

# ASPECTS REGARDING THE PROMOTION OF ECOTOURISM TO CONSUMERS

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## Abstract

*The environment is a key factor for the success of the tourism industry. If we consider nature a product of the tourism industry, it is obvious that the product will no longer be purchased by consumers, if it begins to have a low quality. This is why all stakeholders of the tourism business should be aware of the importance of preserving the environment and natural resources. Hence the need to promote and stimulate ecotourism consumption.*

*Ecotourism combines the pleasure of discovering and learning about fauna, flora, and spectacular cultural sites with educational accents, environmental, and local community benefits. Ecotourism that is properly designed and managed leads to a balance between nature conservation and the need for tourism development.*

*Due to growing demand, the eco-tourism market is becoming more and more diverse, so for businesses operating or seeking to operate in this market the need to know the behavior of ecotourists is becoming increasingly important in order to „manipulate” more efficiently both the ecotourist and his experience. Thus, understanding the needs and attitudes of ecotourists who spend their holidays in protected areas can contribute to the development of tourism marketing strategies and plans. In this context, the following paper reveals some important aspects regarding the characteristics of ecotourists behavior together with solutions that marketers can apply to stimulate the consumption of ecotourism.*

**Keywords:** *tourism marketing, consumer behavior, ecotourism, sustainable marketing, green marketing.*

## 1. Introduction

Tourism specialists are assigning the emergence of alternative forms of tourism, such as sustainable tourism, cultural tourism, adventure tourism, ecotourism, etc., to the significant negative impact of mass tourism on the environment, the economy and the socio-cultural elements of society. Among the forms of alternative tourism, ecotourism is distinguished as an option to mass tourism leading to an economic development using and protecting the natural resources of an area.

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Ecotourism combines the pleasure of discovering and learning about fauna, flora, and spectacular cultural sites with educational accents, environmental, and local community benefits. Ecotourism that is properly designed and managed leads to a balance between nature conservation and the need for tourism development.

Demand for ecotourism appeared also due to changes in the behavior of tourists who began to focus towards more individualistic, intense experiences, and as a result the consumer feels "enriched", at the expense of mass tourism. Thus, understanding the needs and

attitudes of ecotourists who spend their holidays in protected areas can contribute to the development of tourism marketing strategies and plans.

## 2. Ecotourism and its current prospects

The tourism industry is one of the main driving forces of the global economy, playing an important role in regional and tourism destinations development. A successful tourism activity can generate significant external exchanges, population employment and many opportunities for local communities. However, despite the benefits, mass tourism has a negative long-term impact, causing environmental and socio-cultural degradation. In the process of finding solutions to balance the negative and positive effects of mass tourism, ecotourism, a symbiosis between environmental conservation and the maintenance of tourism as a profit-generating industry has been developed.

Two categories of tourism activity can be delimited. First, there is mass tourism that represents the activity of a large group of people looking for a replica of their own culture in an organized setting. In other words, mass tourism is the traditional travel in which tourists are visiting places that have a certain link with their culture (the same country or a similar country). The second form of tourism is called alternative tourism, representing tourism activity carried out in a sustainable manner. Ecotourism is one of the socially and environmentally benign alternative forms of tourism, representing, according to The International Ecotourism Society, that form of

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responsible tourism carried out in natural areas that protects the environment and improves the living standards of the local population.

Ecotourism is that segment of the tourism industry that attracts environmental conscious individuals, having a low impact on the environment and at the same time contributing to local economic activity. Also, ecotourism is a sustainable alternative to mass tourism involving:

- Traveling to a natural area with a traditional culture;
- Profit reinvested in local environmental protection activity and in the involvement of the local population;
- Assimilation of the principles of biodiversity conservation by the local population and tourists by minimizing the impact of visitors and promoting the education of tourists;
- Visiting relatively protected natural areas to enjoy nature.

