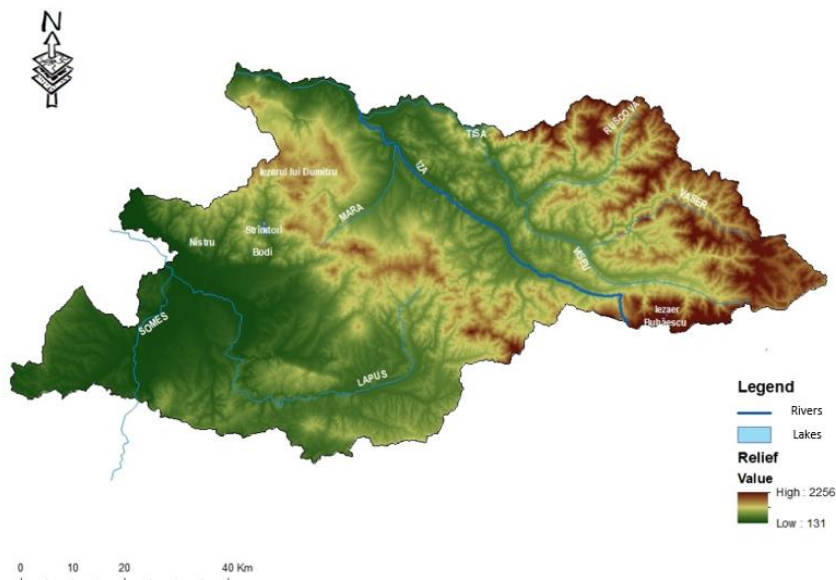


Fig. 3. The landforms and rivers of Maramureș County

3.2 County socio-economic context

Even though there has been a continuous improvement of jobs and lifestyle in the Maramureș County, the population is declining slightly. According to the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), 2020, since 1992 the population of the county has been on a downward trend, ranging from 554,896 inhabitants in 1992 to 520,551 inhabitants in 2020.

The urban areas concentrate more than half of the total population (60%, representing 312,687 inhabitants), while the rural area, even if it is well extended, has only 40%, i.e. 207,864 inhabitants, one of the causes being the rural exodus after the 90s. According to the NIS, in the 2012-2018 period, there were about 27,000 temporary immigrations, about 1,100 permanent immigrations, 33,000 temporary emigrations and over 2,700 permanent emigrations in the Maramureș County.

In 2008, the primary sector was the main field of activity of the population, with a workforce over 72,000 people. In 2018, the services ranked 1st in terms of population employment (approximately 52,000 people), being also the sector with the highest average gross earnings (4,172 lei / person), followed by industry and agriculture (Fig. 4).

In this context, there are underlined good prerequisites for tourism development in the county due to the expansion of services, especially in the rural areas that can be revitalized through this type of activities, impelling the youth to open businesses in the tourism sector.

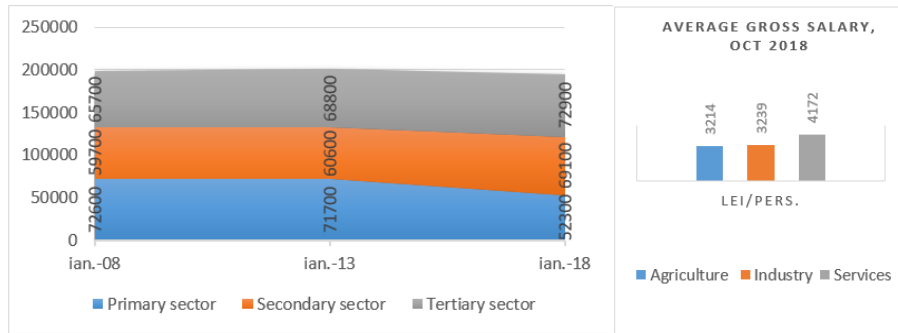


Fig. 4 The employed population in the 3 sectors of the national economy (period 2008-2018) and the average gross earnings from October 2018 in Maramureş
(Source: processed data from NIS, 2020)

3.3. Quantitative tourism analysis

The analysis of the lodging capacity shows a high number concentrated in the rural areas of the Maramureş County, because there is a high tourism demand mainly due to the well preserved customs, traditions of villages. So, over time, this type of tourism has expanded a lot, the locals trying to adapt and offer tourists a countryside lifestyle.

