

**THE ISOLATED RURAL COMMUNITIES
IN DOMOGLED-CERNA VALLEY NATIONAL PARK**

**COMUNITĂȚILE RURALE IZOLATE
DIN PARCUL NAȚIONAL DOMOGLED-VALEA CERNEI**

Cristina ȘOȘEA¹, Simona GHEORGHITĂ²

Abstract: Tourists tend to choose natural areas as a destination for leisure and relaxation and Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park constantly "provides" these opportunities. It stands out due to its natural heritage, but the specificity of the area is given by the presence of picturesque isolated human settlements on the ridges of Cerna Mountains, the isolated hamlets belonging to Cornereva in Caraș-Severin county, known for being the largest commune in Romania in terms of number of villages. The main objective of this research derives on the one hand, from the necessity to emphasize the remarkable potential of the studied area, with endemic species, mountain trails with different degrees of difficulty, ecotourism activities and unique experiences, but moreover to draw attention to its fragility.

Key-words: *isolated rural communities, Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park, Cornereva commune, Ineleț, Scărișoara.*

Cuvinte cheie: *comunități rurale izolate, Parcul Național Domogled-Valea Cernei, comuna Cornereva, Ineleț, Scărișoara.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Geographical research demonstrated that the Carpathians never behaved like an obstacle, but rather played a role of permanent uniting and cementing the native population in internal basins and familiar paths (*Geografia României*, 1984, p. 16). Population's permanence in time and the process of perpetual humanization in the conditions of mountainous relief are due to moderate heights, varied mountain resources, but also to the valleys that run through them, as it is the case of the Cerna Valley, which facilitated a permanent movement of people and products between inland and from outside the Carpathians (*Geografia României*, 1987). In the process of humanizing the mountain area, rivers have considerably influenced, since the Neolithic, the fixation and concentration of settlements, being used as drinking water for humans and domestic animals, household needs, as a source of food (fishing), means of communication and transport, as a hydraulic force for setting in motion water mills and stamps. Therefore, close, indissoluble

¹ University of Craiova, Geography Department, cristinavmara@yahoo.com.

² University of Craiova, Geography Department.

connections have been created, maintained and developed in a continuous, permanent way, which led to the shaping or even individualization of specific human landscapes.

In the entire Carpathian oikoumene, the hydrographic axis of the Cerna river sets as part of the internal oikoumene, characterized by a wide distribution of settlements along the valleys penetrating into the the mountain, usually in filamentous or linear forms. In the surrounding mountain units, in the Cerna and Mehedinți Mountains in particular, households develop on the slopes or climb the smoother ridges of the peaks, usually associating in a mixed oikoumene, of valley-slope-peak type (Giurcăneanu, 1988, p. 44).

As compared to the other two Carpathian frames, the Southern Carpathians had completely different living, settling and humanizing possibilities, given their height, relief energy, leveling surfaces, biopedogeographic cover and mineral resources. In this context, the Cerna valley represented a favorable axial area in the complex of human settlements in the Retezat-Godeanu Mountains. An amalgam of picturesque rural settlements, gorges, extensive forests, distinctive plant and animal species due to the Mediterranean influence, the Cerna valley and part of the surrounding mountain units (Cerna Mountains, Mehedinți Mountains, Vâlcan Mountains, Godeanu Mountains) constituted in a protected area of national interest - PNDVC (Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park) by Order of the Minister of Environment no. 7/1990, and an integral part of the European ecological network Natura 2000 as a result of the Order of the Minister of Environment and Sustainable Development no. 1964/2007 regarding the establishment of the regime of protected natural area of the community importance sites (Management Plan of DCVNP, p. 7).

Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park is located in South-Western Romania, in the Western extremity of the Southern Carpathians and the Retezat-Godeanu Mountains. From a geographical point of view (*Geografia României*, 1987), Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park stretches over the Cerna basin from its source to the confluence with the Belareca River, over Godeanu Massif and Cerna Mountains on the right slope, respectively Vâlcan Mountains and Mehedinți Mountains on the left slope (Fig. 1).

From an administrative point of view, DCVNP partly covers areas from 3 counties (eastern Caraș-Severin County, western Gorj County and western Mehedinți County). The list of the 11 administrative-territorial units is given in Table no. 1, in which it can be seen that the rural environment included in this protected area is predominant both in terms of population (over 52% of the total), but especially in terms of surface (over 94%). If analysing the demographic dimension of the rural settlements (Iordache, 2009, p. 168) included in the studied area, it can be observed that most of them represent average-sized communes, with 2,000-4,999 inhabitants, except for Obârșia Cloșani - a small commune (1,000-1,999 inhabitants) and very small communes Balta and Podeni from Mehedinți County, with a population of less than 1,000 inhabitants.

