

ECOTOURISM. PRESENT AND FUTURE

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Abstract. Mass tourism practiced during the last half of the century has generated a spectacular economic growth, tourism industry presently representing the first *industry* worldwide. However, this activity has also triggered negative impact upon the most visited tourist attractions. In response to these negative actions, there emerged other forms of tourism with less impact on tourist sights. Among these forms of tourism, starting with 1983 there appeared ecotourism. This represents a form of travel that respects and investigates attractions and state of local people within their natural areas through eco-volunteering.

Keywords: tourism, ecotourism, eco-volunteering, permafrost.

Rezumat. Ecoturismul. Prezent și viitor. Turismul de masă practicat în ultima jumătate de secol a generat o creștere economică spectaculoasă, activitatea turistică reprezentând în prezent prima *industrie* a planetei. Dar, această activitate a determinat și impacte negative asupra obiectivelor turistice vizitate. Ca reacție la acțiunile negative sesizate au apărut în timp și alte forme de turism cu mai puțin impact asupra obiectivelor turistice. Dintre aceste forme de turism s-a evidențiat, începând din anul 1983, ecoturismul. Acesta reprezintă o formă de călătorie care respectă și cercetează în spațiile naturale, obiectivele vizitate și starea populației locale, prin ecovoluntariat.

Cuvinte cheie: turism, ecoturism, ecovoluntariat, permafrost.

Tourism, as a form of travel of a person aims at relaxing, knowing and admiring natural and man-made attractions: mountain summits, caves, waterfalls, natural or anthropogenic landscapes, rare plants and animals, ancient and medieval remains, churches and monasteries, monuments of architecture and art, museums, memorial houses, farmhouses, economic, technical objectives, etc. (FREIDEL, 1980; NICULESCU, 1997; STĂNESCU, 1993; VOICA, 2002).

Globally, tourists' number exceeded 1.6 billion persons in 1997, and, it is expected to reach over 5 billion in 2017. Presently, tourism represents the first *industry* of the planet as more than 200 million men and women work in this field. According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO), tourism activity represents the first source of dividends in more than one third of the countries; it is among the first five categories of exports in 83% of the countries, generating between 3 and 5% of the world GDP.

In case of less developed countries, international tourism may confer considerable economic benefits. However, mass tourism practiced between 1960 and 1980 triggered negative impacts upon the environment (waste, pollution, landscape deterioration, etc.) (HALIOUA & CABOUT, 2001; PINCE, 2007). Parallel to the growth of tourism it has developed clandestine trade with various rare animals or their products (skins, shells of molluscs, ivory, rhino horn, feathers, stuffed animals, etc.). These challenges have jeopardized the survival of many rare species (SEAGER, 1993; NEACȘU & NEACȘU, 1994).

As a reaction to the excesses of mass tourism there have lately emerged new and less harmful forms of tourism, which take into account the conservation and protection of visited tourist attractions. Thus, in 1995, it appeared sustainable tourism, which, according to its Charter, has to be ecologically bearable in long time, economically viable, ethically and socially equitable for the local populations (PINCE, 2007).

Responsible tourism aims at respecting the development of ecological and social practices. In 1999, the World Tourism Organization elaborated a global code of ethics for tourism (PINCE, 2007).

Solitary tourism is based on the principle of solidarity both in the organizational system and in the size and structure of the market or exchange and investment instruments (PINCE, 2007).

Rural tourism represents the tourism in rural areas, consisting of three main independent elements:

- attraction to natural beauty, charm and specific events of country life;
- accommodation and meals, even if they are not at hotel standards, have to be of high quality and offered with hospitality;
- transport, access roads to rural areas is vital to ensure a continuous flow of tourists.

For a good collaboration between countries with tradition in rural tourism, in 1990, it was created the European Federation for Rural Tourism, in Strasbourg, which brought together 24 rural tourism associations from 18 European countries.

In Romania, the first rural tourism activities occurred in the early 1967 – 1968 for tourist groups visiting the Romanian coast of the Black Sea and the Danube Delta. In 1982, according to an Order of the Ministry of Tourism, the Research Centre for the Promotion of International Tourism, identified and selected the representative villages on the territory of the Romania. This study established that 118 rural settlements can be introduced in domestic and international tourism. Starting with 1973, by the Order 774 of the Ministry of Tourism, 13 rural settlements were declared experimental tourist attractions: Lerești, Rucăr (Argeș County), Fundata (Ialomița County), Șirnea, Sibiel, Rășinari (Sibiu County), Tismana (Gorj County), Vaideeni (Vâlcea County), Halmagiu (Hunedoara County), Bogdan Vodă (Maramureș County), Vatra Moldoviței (Suceava County), Murighiol and Sfântul Gheorghe (Tulcea County) (CIOBOIU, 2005; VOICA, 2000).

Ecotourism was defined in 1983 by the Mexican architect and urbanist HC Lascurian as a form of tourism that consists in visiting relatively intact or less disturbed areas, for research purposes, admiring the scenery, flora and fauna, and cultural past and present aspects - inherent in a given place.

