

## ECOTURISM CERTIFICATION SYSTEMS IN THE DANUBE CLUSTER AREA

### SISTEME DE CERTIFICARE ECOTURISTICE ÎN ZONA CLISURII DUNĂRII

Loredana DRAGOMIR<sup>1</sup>, Alexandru DOBRESCU<sup>2</sup>, Mirela MAZILU<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract:** The subject of certification and certification systems is a vast, complex and at the same time topical subject, in recent years being increasingly associated with tourism and especially ecotourism. The concept of ecotourism and other sustainable forms of tourism have their origins in the ecological movement of the 1970s. Ecotourism became relevant in the late 1980s, after the Manila Conference on World Tourism in the 1981, where it was unequivocally stated that tourism causes more harm than good to people and destinations. To avoid this, emphasis has been placed on the development of ecotourism, that form of tourism that is often in a convergent relationship with nature. In turn, certification systems are processes designed to encourage and reward firms that choose to produce or market products that use the highest social and environmental standards in their production. Obtaining them involves consulting with a variety of stakeholders and uses primarily a performance-based system, but also a third-party audit. They may also include the creation or implementation of a management system to help establish better and more efficient environmental procedures. The basic purpose or motto of this type of program can be characterized as a risk reduction.

**Key-words:** *certification systems, ecotourism, Danube Cluster, certification.*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *sisteme de certificare, ecoturism, Clisura Dunării, certificare.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

An interesting topic in the attention of tourism specialists, the topic of ecotourism certification was also addressed by authors such as Martha Honey in "Ecotourism and certification. Setting Standards in Practice" (2002) or Font&Buckley in "Tourism Ecolabelling. Certification and Promotion of Sustainable Management" (2001), which treats the subject from different perspectives.

Certification is a way to ensure that an activity or product meets certain standards. Within the tourism industry, various organizations have developed certification programs that measure different aspects of tourism: (a) quality, for the whole tourism industry, (b) sustainability, also for all sectors, and (c) ecotourism, in natural ecosystems, protected or fragile, which may include indigenous communities.

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<sup>1</sup> University of Craiova, Geography Department, loredana.dragomir25@yahoo.com.

<sup>2</sup> University of Craiova, Geography Department, dobrescu.sorin.alexandru@gmail.com.

<sup>3</sup> University of Craiova, Geography Department, mirelamazilu2004@yahoo.com.

In other words, obtaining the certification of quality ecotourism certification systems will contribute to increasing the image of the Danube Gorge as an attractive destination.

## **II. DATA AND METHODS**

The study is based on a very in-depth documentation of the content of specialized books and, in particular, the consultation of web pages, especially Google Trends. This method is widely used in the analysis of all tourism sectors, as the role of the Internet as a source of information is increasingly important. The article aims to highlight the importance of ecotourism certification systems in the process of protecting the environment with respect to the impacts of tourism on the natural and socio-cultural environment, through conceptual clarification of terms, using comparative methods, deductive and inductive analysis, etc.

## **III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **3.1 What is Ecotourism?**

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES, 2015) defines ecotourism as a "responsible journey into natural areas that preserve the environment, support the well-being of locals and involve interpretation and education".

It is different from traditional tourism because it allows the traveler to become educated about the areas - both in terms of physical landscape and cultural characteristics, and often provides funds for conservation and benefits from the economic development of places that are frequently impoverished.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in responsible travel, with tourists trying to find answers to questions such as: What is ecotourism? How does it work? Why does it matter? And how can we, as travelers, put into practice the basic principles of ecotourism? And as we continue to see the negative impact of mass tourism on beloved destinations around the world, the answers to these questions will become increasingly vital.

Ecotourism and other forms of sustainable travel have their origins in the ecological movement of the 1970s. Ecotourism itself did not become relevant as a concept of travel until the late 1980s. Since then, various ecotourism organizations have developed and many specialists have become an expert in this field. Martha Honey is just one of them. She addressed the topic of ecotourism in works such as "Ecotourism and sustainable development" (1999) and "Ecotourism and certification. Setting Standards in Practice" (2002), where she defines ecotourism as the act of "traveling in fragile, clean and usually protected areas, which strives to have as little impact as possible and usually on a small scale. Helps educate the traveler, provides funds for conservation; contributes directly to the economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and encourages respect for different cultures and human rights."