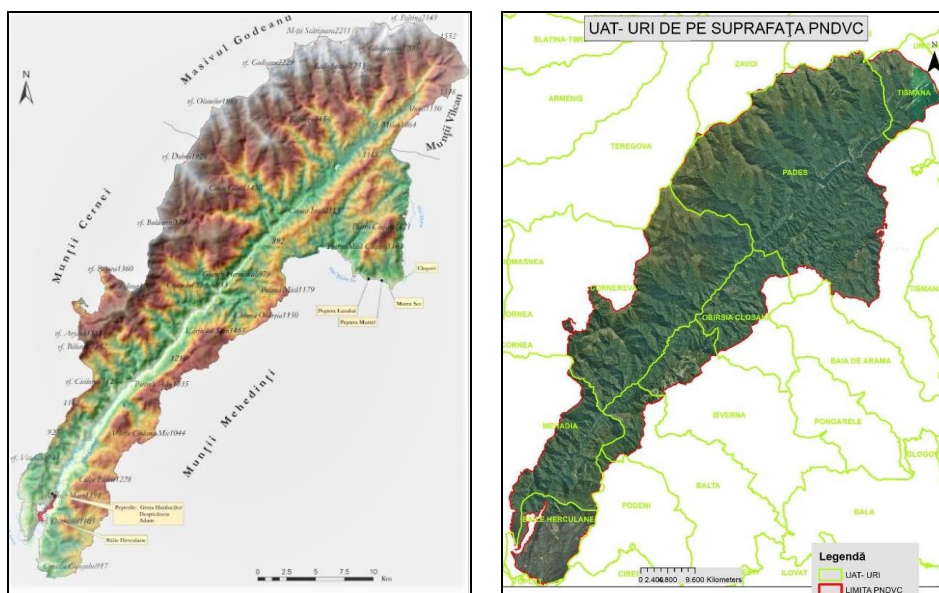


Fig. 1. The geographical position of the territorial-administrative units under study
(Source: Integrated Management Plan of DCVNP and Natura 2000 Sites Rosci0069 and Rospa0035)

Table no. 1. The territorial-administrative units included in DCVNP

County	T.A.U. (territorial-administrative unit)	Population (2019)	Surface in DCVNP (ha)
Caraș-Severin (CS)	BĂILE HERCULANE	4,784	75.6
	Cornereva	2,862	14041.5
	Mehadia	3,973	5822.4
	Toplet	2,528	13.1
Gorj (GJ)	TISMANA	6,928	2870.5
	Padeș	4,798	26989.1
Mehedinți (MH)	BAIA DE ARAMĂ	5,537	0.02
	Balta	975	1779.1
	Isverna	2,060	2479.4
	Obârșia-Cloșani	1,012	3667.5
	Podeni	792	176.3
TOTAL	Urban	17,249 – 47.6%	2946.12 – 5.09%
	Rural	19,000 – 52.4%	54968.4 – 94.91%
	Total	36,249	57,914.52

(Data source: NIS, Tempo online and Integrated Management Plan of DCVNP, p. 96)

A special note is given by the morphostructure of the settlements (Iordache, 2009, p. 173), as we can see that the rural settlements included in the study area are scattered settlements, individualized by the extremely high degree of dispersion in the territory, the distance between households reaching up to 2 km, being specific in this area - the hamlets (*cătune*), also known as groves (*crânguri*) or bodies (*trupuri*) of settlements, often inhabited by related families (Tufescu, 1982). Cornereva commune asserts, which stands out through a very high index of dispersion in the territory including 40 villages, some of which are very difficult to

access, but even more special from a touristic point of view: Dobraia, Prisăcina, Cracu Mare, Ineț, Scărișoara, Țațu (Fig. 2). In their case, it is not possible to speak about a regular texture of the configuration of the street network, given the fact that the households, extremely few in fact, are grouped in hamlets that are difficult to access and very scattered as spatial distribution.

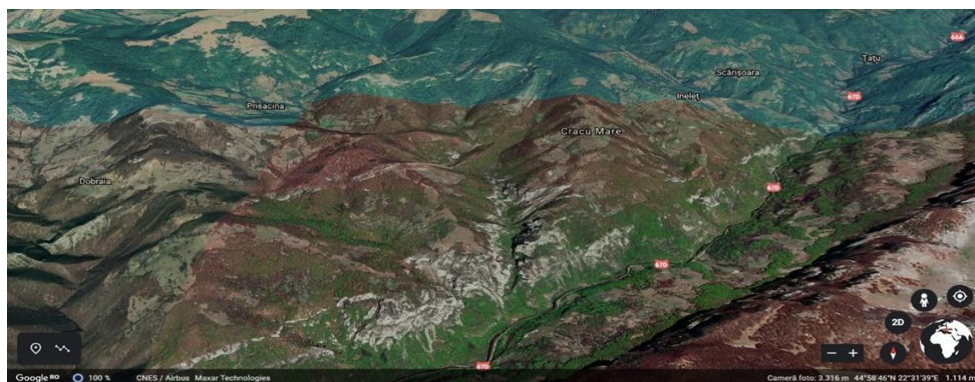


Fig. 2. Low accessibility of several isolated villages included in Cornereva commune: Dobraia, Prisăcina, Cracu Mare, Ineț, Scărișoara, Țațu
(Source: Google maps, 3D satellite image)

1.1 Isolated rural communities in the Geographical research literature

Along with urban, modern Romania, preferred for its dynamism, promptness and receptivity by Romanian or foreign investors, it coexists a rural Romania, much poorer and much more traditional, invisible to businessmen, only apparently in the 21st century and numbering over 9.5 million inhabitants and owning almost 9 parts of the 10 that make up the country's surface.

In the context of the pandemics and growing pollution in urban areas, the need for sustainable development and the development of ecotourism as a main form of manifestation of sustainable tourism becomes more and more obvious. Thus, tourism in natural areas is that form of tourism in which the activities carried out are dependent on the characteristics of the natural environment (Eagles&McCool, 2002). It is based on two fundamental components: a high quality level of the environment and the provision of specific services.

As literature reveals, tourism in isolated, wild rural areas means travelling to places untouched by man, unpolluted, to know and enjoy nature, with a primary interest in the natural history of a destination, to observe animals, birds and fish in their natural environment (Fennell, 2015). This particular type of alternative tourism – ecotourism - fosters sustainability through the process of selective marketing in order to attract environmentally conscious tourists who show respect for the natural and cultural components of tourism destinations and are conservation minded and culturally sensitive in their use of them (Fennell&Dowling, 2003). Land-use patterns and planning, pollution control, corporate environmental management, biodiversity conservation and protected-area systems are all essential aspects. Tourism may be either a threat or a tool in

improving global sustainability. It produces both social and environmental impacts, but it can also bring income to impoverished communities, improve global awareness of social and environmental problems and contribute both politically and financially to the establishment and survival of protected-area systems (Buckley, 2002, p. 219). For a long time, these isolated rural communities were rather forgotten, unwanted spaces, due to their stagnation in time and space and the difficulties imposed by their poor accessibility (Tigu, 2002). Nowadays, nature-based tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors within the global tourism industry, involving local people, feeding economic profit into local environmental protection and contributing to the maintenance of the local environment and species diversity through minimizing visitor impact (Hill&Gale, 2009).