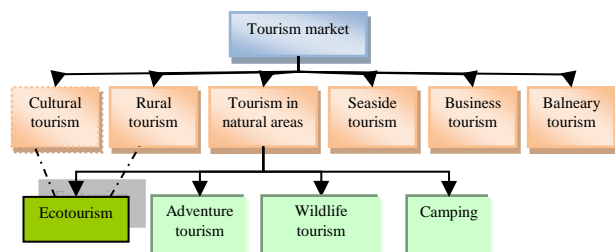
Since the 1980s, ecotourism has become one of the fastest-growing segments in the tourism industry with an annual growth rate of 5%, reaching 5-10% of the global tourism market<sup>1</sup>.

The main principles underpinning ecotourism are represented by:

- Non-destructive use;
- Protecting and restoring biodiversity;
- Promoting environmental sustainable development;
- Education and awareness;
- Direct economic benefits for the local population, combating poverty;
- Health and well-being for all parties involved.

Figure 1 shows how ecotourism integrates into the wider tourism market. Thus, ecotourism is a segment of tourism carried out in natural areas alongside adventure tourism, camping and wildlife tourism. In addition, ecotourism is linked to cultural and rural tourism, distinguishing itself to a certain extent from tourism developed in natural areas.

Figure no. 1. The place of ecotourism within the tourism market



Source: Nistoreanu, P. (coordinator), Tigu, G., Popescu, D., Pădurean, M., Talpeș, A., Tala, M., Condulescu, C., 2000,

*Ecotourism and rural tourism*, ASE Publishing House, Bucharest, pp.80

Among the ecotourism activities we can include<sup>2</sup>:

- adventure activities such as rafting, canoeing, equestrian tourism on pre-arranged routes, bicycle trips on arranged trails, etc.);
- guided trips/hikes;
- trips for nature (flora, fauna) observation;
- trips for nature conservation activities;
- trips to local communities (visiting cultural objectives and traditional farms, watching traditional cultural events, eating traditional food, buying traditional non-food products etc.).

Activities that are carried out in nature but have a clear negative impact on the natural or socio-cultural environment cannot be considered as being ecotouristic activities. Ecotourism focuses on local culture, wildlife adventure, volunteering, personal development, and the assimilation of a new way of living on this vulnerable planet.

Ecotourism is not a marketing plan and it is not a scenic journey in nature, it is an approach that creates a variety of high quality tourism products, environmentally friendly or environmentally sustainable, economically viable and socially and psychologically acceptable.

The ecotourism product varies between two extremes, represented on the one hand by products focused on various elements of an ecosystem, such as the wolves of the Zarnesti reservation or the bison within the various reserves in Romania (Slivut-Hateg Bison Reserve, "Valea Zimbrilor" Bison Reserve etc.), and on the other hand, by products covering the whole ecosystem from a certain area (holistic products).

Romania's ecotourism potential is significant if we take into consideration the fact that our country is the only European country in which 5 (alpine, continental, panonic, steppe and pontic) of the 11 European biogeographical regions can be found, the (still!) low level of natural resources exploitation compared to other European regions, 47% of the country's territory is represented by natural and semi-natural ecosystems with a great diversity of flora and fauna reflected by the 783 identified types of habitats in 261 analyzed areas across the country with 3700 plant species, of which 23 are declared nature monuments, 39 are endangered, 171 are vulnerable and 1,253 are rare together with 33,792 species of animals. In Romania there are 28 major protected natural areas of national interest represented by the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, 13 national parks and 14 natural parks, the total area of protected natural surface in Romania (excluding Natura 2000 sites) covering over 7% of the terrestrial area of the country. Along with the

<sup>1</sup> Percy, D.H., Story, W.K., 2013, *Exploring the Role of the Public Policy in Promoting Holistic Ecotourism*, Journal of Applied Business and Economics, Vol. 15, No 2, pp. 9-16, [http://www.na-businesspress.com/JABE/PercyDH\\_Web15\\_2\\_.pdf](http://www.na-businesspress.com/JABE/PercyDH_Web15_2_.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Tudorache, D. (coordinator), 2009, *National Strategy for Ecotourism Development in Romania – Phase I*, National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism, [http://www.mdrl.ro/\\_documente/turism/studii\\_strategii/ecoturism\\_faza1.pdf](http://www.mdrl.ro/_documente/turism/studii_strategii/ecoturism_faza1.pdf)

natural environment, Romania benefits from a rich original and authentic ethnographic and folkloric potential<sup>3</sup>.