In fact, a very close interpretation is given by "The International Ecotourism Society". According to the source, ecotourism means that

"responsible journey to natural areas that preserves the environment, supports the well-being of the inhabitants of the areas concerned and involves interpretation and education", noting that education must be implemented and put into practice both among staff and guests (TIES, 2015).

Therefore, we are put in the situation of acquiring ecotourism some well-deserved features, namely:

1. It involves those trips to natural destinations - these destinations are open isolated areas, whether inhabited or uninhabited, and are usually under some environmental protection at national, international, community or private level. According to TIES, when traveling to such a destination, hosts have an obligation to provide visitors with memorable interpretive experiences that contribute to increasing sensitivity to the political, environmental and social climate of the host country (TIES, 2015).

2. Minimizes the impact - tourism causes damage; ecotourism strives to minimize the negative effect of hotels, routes and other infrastructure by using either recycled or abundantly available local building materials, renewable energy sources, recycling and safe disposal of waste and rubbish, and sensitive architectural design, ecological and cultural view. Minimization also requires that the number and behavior of tourism be regulated to ensure limited ecosystem damage. In other words, it is necessary to focus on some of the pillars of ecotourism, namely minimizing the physical, social, behavioral and psychological impact, impacts that can be generated by tourism undertaken by both tourism demand and supply.

3. It contributes to the awareness of the importance of the environment - ecotourism means education, both for tourists and for the inhabitants of the nearby communities. Regarding education, Mair Heather is of the opinion that in the case of connecting tourism theorists with the theory of education, it should support the approach of education to practical life (Mair&Sumner, 2017). In fact, the essence of linking education with practical life, including tourism, is an integral part of education and tourism literacy, said Fromel and his collaborators (Fromel et al., 2020).

4. It provides direct financial benefits for conservation as it contributes to fundraising for environmental protection, research and education through various mechanisms, including park entrance fees, tourist company, hotel, airline, airport taxes and voluntary contribution.

5. It provides financial benefits and empowerment to local people - the local community must be involved and receive revenue and other benefits for the conservation area and its tourism facilities. According to Kim Marin and his collaborators, ecotourism has a high impact on local communities in remote areas, by improving economic opportunities and conservation of natural resources and is increasingly accepted as a living alternative for rural people (Kim et al., 2019). However, we believe that not only the financial support of local communities is vital for a good development of ecotourism, but where the legislation is permissive, it will be essential to allocate revenue for the development of tourism infrastructure, including diversification of tourism.

6. It promotes the respect for local culture - ecotourism is not only ecological, but also less intrusive and culturally exploitative than conventional tourism.

7. It supports human rights and the democratic movement.

Ecotourism calls for a more comprehensive approach to travel, one in which participants strive to respect, know and benefit both the environment and local communities (Dinu et. al., 2012).

In other words, the meaning of ecotourism is the journey that has a positive impact on both the ECOLOGY and the ECONOMY of a given destination (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1. Ecotourism diagram**

(Data source: authors)

Ecotourism is essentially all about bringing wildlife conservators, local communities and the industry responsible for travel to ensure development focused on long-term sustainability, not short-term profits.

The aim is to develop tourist accommodation, activities and attractions that benefit all those involved - local flora / fauna, local people, stakeholders in the travel industry and travel.

Therefore, the International Ecotourism Society has established the following principles that should be adopted by those who implement, participate in and market ecotourism activities:

- "It minimizes the physical, social, behavioral and psychological impact.
- It develops ecological and cultural awareness and respect.
- It provides positive experiences for visitors and hosts.
- It provides direct financial benefits for conservation.
- It generates financial benefits for both local people and private industry.
- It offers visitors memorable interpretive experiences, which contribute to raising the awareness of host countries about the political, ecological and social climate.

- It designs, builds and uses low-impact facilities.
- It recognizes the spiritual rights and beliefs of the indigenous people in your community and work in partnership with them to build power.”

