REVIEW ARTICLE

Researches on the potential and impact of agrotourism upon the economic and social-cultural development of rural areas in the South-West of Romania

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Abstract
The paper has the main purpose of highlighting the need to implement and develop agrotourism activities in the South-West area of Romania. For this, the researchers team has performed a through and long study in the region and clearly and realistically revealed which are the favourable factors, weak points, strong points and the impact of agrotourism in economic and social-cultural development. Also the study, analysis and interpretation of the research results have lead to the conclusion that the agrotourism activity has a very significant role in the sustainable development of rural localities, because by rationally using all resources, decreasing and eliminating waste, providing environment preservation and protection, by decreasing the process of removing agricultural and forest fields in the agricultural and forest circuit, no prejudices are brought to the natural and built environment.

Key words: agrotourism, impact, sustainable development, environment protection.

Introduction
At the basis of this work there were the various studies and researches developed by the agrotourism professors of the Agronomy Faculty in Craiova, during 10 years of activity in the field, developed mainly in the South-West of Romania, in the historical province with the generic name of Oltenia. Also, in understanding, gathering, analyzing and interpreting the results of the research, a contribution has been made by the expertise together with some French experts, within an international project, aiming the professional training of several workers in the field of agrotourism. From the collaboration to them, we have established that France has a special experience in this field, worth studying. Agrotourism in France appeared in the ‘50s, by creating accommodation places, which is complementary to the one developed in agricultural exploitations. French rural is rich through its cultural and historical patrimony (Moinet, 2006). The agrotouristic capitalization possibilities are various from the rural gîte (touristical structures specific to the french rural turism) or the guests rooms to the actual activities like the inn farm or equestrian farm. At the same time an agreement has been reached as well as the definition of the notion of agrotourism, created and developed at an agricultural exploitation. The concept of agrotourism was created immediately after the crises in agriculture, being a complementary activity, exclusively applied by farmers (Deshons, 2006).

In our country, unlike France, it is difficult to identify the beginning of the agrotourism activity, almost in all ages, especially after cities have become a special part of communities, localities, the urban population “escaped” always in rural spaces where they met their relatives, where they had the so called “country house” but where they could also find their peace in the middle of nature. Agrotourism was practically ignored until the
beginning of 1990, due to the interdiction to accommodate foreign citizens in private persons’ houses (Glăvan, 2002). The concept of rural tourism, with accommodation at touristic pensions and agrotouristic pensions or other reception structures have developed after December 1989. The first rural touristic activities, under the market economy conditions appeared around Rucăr, Bran, Moeciu, areas, rapidly extending around Bârsa, Dorna, Maramureș, Apuseni Mountains, Sibiu and Cluj surroundings. After 1989, as resulting from the short history, the agrotourism activity in our country has been under continuous development, but unfortunately the south-west area of the country has remained a little behind, mainly due to the existent of a little favorable environment in some counties and a weakly developed infrastructure. This is why, a special role in the implementation, popularization, and development of this activity in the area is held by local authorities and experts in the faculty’s agrotourism subject, that have permanently followed and monitored possibilities, achievements and prospects (Călina, 2008).

Material and methods

Researches have focused on the south-west region of the country, located between 22°2’-24°2’ meridians and 43°3’-45°3’ parallels, with a surface over 29212 km², meaning 12.25 % of the entire surface of Romania. As a geographic position, the region occupies the location near the immediate neighborhood of the Carpathians to the north of Danube, with the following borders: - north and north-west Alba, Hunedoara and Sibiu Counties; - east Arges and Teleorman Counties; - west Caras – Severin County; - south and south west, Bulgaria and Serbia. Regarding the administrative and territorial organization, the researched area includes 5 counties (Dolj, Gorj, Mehedinți, Olt, Vâlcea), with its localities structured as follows: - 32 municipalities and towns, of which 11 municipalities, 387 communes and 2080 villages.

Researches carried in more than 10 years of activity have focused mainly on the 3 interdependent elements of agrotourism and rural tourism:

- attraction to the beauties of nature, news, the greatness and events specific to country life;
- accommodation and meal, without desiring to reach the standards of a hotel, but with quality and hospitality;
- transport, access ways to rural environment are the main elements for providing a continuous flow of tourists.