Despite the important tourism potential represented by various natural resources and the cultural heritage of our country, ecotourism is still under-exploited due to poor local cooperation, poor development of infrastructure for ecotourism activities carried out in the protected areas, poor promotional activities, rather limited and undiversified offer, poor staff training in the field, etc. In addition, ecotourism is an area almost unknown to Romanian travel agencies<sup>4</sup>.

Forecasting studies show that in 2020 there will be 1.5 billion international tourism travels and Central and Eastern Europe will exceed the volume of tourism services in Western Europe. In this respect, strategic investments in tourism are being made in Romania, concentrated mainly in the Prahova Valley and Poiana Braşov, on the Black Sea coast and in the Danube Delta. Business development in tourism will, however, depend on the quality of the natural environment, representing a priority for managers and marketers from tourism companies<sup>5</sup>.

And if we take into account the World Tourism Organization's forecasts on tourism trends within the timeframe spanning up to 2020, according to which the number of tourists concerned about environmental protection will increase, we can consider ecotourism to have a spectacular evolution during the next period. Taking this into consideration, we can conclude that studying tourists' behavior should be considered an extremely important activity by ecotourism operators. By understanding the reasons and their impact on the intentions of ecotourists, operators can develop better offers for specific tourists' needs, and at the same time manage more effectively the relationship between product development and the environment of the ecotourism destination. Also, beyond sightseeing, opportunities for other forms of ecotourism support can be identified, such as volunteering and making donations. And last but not least, consumers can be persuaded to choose an eco-tourism product through adequate promotion.

### 3. Ecotourists and their behavior

According to specialists, the most important feature of ecotourism and, by extension, of ecotourists, is the protection of natural resources. Ecotourism emphasizes on the sustainable development of the environment and a responsible behavior towards the environment is a mechanism for environmental conservation. The environmentally responsible

behavior of tourists contributes to limiting or preventing the destruction of the environment. Thus, behaviors such as volunteering within an environmental conservation association, adherence to ecotourism principles, and consumption of local products can give us an idea of who is a "true" ecotourist and who is not. Ecotourists are those tourists who are guided in the travel choices and their participation in those trips by the principles of ecotourism. The current ecotourist cherishes nature and a clean environment, and at the same time understands the local population and its culture. The ecotourist has a sustainable lifestyle even when traveling.

Ecotourists are individuals who show increased intellectual curiosity and seek to enjoy in depth the experience offered by the destination, being, according to some studies, mainly women, having a medium age and a high level of education and income. Also, the ecotourist is an experienced, more aware and active traveler in terms of environmental protection preferring individual tourism or in groups of up to 25 people and low-capacity accommodation. Ecotourists are individuals who visit a natural area with the intention to observe, learn and experience nature.

Also, according to studies conducted in this field in which the premises of Maslow's theory on the hierarchy of needs were applied, it is clear that the future intentions of ecotourists are motivated to a significant extent by higher needs, such as the need for self-esteem or the need for personal development (fulfillment).

On the other hand, there are marketers who consider that tourists engaged in ecotourism range from "real" ecotourists ("hard" ecotourists) to occasional tourists visiting a destination to experience something new or fashionable ("soft" ecotourists). For "hard" ecotourists, the satisfaction of participating in ecotourism activities and environmental observation has a much greater significance than the satisfaction derived from the high level of services offered, unlike "soft" ecotourists where the situation is reversed. Clearly, in this context, the approach of different ecotourists categories must be done on the basis of different marketing strategies, which does not necessarily imply the creation of sustainable tourism offers.