In the study entitled "Development for whom?" Tourism as a social intervention for the development of rural communities in protected natural areas», Warnholtz&Barkin (2017) question how development agencies set their goals and how academic analysis focuses on the success of the tourism business, rather than on the sustainable development of the host community through tourism, explaining the failure of business and management. It is argued that the issues that determine the success or failure of tourism projects based on isolated rural communities needed to design successful interventions on behalf of the community are much more complex than have been achieved so far in the generally accepted context. To begin addressing this crucial issue, the authors argue, attention to policy thinking and planning should include spaces for local empowerment and self-determination to meet the needs and expectations of the host community, along with those of tourists. Using international experiences for indigenous areas, the paper demonstrates that these isolated communities are complex social groups organized around specific cosmogonies and according to their specific social, political, environmental, economic and cultural context; that each of them has special needs and resources and that the cultural heritage plays a fundamental role both in their organization and in the tourism project.

II. DATA AND METHODS

The paper requested, in a preliminary phase, a complex and rigorous documentation, but also a thorough acquaintance with the field reality over more than two years, during all seasons. The research involved both quantitative and extensive qualitative analysis, by using statistical data available in Tempo online databases of the National Institute of Statistics, in the Management Plan of Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park, but also collected from the interviews and questionnaire applied during the spring of 2020.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 The place of rural communities in this protected area - brief demographical analysis

The most representative demographic aspects are presented in Table no. 2, using the data provided by the Tempo online database of the National Institute of Statistics, the demographic situation of the T.A.U.s in Caraș-Severin County which are included in the

territory of Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park revealing an aging and permanently declining population during the period 1992-2019 (Fig. 3).

The structure of the population by age groups (Table no. 2) revealed a worrying demographic situation in the case of the analyzed rural localities. Thus, *the elderly population shares* range between 14.6% in Padeș and over 36%, even over 41%, in Podeni and Balta, respectively; *the demographic ageing index* illustrated that the population goes through a process of very accentuated ageing (> 52% according to Vert, 1995) in all cases; *the dependency ratio* is supraunitary in two out of eight rural settlements (1,105 young and elderly persons depend on 1,000 adults in Balta, Mehedinți; 1004 in case of Podeni); *the elderly dependency rate* illustrates that 77(!) elderly persons depend on 100 adults in Balta, Mehedinți. Unfortunately, these negative demographic trends have a series of implications for pensions, health care and education systems and, more generally, for economic growth and welfare in these rural settlements.

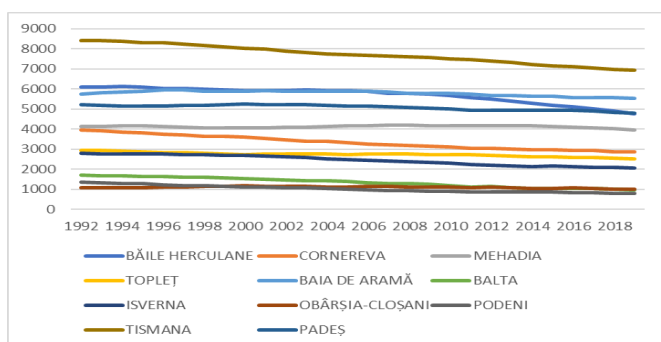


Fig. 3. Population dynamics of territorial-administrative units included in DCVNP between 1992 and 2019
(Data source: NIS, Tempo online)

Table no. 2. The structure of the population by age groups in the TAUs included in the NPDVC

County	T.A.U. (Terr.-Adm. Units)	Pop. (2019)	0-19 y.	20- 59 y.	over 60 y.	% >60y	I _{da}	R _d	R _{ed}
Caraș-Severin (CS)	BĂILE HERCULANE	4,784	816	3,499	693	14.5	84.9	431.3	19.8
	Cornereva	2,862	689	1,887	614	21.5	89.1	690.5	32.5
	Mehadia	3,973	884	2,499	745	18.7	84.3	651.9	29.8
	Topleț	2,528	554	1,686	385	15.2	69.5	556.9	22.8
Gorj (GJ)	TISMANA	6,928	1,389	4,223	1,423	20.5	102.4	665.9	33.7
	Padeș	4,798	1,134	2,964	702	14.6	61.9	619.4	23.7
Mehedinți (MH)	BAIA DE ARAMĂ	5,537	1,390	3,237	722	13.1	51.9	652.5	22.3
	Balta	975	179	532	409	41.9	228.5	1105.3	76.9
	Isverna	2,060	486	1,108	551	26.7	113.4	935.9	49.7
	Obârșia-Cloșani	1,012	252	548	153	15.1	60.7	739.1	27.9
	Podeni	792	140	426	288	36.4	205.7	1004.7	67.6

I_{da} – demographic aging INDEX (%), R_d- dependency RATIO (promiles), R_{ed}- elderly dependency RATE (%)
(Data source: NIS, Tempo online)

3.2 Natural and anthropic elements of touristic interest in NPDCV

The natural potential of the Cerna Valley is remarkable, including first of all: the tourist valences of the very extensive karst relief, the spa value of thermal waters but also of surface waters, specific climatic influences, sub-Mediterranean, transposed into varied plant and animal species (Oarcea, 1964), included and subject to conservation and protection in the national park.