According to the statistical data from NIS, 2020, from 32 accommodation units existing in 2001 in the rural area of the Maramureş County, the number reached 135 units in 2019 and is constantly growing. Most accommodation units had an agrotourism profile, dominantly boarding houses, located in all rural localities.

In 2019, the highest number of accommodation units and number of beds, whether they are in hotels, motels, rural boarding houses was recorded in Ocna Şugatag (Fig. 5). Being given the mineral waters in the area with a medical role, the resort attracted tourists of all ages. A constant number of accommodation units and number of beds is recorded in villages such as Băiuţ, Bogdan Vodă, Rona de Sus, Ruscova, etc.

The Maramureş County is one of the places where tourists come to relax and get in touch with nature, to experiment the traditions, customs and handicraft products, to experiment actually the life "in the countryside".

During 2001-2019, the number of tourists arriving in the area increased almost 10 times. The localities that recorded the most arrivals in 2019 are: Ocna Şugatag, Recea (due to the proximity with the city of Baia Mare), Moisei (with important tourist attractions, such as: Rodna Mountains National Park) and Vadu Izei. The lowest number of arrivals is observed in Băiuţ, Mireşu Mare, Bogdan Vodă and Copalnic-Manastur, below 200 arrivals (Fig. 6).

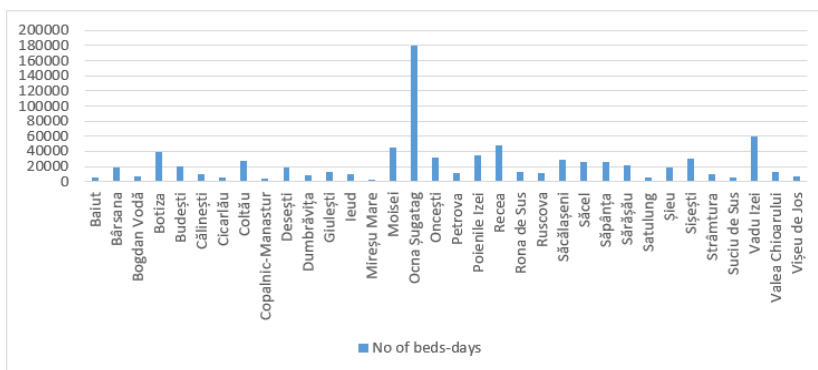


Fig. 5 The accommodation capacity in operation in the villages of Maramureș, 2019
(Source: processed data from NIS, 2020)

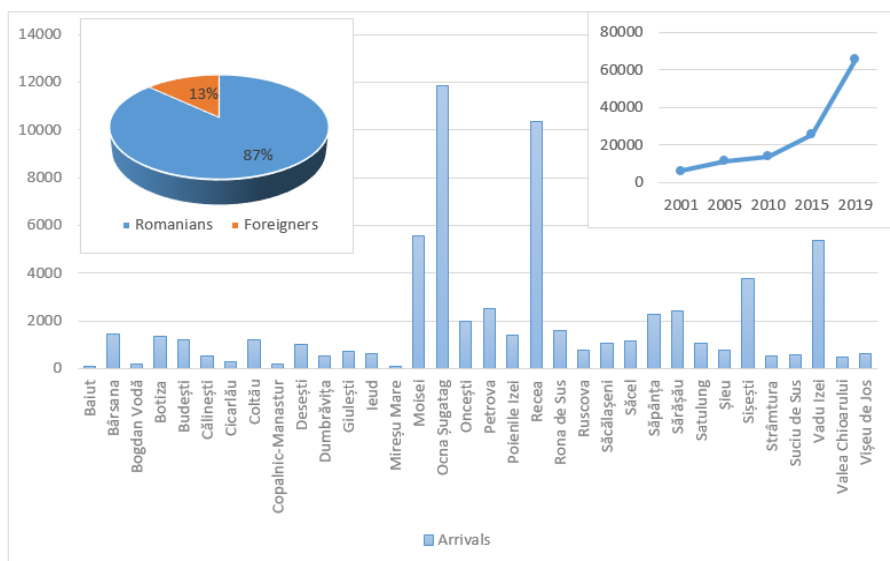


Fig. 5 The tourists' arrivals in the villages of Maramureș county, 2019, the evolution of arrivals from 2001 to 2019 and the rate of Romanians-foreigners' arrivals
(Source: processed data from NIS, 2020)

Out of all the arrivals and overnight stays recorded at the county level, the majority of tourists are Romanians (over 85%) and the rest are foreigners. One of the reasons could be the low promotion of Maramureș on international markets, although some tourist attractions are known internationally.