There are also opinions that argue that ecotourists can be divided into two groups: "born ecotourists" and "made ecotourists". "Born ecotourists" are those visitors who have an internal predisposition to in-kind travels, while "made ecotourists" are those visitors who are not familiar with this type of tourism but can be involved in ecotourism through an effective marketing activity. This classification points to the fact that even

<sup>3</sup> Tudorache, D. (coordinator), 2009, *National Strategy for Ecotourism Development in Romania – Phase I*, National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism, [http://www.mdrl.ro/\\_documente/turism/studii\\_strategii/ecoturism\\_faza1.pdf](http://www.mdrl.ro/_documente/turism/studii_strategii/ecoturism_faza1.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Ban, O.I., Iacobaş, P., Nedelea, A.M., 2016, *Marketing research regarding tourism business readiness for eco-label achievement (case study: Natura 200 Crişul Repede Gorge – Pădurea Craiului Pass Site, Romania)*, Ecoforum, Vol. 5, Issue 1, pp. 224-234, <http://www.ecoforumjournal.ro/index.php/eco/article/view/359/225>

<sup>5</sup> Gherman, M.C., Butnaru, G.I., 2012, *Tourism Marketing Management Company Ecological Role*, Romanian rural tourism in the context of sustainable development, Volume I, Issue 1, pp. 169-180

tourists unfamiliar with ecotourism can participate in eco-trips and can thus be called eco-tourists. In addition, the likelihood of identifying themselves with the concept of ecotourism will increase.

Experts in the field even argue that there is little evidence to suggest that the notion of ecotourist is qualitatively different from that of a mass tourist in terms of motivation to choose ecotourism over other forms of tourism.

The Master Plan for National Tourism Development in Romania 2007-2026 states that the number of foreign ecotourists who visit our country ranges from 10,000-25,000. Also, in 2014, the vast majority of tourists accommodated in the accommodation facilities of the Ecotourism Association of Romania - AER members (data from a number of 15 hostels) came from Romania (55%), Great Britain (13%), Germany (7.3%), France (3.5%), etc. with an average stay of 2.41 days/tourist. In the same year, the majority of tourists participating in the programs offered by AER members (data from a total of 20 tour operators) came from Romania (22.5%), Germany (21.4%), Great Britain (21.1%), Austria (3.0%), Belgium (5.6%), Switzerland (2.5%), Hungary (2.0%), etc.

In our country, however, a passive and casual ecotourism is practiced by "mass tourists" as part of a holiday with different objectives. Thus, the categories of tourists visiting Romania's national/natural parks are represented by: weekend tourists, tourists practicing religious tourism, tourists practicing sport fishing, mountain tourists, adventure tourists, researchers, pupils, students (scientific tourism), cyclotourists, etc. The vast majority of Romanian tourists are not interested in adopting a sustainable lifestyle or in supporting tourism products in this category.

#### 4. To do's in marketing regarding ecotourists' behavior

The marketing applied in the field of ecotourism falls within the category of social marketing, given that in practice this approach is an attempt to mediate between tourists' preferences and the long-term interests of the host community. In the category of tools and strategies commonly used to boost sustainable tourism consumption, such as eco-tourism, we can usually find rewards, eco-certification, awareness and educational campaigns<sup>6</sup>.

The success of marketing in ecotourism is reflected not by the number of tourists visiting a

particular destination but by the level of consumer satisfaction and their intention to return in the future<sup>7</sup>.