The Cerna Valley is a longitudinal corridor that separates two rows of mountains with special orographic features. On the right side of the Cerna Valley, Godeanu Mountains and Cerna Mountains extend to the confluence of the Cerna and the Belareca. The Godeanu massif is characterized by rounded peaks with smooth surfaces and is slightly undulating in contrast to the steep slopes of the valleys. There are two relief steps: a high step located at over 2000m and a secondary step between 1200 and 1400m on the southern slope of Godeanu Massif, giving it the appearance of an amphitheater. The altitude is maintained between 2000 and 2250m between the Paltina and Godeanu peaks (2291m) succeeded by saddles of different altitudinal variations that do not exceed 200m.

Cerna Mountains continue to Godeanu Mountains on the right side of Cerna for a distance of about 40 km, from the Olan Valley to the confluence of the Cerna River with the Belareca. The relief of Cerna Mountains is similar to that of Godeanu Mountains, presenting rounded peaks in the transversal plane while in the longitudinal plane it presents irregular shapes due to the altitudinal variability of saddles and mountain peaks. The peaks are short and with a stepped profile. Towards the axis of the Cerna Valley, they are strongly fragmented by water and have limestone cliffs where there are caves and, in some places, real inaccessible walls (for example, the right wall behind Vânturătoarea Waterfall).

Mehedinți Mountains, on the left side of the Cerna, have low altitudes between 1000 and 1200m, with the exception of Stan's Peak (1446m) and Piatra Cloșanilor (1421m). The left slope of Cerna is narrower than the right one, which is why the Cerna basin has an "asymmetrical hollow" appearance. The slopes are fragmented by streams with frequent slope breaks. Between Stan's Peak and Domogled Peak is the largest limestone surface, bordered by the river Cerna by a steep slope with altitudes of 400-600m, fragmented in turn by karst valleys such as: Ploștina, Țăsna, Padina Seacă, Jelărâu, Feregari, with narrow gorges that make accessibility difficult. Also, here we find the most spectacular karst forms, karren fields, sinkholes, dry valleys, ponors, caves, poljes: Beletina, Poiana Cerbului, Poiana Mușuroaie, Cheile Țăsnei, Jelerâu, Ciocu Waterfall etc.

An important feature of the Cerna Valley is the number of "ciuceve" - rows of different altitudes arranged along the Cerna Valley. They are arranged in the landscape as small limestone massifs and have a special picturesque. What gives the Cerna a completely unique charm is the steep limestone that runs along almost its entire length, sometimes massive, sometimes narrow as a ridge, always segmented by the age-old saw of the waters. This extended back, called the Cerna Fault, is individualized in various shapes, along its entire length. Here are the huge limestone piles of Domogled, Șușc, Ineleț or Vîrfului Stan, here is the row of bags

(named after the locals) - piles of limestone walls less high, but more impressive, due to their proximity to the valley, the row of ciucevia Cerna, an ever-increasing range of rocky ridges, from the smallest to the heavy creature of Ciuceva Mari, which dominates the entire view of the upper Cerna.

From the point of view of the anthropic tourist potential, spectacular and with a high degree of importance are the isolated local communities along Vlașcu Peak, respectively the hamlets of Cornereva commune, especially the hamlets Ineleț, Scărișoara, Țațu, being classified as the most isolated human settlements. from the Romanian space. The specificity of these settlements is given by archaic, traditional customs - so we can talk about ethnographic and folklore tourism, adjacent to other forms of tourism existing and practiced exclusively in rural areas.

The popular architecture presents particular aspects of great interest for tourists, through the shelters built by the inhabitants of Cerna Mountains, shelters called dwellings or rooms, built of wood, usually with one room, attached to a stable or pen that serves animals, an orchard or layers grown with vegetables. Some settlements have stone foundations, carved wooden walls and a shingled roof.



Fig. 4. Modest houses with stone foundations - Cornereva commune, Ineleț village
(Source: Photos by Simona Gheorghită, June 2019-right, up left, January 2020-down left)

Popular artistic creation stands out through clothing created exclusively by locals, crafts, sculptures, etc. The traditional port is well preserved in these areas. Popular customs are related to religious events and holidays.

Of great religious importance to the locals are the churches built by themselves; the church from Ineieș, the church from Dobraia. In Ineieș we also meet an elementary school "Ineieș Primary School", a two-room building that served the students in the village, in the window of which is the following message on a white sheet of paper: "a place forgotten by time, not by people", which is why the few people left are grateful to each visitor. The school has not been operational since 2015, and the students were relocated to Băile Herculane to continue their studies. Unfortunately, the migratory balance is negative; students and young people who leave for Băile Herculane choose not to return to their hometowns.



Fig. 5. The church (left) and the primary school (right) from Ineieș village, Cornereva commune

(Source: Photos by Simona Gheorghică, January 2020)

It is admirable that the ingenuity of the people determined the construction or improvisation of water mills in order to obtain electricity. At the same time, small solar panels have been placed in some places, but they do not cover the needs of each household.



Fig. 6. Water mill on the Iuta brook, a tributary of the Cerna, between Țațu and Scărișoara villages

(Source: Photos by Simona Gheorghită, January 2020)

The administration of the Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park annually organizes an ecotourism program "Tradition and spectacular nature" designed to encourage the promotion of isolated communities on the peaks of Cerna Mountains and, implicitly, traditional crafts, folk art and organic food.

3.3 The need for the tourist capitalization of the rural space in DCVNP – SWOT analysis

Despite important downturns in some countries, nature-related tourism is far from declining everywhere and may still have considerable potential both to generate funds for conservation and to shape people's attitudes to the environment, which represent one of the most important environmental benefits (Seba, 2012). Recently, tourism has become an important vector in the development of local communities, showing its impact on many levels; in this regard, it must be ensured the sustainable development of tourism that have role balance preservation of natural heritage, socio-cultural and meeting the demands of tourists and local population in host communities (Dorobanțu&Nistoreanu, 2012; Mazilu, 2008).