The quantitative analysis of tourism data shows that the lodging capacity in the rural areas of the county is well represented as well as the number of arrivals, being on an upward trend in the analysed period. There are still few foreign tourists

visiting the county, mainly due to a reduced targeted marketing of the area in general and of the rural areas in particular.

3.4 Rural tourism asset development

After the field trips in Maramureş and observations conducted in 2019 and 2020, several attractions in the area were investigated in order to determine if they can be considered assets or not. When assessing a tourism attraction, some characteristics were taken into consideration: development degree of facilities, services, access; visit duration and the uniqueness of the asset.

Out of the natural resources, there were identified several potential assets: the Rodna Mountains National Park (the most emblematic protected natural area in the county, located on approximately 9,800 ha), Pietrosu Mare Nature Reserve (being appreciated for the most recognized glacial relief in Romania), The Rooster`s Ridge (nature reserve located in Gutâi Mountains), The cave with bones from Botizii Meadow (a fossil cave with a special speleological value), the Rosette of stone from Ilba (a set of andesitic columns), Şipot Waterfall, Horses Waterfall (one of the most amazing waterfalls in the county, located in the northern part of Rodna Mountains, in the vicinity of Borşa tourist resort), the Iza Valley (one of the most picturesque regions in the area), White Spring of the Iza Reserve, the Lăpuş Gorge (having as purpose the protection and conservation of natural habitats). In terms of the man-made attractions, the most famous are the Merry Cemetery from Săpânţa, Bârsana Monastery, Mocăniţa from Valea Vaserului, Wooden Church from Ieud-Deal, Peri Monastery, Breb village and Ocna Şugatag spa resort. Local dishes and products may appeal to visitors and need consideration.

The rural tourism assets analysed and included in a route that has the ability to draw tourists from outside of the area are highlighted in Fig. 6.

The route includes unique natural places, local architecture and agro-tourism, i.e. a mixture of tourism products. Baia Mare city is one of the main access points on this route. The route can be covered in 6 overnights and the assets that were selected to be visited are the Merry Cemetery in Săpânţa-Peri Monastery-Breb village- Sârbi village- Bârsana Monastery- Wooden Church from Ieud-Deal-Vadu Izei- The Rooster`s ridge- Mocăniţa steam train-Horses Waterfall.

Taking into account that the typical tourist attracted by these rural assets is adult/older, well educated, and seeking unusual activities where one can learn new things, the proposed route of assets must be very accessible in terms of time and expenditure. The target market was identified within the 5-6 hours` drive, encompassing the Transylvania counties and Bihor County.

Another thing that is worth mentioning is that Maramureş County is an easy three-to-six days` trip or week-end getaway for tourists living nearby.

Some of the activities that can be connected with rural tourism are camping, hiking, wildlife viewing, bicycling and fishing. In short term, activities as camping and fishing are declining but others such as adventure activities record growth.

Some proposed activities such as geocaching (an outdoor experience practiced around the world, in which participants use a GPS application to hide and seek geocaches (waterproof containers that contains logbook and items for trading

at locations marked by coordinates on maps that can be easily reachable), hiking, mountain biking are opportunities that can bring new visitors into the area and can be linked successfully with rural tourism. An integrated tourist product represents thus the best option for this study area.