**Information** is essential for the success of the ecotourism industry. In order to choose the destination to which they want to go and the various services they wish to purchase (accommodation, transport, activities and routes, etc.) consumers need information. On the other hand, in order to develop a sustainable tourism-oriented consumer behavior, organizations from various relevant sectors need to carry out a sustained marketing activity aimed at educating the public on environmental conservation and ecotourism. Communication technology is so advanced these days that environmental education, the content and spirit of ecotourism can be easily propagated in the online environment, on TV and in the press.

Also, the marketing activity in this field should be focused on the development and promotion of *holistic ecotourism* products. In this regard, an essential component must be integrated into ecotourism products represented by consumer learning opportunities varying in intensity and formality, from suggestive signs to lectures and printed materials containing, among other things, aspects related to the impact of tourists' behavior on the visited ecosystem, with a transformative effect on their behavior. In addition, the process of informing and educating consumers on the environmental consequences of tourism consumption will be centered on the tourism product. In other words, it is important to focus on promoting specific positive consequences of the consumption of certain ecotourism products and the negative consequences of the consumption of alternative non-responsible products rather than a presentation of the consequences of tourism consumption in general<sup>8</sup>.

Information is particularly important in the process of ecotourism product consumption, providing it through professional or local guides, informative leaflets, explanatory maps, etc. is ensuring the ecotourist's high satisfaction and increased likelihood of returning to the destination and, moreover, recommending the destination to other consumers. Of these, the use of guides is especially distinguished by the fact that they fulfill multiple roles in the ecotourism product consumption (information provider, behavior model, etc.). Using the services offered by a tourist guide in ecotourism can increase the awareness, knowledge, the formation of positive attitudes and participation intentions of ecotourists. Travel guides should be considered key intermediaries between ecotourists and the environment, having a significant role in shaping consumer behavior.

<sup>6</sup> Budeanu, A., 2007, *Sustainable tourist behavior – a discussion of opportunities of change*, International Journal of Consumer Studies, Vol. 31, pp. 499-508, [ftp://puceftp.puce.edu.ec/Facultades/CienciasHumanas/Ecoturismo/ArticulosTurismo/Art%C3%ADculos%20cient%C3%ADficos/Turismo%20sostenible/comportamiento\\_turistas\\_sostenibilidad.pdf](ftp://puceftp.puce.edu.ec/Facultades/CienciasHumanas/Ecoturismo/ArticulosTurismo/Art%C3%ADculos%20cient%C3%ADficos/Turismo%20sostenible/comportamiento_turistas_sostenibilidad.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Paço, A., Alves, H., Nunes, C., 2012, *Ecotourism from both Hotels and Tourists' Perspective*, Economics & Sociology, Vol. 5, No 2, pp. 132-142, [http://www.economics-sociology.eu/files/15\\_Paco\\_3\\_4.pdf](http://www.economics-sociology.eu/files/15_Paco_3_4.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Barber, N., Taylor, D.C., Deale, C.S., 2010, *Wine Tourism, Environmental Concerns, and Purchase Intention*, Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing, No 27, pp 146-165, [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/D\\_Taylor4/publication/247495272\\_Wine\\_Tourism\\_Environmental\\_Concerns\\_and\\_Purchase\\_Intention/links/57308c0b08ae7d0d05660ecb.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/D_Taylor4/publication/247495272_Wine_Tourism_Environmental_Concerns_and_Purchase_Intention/links/57308c0b08ae7d0d05660ecb.pdf)

Information also covers specific aspects of the activity of entrepreneurs which are providing ecotourism services. They need to consider effectively delivering messages explaining the objectives of their environmental policies to help consumers better understand the idea behind the entrepreneur's green activity or to build a good reputation and an environmental profile for the company. In addition, it is a good idea for managers of such organizations to remind consumers of their social responsibility to protect the environment, beyond the pursuit of satisfying their personal needs and desires<sup>9</sup>.