Yet, few issues in the academic study of travel and tourism are as contentious, drawing divided and polarised lines of debate, as the concept of

ecotourism. In addressing this, researchers argued that the so-called 'responsible' forms of tourism, including ecotourism, are not the answer. Alternative forms of tourism were viewed as elaborate ruse and effective marketing tools for building further demand for tourism at a time of growing concern for the impacts of popular mass tourism. 'By clothing itself in a green mantle, the industry is being provided with a shield with which it can both deflect valid criticism and improve its own image while, in reality, continuing its familiar short tourism commercial march (Higham, 2007).

Considering the promotion of tourism in Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park, we can conclude it determines a series of *positive implications*, as it follows:

- Economic support of farmers. The economic situation in the life of farmers is a problem that can be combated by supporting farmers in offering various forms of accommodation, promoting visits to specific agritourism areas, by selling handicrafts, etc. Economic benefits can entice farmers to engage in tourism activities; a major importance appears at the social level, when, following the interaction with tourists, the local inhabitants can improve their social life, to become better informed regarding current issues, technical, medical, legal that can have a favorable impact on their socio-economic condition, but also cultural.

- Rehabilitation of the patrimony - it is possible in the conditions of the existence of a tourist flow. The natural potential of the Cerna Valley is remarkable, including first of all: the tourist valences of the very extensive karst relief, the spa value of thermal waters but also of surface waters

1. Preservation or restructuring of objects of historical or cultural interest following the payment of taxes by tourists. The tourist routes throughout Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park require a conservation fee that tourists pay at the tourist visit center in Băile Herculane.

2. The possibility of creating an accommodation infrastructure, implicitly restoring and putting back into operation the old abandoned buildings (as a result of the depopulation phenomenon), building motels, tourist villas, camping areas, landscaping and recreation. The local population could benefit directly from these initiatives, because, following the potential investments made, the desire to relocate the young generations would diminish. We could even talk about a repopulation or the installation of new inhabitants.

- Promoting and supporting folk art. Rural arts and crafts occupy an important place in the cultural heritage. Ecotourism can help these activities, both by recognizing their importance and by marketing artisanal products.

- Ecotourism is a potential way to open new perspectives in the field of investment. There is a possibility that among ecotourism practitioners there are visionaries who have the ability to quickly speculate on the possibilities of developing specific activities that can help or determine the growth and development of this form of tourism.

Although the development of ecotourism has many advantages, it should not be neglected that to a relatively large extent, it can cause a number of problems,

including difficulties. The main aspects related to the *disadvantages and difficulties* of ecotourism in Domogled- Cerna Valley National Park are:

□ Pressure on the environment. Usually, ecotourism takes place in natural environments with fragile balance, tourist destinations being also conditioned by the most sensitive environments. Considerable is the example of tourist routes in the territory of Domogled- Cerna Valley National Park (35 in number, but not all are approved) especially tourist routes leading to isolated hamlets in Cerna Mountains, where a possible intensification of tourist traffic can cause significant damage. Of course, these things can be prevented by carefully managing the space for tourist activities.

□ Socio-cultural pressure. The socio-cultural framework in a rural society is prone to change. From a sociological point of view, the influence that modern culture exerts on traditional culture has major implications. Following the relationship / contact with ecotourists, the local rural community acquires the feeling of community ignored "or at most accepted".

□ The reluctance of the local society. In the rural environment, the most important link that confers the functionality of the rural economy and implicitly the landscape on which the ecotourism depends is given by the local community - the locals. Often, they perceive in an unequal and slow measure the results following the practice and development of ecotourism. This situation is also justified by the inadequate tourist demand. Therefore, the practice of ecotourism can be hampered by a series of conditions likely to produce both satisfaction and dissatisfaction, the latter being reciprocal; ecotourism lovers are disappointed by the poor quality of tourist services (in the case of isolated hamlets in the Cerna Mountains this is the most prominent), locals, in turn, perceive the tourist as an intruder who aims to endanger the peace and convenience of the place.

However, the proper design of tourism activities and in particular the creation of an economic motivation would solve and reduce these reluctances.

□ Poor or unmodernized infrastructure. The lack of good infrastructure or non-modernized access roads has negative consequences, especially in motivating tourists to choose a rural area. Although for many this is not an impediment, there are still tourists who prefer a modernized infrastructure and accessible to one in poor conditions, as is the case of access to the hamlets Ineleț, Scărișoara, Țațu where access is possible only by climbing old wooden stairs, mounted in the early 1970s.

Although the eventual modernization of the access to the hamlets from Cerna Mountains would considerably increase the tourist circulation, we are talking about a protected area within Domogled- Cerna Valley National Park where the ecological tourist activities are also limited.

Other difficulties and disadvantages that endanger the development of ecotourism in Domogled- Cerna Valley National Park include:

- Territorial differences in terms of tourism potential.
- Insufficiency or lack of competitiveness among farmers who could benefit from the results of ecotourism.
- Limited character of accommodation units.

- Issues of planning, local control, public participation and partnership.

In order to be able to identify the concrete possibilities for the development of ecotourism in the Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park, a SWOT analysis was conducted, as presented in the following:

Table no. 3. SWOT analysis

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The diversity of the natural environment imposed by the relief; • The presence of the natural area with specific protection regime; • Floristic and fauna diversity; • Existence of reservoirs and karren fields; • The forest fund as an important economic means; • In Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park the rural specificity has a significant valuable character - the village heritage through the specificity of isolated hamlets in Cerna Mountains, the specific cultural and traditional heritage, especially the very well preserved crafts today, transhumance - the presence of traditional sheepfolds, handicrafts; • Large areas occupied with natural meadows for raising animals - hence the traditional and agricultural character as the main occupation for the inhabitants; • Increasing interest in ecotourism and awareness of the benefits of the natural environment; • Existence of funding programs for the conservation and protection of natural areas; • PNDVC shelters many endemic species, both floristic and faunal of great importance for scientific studies; • Due to inaccessibility, some rural natural environments are still unaltered, the anthropogenic footprint being limited; • Rural-thematic festivals take place in PNDVC in order to promote and increase 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The general infrastructure is poorly developed; • Poor condition of unmodernized roads; • Unmodernized technical-material base; • Disinterest of local authorities in promoting responsible tourism in the natural areas of PNDVC; • Low density of poor roads and forest roads; • Mountain trails have a high degree of difficulty; • The stage of conservation and capitalization of natural, cultural and historical sites; • Non-endowment with water network, heating, sewerage; • Poor exploitation of natural resources for ecotourism purposes; • Low investment in environmental technologies.