Many of these principles are in line with those of the Global Council for Sustainable Tourism, which has developed an extensive list of criteria for sustainable destinations, hotels and tour operators. Taking into account the above, we would like to present in detail a case study aimed at the Danube Cluster as an eco-tourist destination.

### **3.2 The need for the certification standard for tourism in the Danube Cluster region**

Certification is a formal process by which a community of people with knowledge, experience and qualified representatives of an organization provides a confirmation of an individual's competence (proven knowledge, education and experience) in a particular field. Certification differs from licensing, because those licenses are permissions granted by a government entity for a person to practice within their regulatory limits. Certification also differs from a "certificate" that documents the successful completion of a training or education program (Dragomir et al., 2018).

Certification is also a credible and globally recognized way to demonstrate commitment to a professional, successful and responsible business.

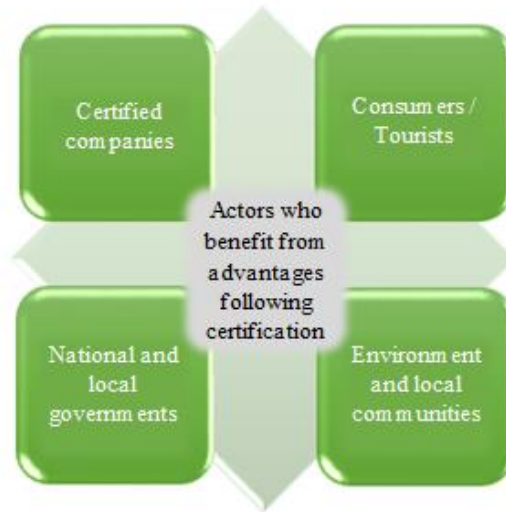
Certification distinguishes between three main sectors: systems, product and personnel certification. The purpose of certification is to demonstrate that the specified requirements are met. The requirements are usually based on international standards.

Certification can be a useful tool to add credibility by demonstrating that the product or service of those institutions meets customer expectations. For some industries, certification is a legal or contractual requirement.

The certification sets standards and contributes to the true distinction of ecotourism and sustainable tourism businesses. This helps protect the integrity of these concepts (Ryglová, 2007).

Certification is not an end in itself. It is one of the tools needed to motivate companies and others to improve their environmental, social and economic performance, while rewarding them for doing so. These rewards are sometimes tangible and sometimes not.

A continuous and growing proliferation of certification systems and labels at international, national and local level demonstrates that the importance and potential added value of certification is becoming increasingly clear to all actors working in the tourism sector (Fig. 2).