In this sense, after comparing and analyzing the internal and external market of agrotourism and rural tourism, the area is particularized by:

*Natural environment:* landscape diversity from the plane forms of the Danube to the steep peaks of the Meridional Carpathians; mountainous environment with natural, not altered contents; hydrography represented by the numerous flows of water - (Jiu, Olt) from North to South, and from West to East to the Danube. Danube is a significant regional source following the South border for a distance of 417 km; the area climate (temperate - continental) is generally warmer comparing to the regions from the centre and North of the country; three areas rich in mineral waters: in Mehedinți (Bala, Schela Cladovei, Gura Văii); in Gorj (Săcelu), in Vâlcea (Govora, Călimănești - Căciulata, Băile Olănești); rich flora with over 900 plants of which 300 of them are rare (the largest forest of eatable chestnut - Tismana, the savage lilac forest at Ponoare-20 ha, Natural Parks Domogled, Cozia, Porțile de fier); various fauna with unique species and ecosystems;
Position and accessibility: attractive geographic position between the Danube and Carpathians; the region is crossed by 3 European Roads (10 000 km roads): E 70; E 79; E 81; 4th European Corridor; 5 harbors’ at the Danube and Craiova International Airport.

Economic, social and cultural framework: agriculture and silviculture represents 51.2 % of the economic activities of the population in the region; mainly rural population - 54.6 % of the region population lives in the countryside; the representative ethnographic centers of the region are: Horezu, Vaideeni, Polovragi, Ţepeşen, Bărbateşti, Somăneşti; from the cultural point of view, the thesaurus is completed with museums, memorial houses, historical monuments, laic, religious art, archaeological sites, etc.; the area is also considered a land of monasteries, churches and hermitages, being the second region after Moldavia, as number and significance.

For developing a realistic, documented and pertinent research in the activity of agrotourism and rural tourism in the area, experts from the Agriculture Faculty in Craiova, based on their expertise together with foreign experts have analyzed, studied and correctly interpreted the results of the research, producing several discussions, recommendations and conclusions, aiming the development and impact upon the rural space.

Results and discussion
After interpreting the results of the studies and researches, the authors noticed that the agrotourism activity in the south-west of Romania, as well as the level of the entire country is poorly diversified and specialized, aiming a small number of touristic activities and ways of spending spare time. This is why, in order to further develop agrotourism in this area and at the level of the entire country respectively, it is necessary to follow a new series of examples and adapt them to the actual conditions, developed mainly in the European Union, with a rich and great experience. From the experience gathered in France, knowing the agrotourism organization and development within two of the best networks in France (bienvenue à la ferme” and ” accueil paysan”), we considered that their organization and operation pattern will adjust very well in the researched area. Still, for being able to be implemented with important results at the level of the south-west region and at the level of the entire country, it should be completed with visions and experiences from other European countries, so that a large level of diversification and specialization be reached, focusing mainly on the following activities of agrotourism: – direct sale of the farm’s products;– in type farms; – pedagogic farms;– children’s teaching and holidays farms; – equestrian farms;– camping farms; – accommodation in the peasant’s house or farms; – meals in peasants’ houses or farms; – reception in peasants’ houses or farms;

Also, due to the numerous studies and researches carried at the level of the area, the analysis of the weak and strong points has been developed, upon the possibilities to implement and develop agrotourism, revealing the points very clearly as follows:

weak points: the network of roads, railways, rivers networks and airlines which is not enough developed and modernized, in comparison to the possibilities of evolution and development of the touristic activity in the area; the small number of accommodation structures in the rural environment; the lack of technical and urbanity endowments for increasing the degree of comfort and hygiene in the rural space without leading to aggressive urbanization; the lack of facilities for pensions owners who have the opportunity to develop ecologic agricultural farms, according to European standards; the influence of other fields of activity – strong dependence of subsistence agriculture, practiced by aged population and retires population from the urban environment; consolidation of the cheap offer perception against the quality one; non-correlation of
minimum professional training with the current requirements of agrotourism in EU, (pensions owners cannot be turned into real hotel owners over the night).