<p>economic activity;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very strong local identity; • The existence of numerous mountain trails. 	
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PNDVC has an important potential in the field of geodiversity whose responsible exploitation can be beneficial; • Development of the legal framework for rural financing; • There are independent tourists who support the local economy by purchasing local products; • Voluntary organizations whose main purpose is natural environment conservation practices; • Increasing demand for local products; • Development of spa tourism - preferred by tourists of various ages - due to the presence of numerous mineral water reserves; • The natural space is suitable for ecotourism - the existence of camping spaces; • The existence of AER (Romanian Ecotourism Association) supports the development of ecotourism; • Existence of management plans as a tourism development strategy; • In PNDVC there are tourist guides specialized in ecotourism activities; • Encouraging the participation of local agents in profile fairs through which local products and specifics will be promoted; • The existence of elements of architectural and cultural heritage; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The financial funds are insufficient for the administration of the Park; • Not encouraging or not supporting tour operators who have implemented a code of good practice in ecotourism; • There is currently no system for stimulating residents within the Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park or its proximity to engage in tourism activities; • Ecotourism does not have a very good representation in local development strategies; • Viable policies for the conservation and protection of the natural environment are deficient; • Isolation in the territory makes it almost impossible for the economic development of rural areas; • The ageing of the population on the one hand, and on the other hand the migratory movement - the fact that young people leave the hamlets of the Cerna Mountains to the city and do not return, leaving only an aging population; • The practiced tourism is not adequate for a protected area such as Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park, because, most of the times, the protection regime is not observed; • Poaching and intense fishing, destruction of natural habitats.

3.4 The specifics of the isolated rural communities in Cerna Mountains

The concerns and lifestyle of the inhabitants in Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park area have been closely linked to nature for centuries. In order to increase their income sources, the inhabitants of this area speculated on the importance of forests, implicitly of wood processing.

Cornereva commune is located in the South-Eastern part of Caraş-Severin county, in Cornereva-Bogăltin Depression, stretching in the receiving basin of the Belareca river valley and on the slopes of Cerna Mountains.

Cornereva commune totals a number of 40 villages, being thus the largest commune on the Romanian territory as number of component villages. The specificity of this commune is given by the isolated hamlets (*cătune*) on the mountain slopes. Unfortunately, the generalized demographic decline prevails because of migration and population ageing; in 1992, Cornereva had 3,956 inhabitants, reaching only 2,862 inhabitants in 2019. Cerna-Sat village, in the commune of Padeş, is in the same situation. The 9 isolated rural localities inside DCVNP, which totalize only 253 inhabitants, are illustrated in Table no. 4 below:

Table no. 4. Isolated rural communities inside DCVNP

T.A.U. (territorial-administrative unit)	Component villages
CORNEREVA	Dobraia
	Prisăcina
	Cracu-Mare
	Cracu-Teiului
	Ineleţ
	Poiana-Lungă
	Scărişoara
	Țațu
	Cerna-Sat
PADEȘ	

(Source: Integrated Management Plan of DCVNP, p. 103)

A particular interest presents the right side of the Cerna Valley, respectively Vlaşcu Peak in Cerna Mountains and the hamlets spreading here. In this landscape there are several hamlets whose attestation dates back only to the second half of the 20th century, being characterized, at the same time, by a strong dissipation of the households in the form of rooms (*odăi*), sheepfolds (*stâne*), huts (*bordeie*) (Novăcescu, 2006). The slight extension of the arable area denotes a pronounced pastoral and fruit-bearing character of the main traditional activities. The traditional occupations of the inhabitants that present an ecotourism potential include: animal breeding, extensive cultivation of fruit trees (especially plums for the traditional Banat brandy – *țuica* – commercialized at fairs and folklore festivals promoting Cornereva commune in Băile Herculane: the Brandy Festival - *Festivalul Țuicii*), cultivation of plants such as: potatoes, corn, fodder grains.

There are two alignments of hamlets, one on the right side of the Cerna Valley and another in the Belareca Basin, being separated by the Arjana Peak (1512m) and its lower extension of Cornereva. There is a forest road, not modernized, of about 30km also called "main" that starts from Bogăltin and connects all the isolated hamlets from the right slope of the Cerna Valley,

respectively: Cracu Mare, Poiana Lungă, Bedina, Dobraia, Prisăcina and continues with Ineț, Scărișoara, Slătnic, Cracu Teiului and Țațu.

By far, the most culminating point is the route on the vertical slope sector called "La Cârlige"/"La Scărițe" which starts at kilometer 18 from Băile Herculane. This vertical sector has an altitude of 80 meters and is arranged by the locals with four acacia wood stairs fixed on the cliffs of the slope (Fig. 7). This is the shortest access to Scărișoara and Ineț hamlets.



Fig. 7. Wooden stairs halfway to Ineț and people living in the isolated hamlets (Maria Rădulescu, living in one of the few houses from Țațu hamlet)

(Source: Photo by Simona Gheorghiță, June 2019)

Tourism development is endangered and limited by the lack of public utilities in the area, especially electricity, although in many households, locals have improvised small power plants on rivers, and some public institutions such as the church in Ineț, schools in Dobraia and Ineț were equipped with small solar panels. It is worth mentioning that, despite many vicissitudes, the locals have not lost their devotion and love for their hamlets, their birthplaces, which is also the reason for the perpetuation of village traditions and local customs.