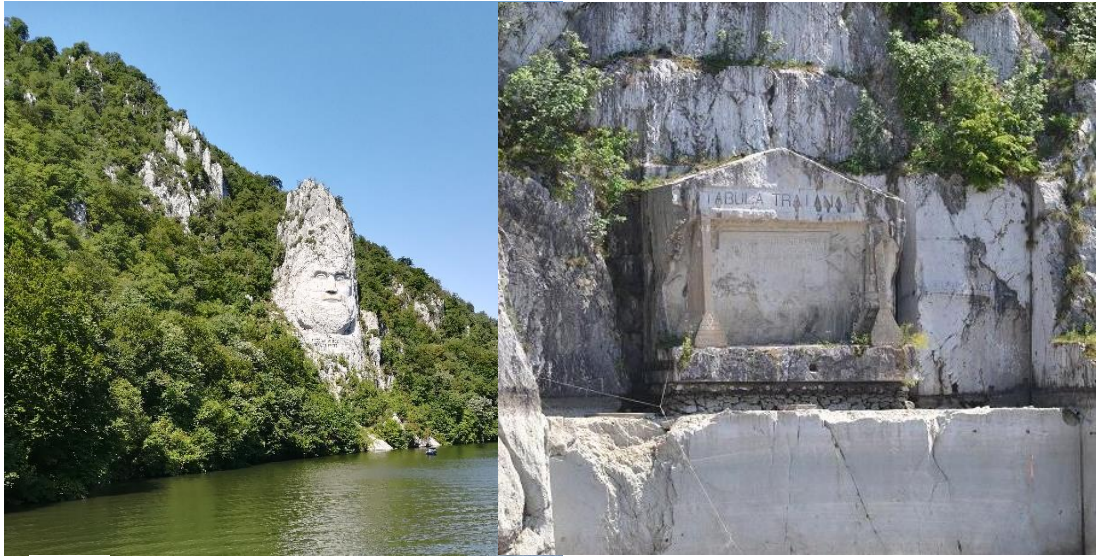


**Fig. 2. Actors operating in the tourism sector who benefit from certification**  
(Data source: authors)

Romania is a Carpatho-Danubian-Pontic country, which gives it the status of a tourist destination strongly endowed with a natural tourist heritage. So, at national level, it has a special natural setting: unfragmented forests, over a third of the population of bears, wolves and lynx in Europe, the unique paradise of birds in the Danube Delta, over 12,000 caves and last but not least, authentic local traditions. Given the strengths that Romania has in competition with other destinations in Europe, ecotourism can be a solution to restore the vigor of the Romanian tourism.

The Danube Cluster is one of the ecotourism destinations in Romania that does not currently have the certification of such an ecotourism system, but which has a great cultural diversity, development levels, administrative systems, as well as an impressive history.

The Danube Cluster represents the most picturesque part of the Danube Canyon when passing through the Carpathians. The Danube Gorges are a component of the "Iron Gates I" Natural Park, which runs along the largest and oldest canyon that a river has built in Europe. Among the tourist attractions in this area, it is the Statue of the Dacian king Decebalus (Fig. 3), unique in Europe by its size and second in the world after that of the American presidents. It hides one of the most beautiful legends known in this place and tells stories about the Dacians. There can be also added the Danube Boilers, a picturesque region of special beauty, Mraconia Monastery, Tabula Traiana (Fig. 3), located on the right bank of the Danube, Dubova Bay, Ponicoval and Veterani caves. Also, in Orșova, the numerous tourist attractions complete the beauty of the area.



**Fig. 3. The statue of the Dacian king Decebalus (left) and Tabula Traiana (right)**

(Data source: authors)

From the above we can see that the Danube Gorge region has the necessary resources to obtain the certification of an ecotourism system. This requires following a set of criteria, which are the central element of any certification system. Their choice reflects the political purpose of the creators of the system, the intensity and openness of the certification process.

Definitely, when we talk about ecotourism and sustainable tourism, the certification criteria should be inspired by the principles of sustainability and, respectively, seek a positive impact on nature. Each system is thus free to choose its own set of certification criteria.

In Romania, the elaboration of criteria for the designation of ecotourism destinations is based on the directives of the World Tourism Organization to use the European Ecotourism Labeling Standards (EETLS) developed by the ECO-DESTINET Network within the project funded with the support of the European Commission. Lifelong Learning, Leonardo da Vinci (Mazilu, 2017).

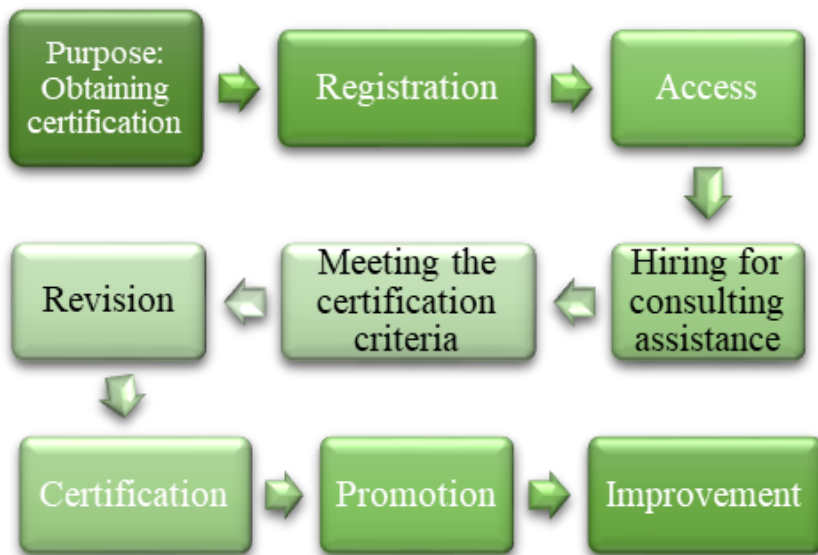
The Danube Cluster area aims at all four preconditions for an ecotouristic destination, which has a wide range of natural and socio-cultural resources; the destination is also accessible by any means of transport, whether public or private (train, minibus, own car); the geographical area also has a minimum level of tourist services, but also public services.