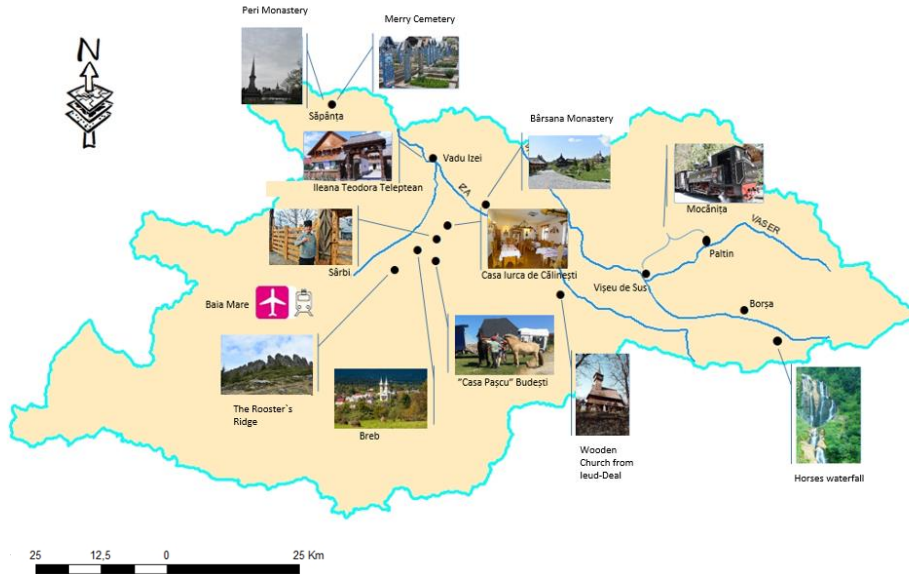


Fig. 6. The rural tourism asset map and route

The management and marketing of tourism products must be well developed; they must be designed in such a way as to be both advantageous and attractive to tourists, to bring something new in order to bring benefits both to the local community and to tourists.

The online marketing was analysed, especially the webpages www.ecomaramures.com, www.visitmaramures.ro/, www.emaramures.ro. Tourism promotion in Maramureș County was constantly evolving, different promotional materials (brochures, leaflets, guides, etc.) are found on internet, but most of them do not have a common ground. Marketing materials are not consistently available in accommodation units, at attractions and other locations where tourists may find them. A list of these locations should be developed and a systematic process has to be put in place to ensure that all the marketing materials are available. More information provided for specific tourist activities in the area (craftsmanship, hiking trails) can improve the tourist experience.

It is common to see sellers suggest similar products based on selections the buyer has made online. By offering suggestions of places that are similar to those the person is visiting, the county rural areas would build awareness of its other assets and drive tourists to them. To encourage tourists to visit the proposed route and the identified assets of Maramureș, the rural communities have to collaborate

in a marketing effort that can be challenging. In this respect, there might be considered print and web advertising and targeted merchandise.

The analysis outlines some of the benefits of re-considering rural tourism resource as "countryside assets" and this holistic approach is necessary when the rural communities want to capitalize more efficiently the outcomes that rural tourism has to offer, meaning also a public-private partnership and investments in rural resources.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Tourism does not bring benefits only to the assets that attract visitors, because once these visitors are in the county, they will pass through several communities, often stopping for services or for accommodation, increasing in this way the benefits to other local businesses in the rural areas.

An itinerary was developed to help tourists discover the area. The key activities include heritage visits, recreation and consumption of local products: food and craftsmanship.

The analysis shows the need of further actions in order to develop tourist attractions/assets and to better market the area.

After visiting several webpages that promote the study area, some insights may be considered to improve their organization and presentation: the information about the accommodation, restaurants, shops must be better organized geographically, the list of potential activities could be expanded and more information could be provided in terms of trip planning- contacts, opening hours. All this information must be adapted to the mobile version of the sites in order to load faster and to have a more intuitive navigation. The messages should focus on seeking hidden gems in the rural areas, on outdoor adventures away from the crowded places and on unique and local handcrafted products.

Enhanced surveys and technology can be used to gather more information about the tourists and thus to improve the marketing. Tourism signage by panels, information kiosks, site interpretation, advertising along the routes and mobile applications are other areas of intervention for tourism development.

An effective partnership with the communities has to be established, a coordinated marketing activities has to be implemented and a system for a better analysis of tourism impact can be set up.

The county needs to grow the capacity of the local resources for rural tourism development. Concerning the assets in order to reach a full potential, they need further investments and a better promotion involving also the local businesses and county administration.

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