For these numerically few inhabitants of the isolated hamlets in Cerna Mountains, subsistence agriculture is the most important and valuable source of livelihood. Several times a year, different traders arrive in the commune of Cornereva and the inhabitants of the most inaccessible hamlets have the availability to buy the most necessary food products. Also, in Ineț, there is a church open only to the most important Christian holidays of the year; this church was built by the locals with their own money and materials, with the common goal of the gratitude they want to show to the divinity they believe in (Fig. 8). Although few in number, these people are characterized by a rare modesty, humility and

gratitude that they do not miss to present to tourists who come to visit them. Unfortunately, these hamlets with a declining population are at risk of extinction. Young people choose to migrate to Băile Herculane, and, in most cases, they do not choose to return, contributing to the pronounced demographic ageing process.



"May you be blessed, those who climb this mountain, and do not forget that God is with you in every moment."



"May God ease your way, good-hearted traveler, soothe your anger and bring you happiness. You are the son of God, he is with you in every moment".

Fig. 8. Banners and crosses that accompany the mountain trails, with unique religious messages

(Source: Photo by Simona Gheorghiță, January 2020)

The tourist potential of Cornereva commune is given by the uniqueness of the landscape, but also by the possibility of practicing sports such as fishing, hunting, hiking etc. But, beyond the scenic beauty, the way of life of the inhabitants of these long-forgotten hamlets, deprived of civilization and modernization, is the most attractive for interested tourists (Fig. 9).

Perhaps the most impressive things you can experience as a tourist, in addition to the peculiarity of ecotourism routes and the natural landscape of Cerna Mountains, are the stories of the locals you meet here. Along the trails are markings with prayers written in pieces of wood and attached to trees. Following the same route that starts from kilometer 18 from Băile Herculane to the church from Ineleş, we meet two paths to the left of the church, which leads to Ineleş Primary School and some scattered settlements, and the path to the right of the church leads to Scărișoara and Țațu hamlets. Before entering Țațu, we meet a mountain spring arranged by the locals where they make their water supplies. Next to the spring is a message of accommodation offer, a so-called tourist product, written on a tablet and fixed in the bark of a tree, in which a family of farmers decided to rent the household of any tourist eager to make a stop and experience the style common life of the several dozen inhabitants of the hamlet. The tourist

offer is based on the accommodation that these people offer, including meals served with food produced by themselves (Fig. 10).



Fig. 9. Wooden bridge over the Cerna river, the starting point of the tourist route to Ineleț

(Source: Photo by Simona Gheorghită, June 2019)



Fig. 10. The unique touristic offer in Scărișoara

(Source: Photo by Simona Gheorghită, October 2018)

3.5 The main motivations in choosing isolated rural destinations - a profile of the tourist visiting Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park

The future of rural space depends on the capitalization of agricultural areas, natural resources, natural heritage, local traditions, agricultural products and arts and crafts (Nistoreanu et al., 2010; Nistoreanu&Ghereș, 2010), which implicitly determines a solution to the problems of socio-economic life of the rural areas: low incomes, rural exodus, loss of local identity, demographic ageing and depopulation,

as it is the case of Cornereva commune in Caraș-Severin county, including the isolated hamlets mentioned above.

Considering these aspects, in order to choose the tourist destination from a natural rural setting, the tourist's motivations are various and important, reflecting the profile of the tourist, but also boosting and conditioning the touristic offers. Mainly, tourists practicing ecotourism are determined by the need to escape from the stress of everyday life, to have a different perspective on life in rural society, to live unique experiences, to develop personally, to gain knowledge, to find people who share the same interests, to meet new people and places.

Regarding the practice of ecotourism in Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park, tourists are aware of environmental issues and their implications, so they have a positive attitude towards nature conservation, but do not generally involve in terms of investments for protection and conservation, donations or taxation for tourist trips within the protected area they visit. Ecotourism in Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park is developing, but in the absence of a well-defined infrastructure, the development of this form of tourism will be difficult.

Because it is a form of niche tourism, ecotourism appeals only to that category of tourists interested in the natural landscape offered by Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park, but a determining factor is the rural specificity of the area as the area is home to some of the most isolated rural settlements in the Romanian area, respectively the hamlets in Cerna Mountains. Most tourists who choose this destination travel organize and plan their trips independently, without consulting specialized agencies in the field of ecotourism, because in most cases they are determined to spend a short time, having as activities photographing the landscape, admiring the fauna and flora, hiking on tourist routes, visiting the isolated local communities inside the park. Moreover,

Following the application of a tourism analysis questionnaire consisting of 15 questions to find out the reasons why tourists choose to spend their holidays in the Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park, the following conclusions were stated:

- among the respondents, 82.9% traveled at least once in Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park, out of which 31.4% traveled in the last 6 months;
- 54.3% of the respondents chose complete tourism services (accommodation and tourism activities);
- regarding the activities carried out in Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park, the respondents of the questionnaire chose a longer a stay that involved the expansion of the visited area and pointed out: hiking (60%), cruises on the Danube (68.6%), historical tours in Băile Herculane (51.4%) as main activities and in a lower extent, respondents also chose tent activities (8.6%) or cycling (8.6%);
- depending on the selected services, most of the respondents of the applied questionnaire (65.7%) would pay between 50 and 150 RON, 25.7% opted for prices between 150 and 250 RON, and 8.6% would be prepared to spend over 250 RON during their stay within the protected area;
- the number of days that most respondents consider optimal for spending a holiday in Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park is 2-3 days (48.6%), followed

by a number of 3-5 days 31.4% of the respondents would spend, while 20% consider that more than 5 days are needed for an ideal vacation in the Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park;