- **strong points:** the very special, picturesque and varied natural environment – beginning with the Danube meadow and terraces to the high peaks of the Carpathians; the temperature continental climate with a slight Mediterranean influence – warmer winters and hot summers; hydrography – represented by numerous flows of water and lakes, completed with important springs of mineral and thermal waters; the forest and cyngegetic fund composed of a large range of trees and animals; rich and varied flora and fauna, from one relief unit to another; significant agricultural surfaces owners, with a high percentage of humus – on which ecologic or natural farms can be established – with agro-alimentary products of a high quality; the existence of representative viticulture areas, with possibilities to taste wines and drinks prepared in households; original, varied, personalized, organized touristic offer managed by the people of the village; - the need for low investments for arranging infrastructure and general endowments; harmony, purity and beauty of rural life; peasants’ hospitality, gastronomic habits, craftsmanship and village rituals; rest, fresh air, fresh food consumption (including treatment with vegetables and fruit); opportunity to practice attractive touristic activities - sports, horse riding, hunting, sport fishing, climbing and travelling; popular art, religion, unaltered Christian habits, the possibility to be in the middle of the place specific events (fests, fairs, festivals, even physical labour therapy); traditional architecture, both of villages and “pensions” is an attraction point for visitors; cultural thesaurus – very well history of monasteries, churches, historical and natural monuments, sites, museums, memorial houses, fortified houses, ceramics processing centers and craftsmanship objects workshops, etc.

This analysis reveals that although in the researched area, we have met numerous weak points, they are not a restrictive factor regarding the implementation and development of agrotourism activities, because their impact upon the area is low, comparing to that of strong points, which are and shall further be aces and attractions in the future evolution of the south-west area of Romania. We have also noticed that the area began to be agreed by tourists and investors more and more, because they are currently looking for new things, with unaltered landscape and environment, real oaks of peace and enjoyment, where one can escape the daily noise and pollution.

The most significant role of agrotourism in the area is its very strong impact upon the economic and social-cultural life of the rural space that was lost during the communist period from almost all points of view. The beneficial effects of this activity are visible, rapid and significant, occurring at the level of the Romanian rural space, through:

- acquiring new professional skills, different from the one of farmer – in the field of touristic services;
- maintaining and perpetuating traditional professions and crafts like: pottery, artisanal processing of wood and skin, sewing, glass painting, craftsmanship and embroidery, etc;
- preventing the population exodus from rural areas to urban ones, especially young population, due to the lack of occupation;
- increasing the number of jobs;
- substantial decrease of unemployment rate in the rural space;
- significant growth of the jobs percentage, occupied by women, attracted in the activity of agrotourism;
- increasing the incomes of farms and country households in such an activity;
- increasing the living level of inhabitants in rural areas has developed rapidly and sustainably;
- considerable growth of the number and volume of investments in the area – in infrastructure, agriculture, trade, services and tourism;
- direct source of capital and modernization of agricultural exploitations, because incomes get directly to the families of farmers;
- substantial decrease of the difference between the living way in rural environment comparing to the urban one;
- the possibility for an efficient capitalization of architecture, civilisation, religion, art and culture elements expressing a certain cultural identity and developing tolerance spirit;
- increasing the level of education, culture and civilization of village inhabitants, because by practicing agrotourism, they have to study, be informed, and perfect themselves continuously, for increasing the level of expectations of the guests coming from different social environments and countries;
- capitalizing specific products from agriculture and traditional gastronomy in the region;
- recovering the agricultural urbanity patrimony and capitalizing cultural traditions from the rural world;
- providing durable and sustainable development of rural localities by rational use of all resources, reducing and cancelling waste, their recycling, providing environment conservation and protection, decreasing the removal process of agricultural and forest fields from the agricultural and forest circuit;

From what we have presents so far, we can notice that agrotourism has a special part regarding the further development and evolution of the south-west area of Romania, and the researches have highlighted clearly and realistically the strong influence and impact on all the fields of activity.

Conclusions

Based on the researches made by the expert’s team, the conclusion has been reached that the agrotourism activity in rural localities it has been implemented and developed in, has an extremely important role of relaunching and granting dynamism upon the entire group of economic, social, cultural and spiritual factors in the area. Its impact in the south-west area of Romania upon the evolution and development as a whole is extremely powerful and representative, and can be considered a real engine of the economic and social-cultural development of villages. We have also noticed the fact that an alarm signal has to be drawn regarding the irrational and irresponsible development that could eventually lead to a real industrialization, depersonalization and devalorization of this concept of tourism. For this, at the entire level of the region, of the country and of the entire European Union, a series of strategies and mutual development programs have to be developed, good thought and coherent, for providing implementation and development for this activity, based on precise, clear and realistic regulations, so that by enforcing them, the people in the region cannot damage the natural and built environment in any way.

References