In 1991, the International Society of Tourism formulated a new definition stating that: *Ecotourism is the responsible travel form in natural areas that contributes to environmental protection and welfare of the local population* (PINCE, 2007). This form of tourism involves individual trips or those trips organized in small groups. Small-scale activity promotes the observation of visited attractions, as well as the study and understanding of the environment and its inhabitants; the educational dimension is of great importance.

Ecotourism favourably influences on the development of local communities and the environment; it generates local resources, part of which is devoted to the management and protection of natural habitats and species. The traveller has the opportunity to know protected nature, preferably in the hotspots of the world biodiversity – mountains, deserts, plains, forests, etc. Ecotourists, traveling in small groups, strive to leave no other footprint behind them but their steps (PINCE, 2007).

Currently, ecotourists represent about 5% of all tourists in the world and the number of protected areas that can be visited is estimated at 30,300, totalizing a surface of 13.2 million sq km or 10% of the world land area.

In Romania, there are 155 parks and scientific reserves that can be visited by ecotourists (NEACȘU & APOSTOLACHE, 1982).

WTO defined a series of indicators that allow the estimation of the costs and environmental benefits of tourism:

- The indicator of maximum number of persons that may visit a tourist attraction;
- The indicator of the disturbance of the tourist attraction that allows us to assess the level of environmental impact, according to its natural and ecological peculiarities;
- The indicator of ecological perturbation meant to estimate the natural ecological disturbances of the visited tourist objective according to tourist attractiveness, evolution and frequency.

The application of these indicators provides a correct ecological surveillance of the visited landmarks (PINCE, 2007).

Eco-volunteering and protection of the world patrimony. Ecotourism can influence the growth and mass protection of tourist attractions, due to the fact that the participants in this type of tourism are attached to what they visit and many of them even participate in the restoration and their protection. This action resulted in eco-volunteering, namely many tourists participate voluntarily and without payment, along with specialists, in the restoration and maintenance of the visited objectives. The Italian NGO TETHYS whose objective is the protection of the marine environment, involved thousands of volunteers in its campaigns of study and protection of dolphins and whales. Eco-volunteers in this action have gained a better understanding of the environmental issues and an awareness of the studied animals.

Coral protection. The Great Barrier Reef from Australia is the largest marine protected area. This area of global importance allowed eco-volunteers to participate in coral research, working with researchers from EARTHWACH ecological organization. The mission of this organization was to dive for sampling and identification of those corals, which have a fluorescent protein with applications in medicine and in the survival of threatened coral communities.

Protection of Przewalski horse. Przewalski horse was found in its natural environment in Mongolia in 1970. The first specimens bred in captivity by eco-volunteers and specialists from the Netherlands and Germany were transported in Mongolia in 1992. In France, Przewalski Horse Association, created in 1990, was concerned with the breeding and release of this animal into nature. Ten years later, in the years 2004 – 2005, 22 specimens were taken in Mongolia. And in this action, the role of eco-volunteers was obvious.

Setting up Jatun Sacha Reserve. To promote research and education in environment and ecology, the state Ecuador in South America, founded Jatun Sacha Foundation. This foundation created in NAPO province Jatun Sacha Reserve (Great Forest), with an area of 2,500 hectares. In the reserve, the foundation allowed eco-volunteers to participate in research programs on nature.

In 2005, the foundation received 800 Ecuadorian and five foreign eco-volunteers who freely participated in the research projects initiated by the reserve administration. Eco-volunteers performed numerous works in the forest: tree planting, experimenting with some new species, collecting seeds, etc. Thus, in the greenhouse and garden of the foundation, there harmoniously combined the work of scientists and eco-volunteers.

Research of the Arctic coast. Along the Arctic coast of Canada, there is a strip of bogs, currently under intense scrutiny by specialists due to global warming. These bogs contain up to 20% terrestrial carbon contained in permafrost (frozen ground all year). Due to global warming, the soil will thaw and release large amounts of CO₂ and methane gas into the atmosphere. New environmental changes may lead to the emergence and development of plants that can contribute to carbon fixation. University of Alberta in Canada supports by eco-volunteering the collection of scientific data needed to predict environmental reaction to global warming.

Eco-volunteering actions are taken in other tourist spots in the world and aims at: protection of turtles in Madagascar and Senegal, protection of orangutans in Borneo island, regeneration of forests in Vietnam, opening sites of history and architecture for the protection of the medieval heritage in Belgium and France; discovery and preservation of aboriginal culture and history of Australia, development and preservation of cultural centres and national parks in India, etc. (PINCE, 2007).

CONCLUSIONS

Presently, there are many forms of tourism: sustainable, responsible, solitary, rural, ecological, etc.

Among these forms, the first position is held by eco-tourism, which, among other objectives, aims at the volunteer collaboration between tourists and experts in different fields of activity, such as protection, restoration and prosperity of visited tourist attractions.

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