- among responding tourists, 37.1% have a budget of 500 RON to spend their free time during holidays in Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park, 31.4% have a budget between 500 and 1,000 RON and for 14.3% the allocated budget is directly proportional with the tourist services offered to them;

- 85.7% chose summer as the season with the highest availability for travel;

- respondents opted for a relaxing vacation in proportion of 51.4% and the remaining 48.6% chose an active vacation;

- most respondents turned to online for information about the destinations they want to visit;

- regarding the choice of the holiday reservation method; 54.3% opted to pay the rate directly at the hotel/guest house and 28.6% chose online agencies as booking platforms. The rest of the respondents turn to physical tourist agencies;

- regarding the age span, respondents are classified as follows: 45-55 years (25.7%), 35-45 years (22.9%), 18-25 years (22.9%), 25-35 years (14.3%), 55-65 years (14.3%).

Taking into consideration all the answers provided by the respondents to the questionnaire, we can deduce the profile of the tourist who chooses to spend his free time in Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park: higher education, benefits from a medium-high budget for tourism services, wants to buy a tourism package completely, the tourist is passionate about hiking, but is also looking for relaxation, can plan some free time that he/she wants to spend in a natural setting.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The natural protected areas in Romania offer the possibility of practicing responsible tourism and support, to the same extent, the efforts to protect the natural environment, educate tourists in the spirit of sustainable tourism activities and responsible tourism consumption. Accordingly, the sustainable development of tourism in protected natural areas should be a continuous process of improving management quality in the tourist circuit and the ecotourism products that travel agencies sell.

Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park includes several isolated rural communities, settlements in which the main human activities are practiced so as not to endanger the natural balance. These isolated human settlements maintain their natural, long-time preserved balance and in the conditions of technology evolution and modernization, these hamlets have remained intact of any form of modernization. We are talking about places where barter prevails as an exchange of goods, where people still live harmoniously with and in nature. The hospitality with which these people greet any tourist who arrives in their lands is rarely found elsewhere. Unfortunately, these hamlets are declining rapidly, being largely affected by demographic ageing, which could lead to their disappearance if the appropriate measures are not implemented. Domogled-Cerna Valley National Park

has all the necessary natural resources to intensify tourism demand, but development strategies must develop forms of sustainable tourism which are suitable in a protected area.

REFERENCES

BUCKLEY R. (2002), *Case studies in ecotourism*, International Centre for Ecotourism Research Griffith University-Gold Coast, Australia, Cabi Publishing, ISBN 085199 6655, New York, 283 p.

DOROBANȚU M.R., NISTOREANU P. (2012), *Rural tourism and ecotourism—the main priorities in sustainable development orientations of rural local communities in Romania*, Economy Transdisciplinarity Cognition, Vol. XV, Issue 1, 259-266

EAGLES P.F.J., MCCOOL S.F. (2002), *Tourism and national parks and protected areas. Planning and Management*, Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, University of Waterloo-Canada and School of Forestry, The University of Montana-USA, Cabi Publishing, New York, 333 p.

FENNELL D.A. (2015), *Ecotourism*, 4th Edition, Routledge, New York, 357 p.

FENNELL D.A., DOWLING R.K. (2003), *Ecotourism policy and planning*, Routledge, New York, 357 p.

GIURCĂREANU C. (1988), *Populația și așezările rurale din Carpații Românești*, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București

HIGHAM J. (2007), *Critical issues in ecotourism: understanding a complex tourism phenomenon*, ISBN-10: 0-7506-6878-4, Elsevier, 458 p.

HILL JENNIFER, GALE T. (2009), *Ecotourism and Environmental Sustainability. Principles and Practice*, University of the West of England, UK, Ashgate, ISBN 97807546 72623 (hardback), 279 p.

IORDACHE COSTELA (2009), *Geografia populației și așezărilor umane din România*, Editura Universitaria, Craiova

MAZILU MIRELA (2008), *Turismul - o relație privilegiată cu dezvoltarea durabilă*, Revista de marketing online, VOL. I, NR. 4

NISTOREANU P., GHEREȘ MARINELA, HORNOIU R.I., PLĂIAȘ I., TĂNASE M.O. (2010), *Managementul rural al comunităților rurale și turismul*, Editura ASE, București

NISTOREANU P., GHEREȘ MARINELA (2010), *Turism rural. Tratat*, Editura CH Beck, București

NOVĂCESCU PETRONELA ANIȘOARA (2006), *Dinamica așezărilor rurale în bazinul Cernei (rezumatul tezei de doctorat)*, Universitatea din București, Facultatea de Geografie și Geologie, Școala Doctorală Simion Mehedinți

OARCEA Z. (1964), *Valea Cernei – ghid*, Editura Sport-Turism, București

SEBA JAIME (2012), *Ecotourism and sustainable tourism – new perspectives and studies*, Apple Academic Press, 305 p.

TUFESCU V. (1982), *Oameni din Carpați*, Editura Sport-Turism, București

ȚIGU GABRIELA (2002), *Turism montan*, Editura Uranus, București

VERT C. (1995), *Analiza geodemografică*, Editura Mirton, Timișoara

WARNHOLTZ GERDA, BARKIN D. (2017), *Development for whom? Tourism used as a social intervention for the development of indigenous/rural communities in natural protected areas in "Tourism and Ethnodevelopment Inclusion, Empowerment and Self-determination"*, Routledge

*** (1984), *Geografia României. Geografia umană și economică (II)*, Institutul de Geografie, Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, București

*** (1987), *Geografia României. Carpații și Depresiunea Transilvaniei* (III), Institutul de Geografie, Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, București

Integrated Management Plan of DCVNP and Natura 2000 Sites Rosci0069 and Rospa0035, available at: <http://domogled-terna.ro/pm.pdf>

National Institute of Statistics, Tempo online: <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>