While research in the field highlights the negative impact of the lack of information about the visited destinations on consumer behavior, however, a simple increase in the level of information will not cause significant changes in consumer behavior, taking into account that, paradoxically, the ecotourism offer is much more expensive and often considered as being rather uncomfortable in relation to mass tourism<sup>10</sup>. Along with passive information whose role is to inform about the overall impact of tourist behavior on the environment, it is necessary to include those elements that trigger consumer feedback. These elements can take the form of incentives to reward the tourist for his expected sustainable behavior, or the form of experiences designed to create social norms for the expected ecotourist behavior. People's involvement in activities with a direct impact on the destination ecosystem, such as, the greening campaigns organized in certain tourist areas stand out amongst the social experiences with great effect on consumers. These campaigns can be organized with the help of environmental associations, school ecoclubs and tourism associations.

On the other hand, feelings are a key element of consumer buying and consumption experience, with an impact on how they evaluate tourism products. Positive feelings testify to the benefits of consumed products/services. In the context of tourism activity, destinations generate positive feelings for tourists and genuine experiences create positive impressions. Tourists' experiences are to a certain extent related to the expectations regarding the destination they are visiting, and after the visit they will remain with memories. This experience influences tourists on a cognitive and emotional level, which leads to a positive behavior towards the environment. Marketing research specialists have noticed that changes in tourists' behavior are related to the knowledge and affection regarding tourist destinations. From this point of view, we can affirm that tourists' overall experience has an impact on their attitude towards ecotourism and, consequently, towards environmental behavior. A

satisfactory ecotourism experience, the perceived value of the tourism product and the involvement in various ecotourism activities can lead to an increasingly responsible behavior towards the environment, as well as an increase in concern and sensitivity to environmental issues.

Changes in individual behavior regarding the environment can be initiated through eco-education, and personal experience and participation in environmental protection can promote responsible behavior towards the environment. In this sense, it is useful to organize actions to support ecological clubs, including the ones in the vicinity of protected areas in order to form ecological mentalities, leading ultimately to the participation in ecotourism actions and promotion of the ecotourism phenomenon.

Also promoting ecotourism can be done successfully even through ecotourists. Taking into account that tourism in general and ecotourism in particular are regarded as social phenomena, it is considered that once ecotourists adopt a certain sustainable behavior, they share it within the group of friends/acquaintances they belong to<sup>11</sup>.

The transformation of the tourists' behavior into ecotourism behavior is an extensive and long-lasting process and in its development many actors must be involved - the administrations of protected areas, county, municipal and communal authorities, the school inspectorate and schools, tourism services providers from the areas near the ecotourism objectives, tourism agencies, etc.

On the other hand, bearing in mind that the basis of ecotourists' motivation is a superior need, ecotourism operators will have to develop marketing strategies aimed at a long-term relationship with them.

## 5. Conclusions

The real challenge for eco-tourism marketing is not primarily to develop a strategy to attract as many tourists as possible, but rather to educate tourists in the spirit of responsible consumption, consumption that follows the principles of sustainable development. To this end, it is necessary to introduce elements such as guided activities, leisure facilities development, maintenance of destination's environmental quality and providing an authentic ecological experience.

Also, the ultimate goal of any tourism marketing activity should be to protect the environment of the tourist destination through a positive interaction between all involved, resource managers, tour operators, local population and tourists.

<sup>9</sup> Chen, M.F., Tung, P.J., 2014, *Developing an extended Theory of Planned Behavior model to predict consumers' intention to visit green hotels*, International Journal of Hospitality Management, No 36, pp. 221-230, <http://download.xuebalib.com/xuebalib.com.23934.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Hultman, M., Kazemina, A., Ghasemi, V., 2015, *Intention to visit and willingness to pay premium for ecotourism: The impact of attitude, materialism, and motivation*, Journal of Business Research, No 68, pp. 1854-1861, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/9ca5/035c59bef4088f7a40a1b7350ad8bc8b8733.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> McKenzie-Mohr, D., Schultz, P.W., 2014, *Choosing effective behavior change tools*, Social Marketing Quarterly, No 20, pp 35-46

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