### **3.3 How can the Danube Cluster obtain certification and what are its benefits**

Certification systems have been developed to meet the needs of tourism and travel businesses seeking solutions to "today's" problems that drive social, cultural

and environmental change and go beyond current, unique, inherited and "yesterday's" certification-based solutions.

The implementation processes of some certification systems consists first of all, in determining how sustainable the targeted business / destination is, to decide whether or not external help is needed to improve the sustainability of the targeted business / area, and then to select a program and move on to the next step, namely the certification process (Fig. 4). Once a product, service or tourist destination has been certified, the process does not stop. It is expected to maintain the high standards that allowed the certification.



**Fig. 4. The certification process**

(Data source: authors)

The use of these programs seeks to develop comprehensive global standards that cover all major sustainability perspectives and the common reporting standard, including:

- ✦ Sustainability management;
- ✦ Health and Safety;
- ✦ Human rights;
- ✦ Sustainable development of buildings and infrastructure;
- ✦ Sustainable operations - best practices;
- ✦ Energy, Water, Waste;
- ✦ Environmental management - Resource conservation;
- ✦ Environmental management - Pollution reduction;
- ✦ Environmental management - Biodiversity conservation;
- ✦ Social and community development.



These systems will be determined by an annual evaluation process conducted by a select group of fully independent auditors, trained to perform all on-site evaluations and health verification programs.

The implementation of ecotourism certification systems can result in a series of benefits, including:

- Obtaining a competitive advantage;
- Attracting and retaining quality employees;
- Traveling beyond the "inherited" certification systems of yesterday;
- Reducing operating costs;
- Improving sustainability;
- Building a culture of continuous improvement;
- Unique access to the experts of various programs in the field of sustainable research;
- Risk management and mitigation;
- Consolidated policy framework;
- Involvement with the local community through social and infrastructure development programs;
- PR and communication strategies;
- Third party attestation;
- Access to training programs and destination planning, development and marketing services.

These are just some of the advantages that the Danube Cluster region could benefit from if it obtained the certification of such a standard, whether it is national or international. These can be a good way to allow customers to identify products that give them experiences related to rural culture and nature, ensuring a higher level of service quality, while participating in increasing the trust in the ecotourism products offered by the Cluster area on an international level.

#### **IV. CONCLUSIONS**

Without a doubt, Romania has a vast natural tourist potential and obtaining certification would be possible not only for the area we paid attention to in this study. However, the present analysis has shown a wide variety of benefits that can result from obtaining certification and the implementation processes of some certification systems. Some systems adopt a large number of performance-based criteria, which means that if the entity achieves a specific performance value only then the criteria are met. However, most systems are based on four preconditions for certification, namely: attractiveness, accessibility, minimum level of tourist services, but also public services.

That said, ecotourism and certification are an important addition to the ecotourism literature. Among the most important aspects of them are: increasing the number of tourists involved on environmental issues; increasing demand for new destinations; tourists become more experienced and

sophisticated, expecting good quality attractions, facilities and services, as well as the quality and rates of their travels.

In this context, the essential condition for the continuous development of the tourist phenomenon in the Danube Cluster area is the certification of the quality of ecotourism services.

The practice of niche tourism, the Danube Gorge serving as a tourist ecodestination, is a good opportunity for Romania to gain ground on the international competition stage, where the "actors" managed in time to understand the riches resulting from eco-tourism activities. In fact, only the idea that Romania would host an eco-tourist destination on the scale of the Danube Gorge, should be an opportunity for national joy. We have made known the advantages of certification in this area and hope this study will raise the awareness and involvement of the competent authorities.

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