

Identity and Sustainable Development in Rural Tourism

Mirela MAZILU^{1,*}, Daniela DUMITRESCU

¹ Department of Geography, University of Craiova, 13 A.I. Cuza Street, Craiova, Romania

* Corresponding author, mirelamazilu2004@yahoo.com

Received on <26-06-2012>, reviewed on <24-08-2012>, accepted on <10-09-2012>

Abstract

There are many studies talking about the "anonymity" in which our country is sinking, in terms of international tourist identity, of the symbols that define us. We have never known how to promote ourselves using the unique elements that we have and not because we do not have these unique features, but because it is possible that we do not know or we have forgotten what really represents us. There were several initiatives, some of them recent and costly to create and promote a country brand, starting from tourism, but these did not have the expected impact. Why did not have the expected impact? Have we got an element/several elements that may render a sustainable image, not a temporary one, for us and for the Romanian rural tourism? Are the village, the traditions, and the gastronomy authentic elements of tourist identity for the Romanian village as an element within the tourist offer? What symbols, values, ideas, feelings, places, emotions, personalities, food, artistic expressions are by excellence truly Romanian? How many of us recognize them? These are only a couple of the many questions we try to answer, not desperately, but with the interest of the person who is not only in love with tourism, its values, with its message over time. The article tries to underline the role of identity in the promotion of a tourist product, the Romanian village, a valuable treasure up to the present based on an adequate methodology of the tourism geography research (questionnaires, diagnosis, analytical prospecting, etc.).

Keywords: *identity, rural tourism, authentic, Romanian village, image, sustainability*

Rezumat. Identitate și dezvoltare durabilă în turismul rural

Există multe studii care vorbesc despre "anonimatul", în care țara noastră se scufundă, în termeni de identitate turistică internațională, a simbolurilor care ne definesc. Niciodată nu am știut să ne promovăm folosind elementele unice pe care le avem și nu pentru că nu avem aceste caracteristici unice, ci pentru că este posibil ca noi să nu știm sau să fi uitat ce ne reprezintă cu adevărat. Au fost mai multe inițiative, unele dintre ele recente și costisitoare de a crea și de a promova un brand de țară, pornind de la turism, dar acestea nu au avut impactul scontat. De ce nu au avut impactul scontat? Avem un element/elemente care pot da o imagine durabilă, nu una temporară, pentru noi și pentru turismul rural românesc? Sunt satul, tradițiile, precum și gastronomia elemente de identitate turistică pentru satul românesc ca un element în cadrul ofertei turistice? Ce simboluri, valori, idei, sentimente, emoții, locuri, personalități, produse alimentare, expresii artistice sunt, prin excelență adevărat românești? Câți dintre noi le recunoaștem? Acestea sunt doar câteva dintre numeroasele întrebări la care vom încerca să răspundem, nu cu disperare, dar cu interesul unei persoane care nu este doar atrasă de turism și valorile sale, cu mesajul său de-a lungul timpului. Articolul încearcă să sublinieze rolul identității în promovarea unui produs turistic, satul românesc, o comoară de mare preț până în prezent, pe baza unei metodologii adecvate de cercetare în geografia turismului (chestionare, diagnostic, analiză de prospecțiune, etc.).

Cuvinte-cheie: *identitate, turism rural, autentic, sat românesc, imagine, durabilitate*

Introduction

The Romanian village was approached in the literature either from multiple angles or belonging to different subjects, from museology, anthropology to statistics, management or marketing with application in rural tourism (Bran et al., 1997; Bran et al., 1995; Mitache et al., 1996; Nistoreanu, 1999; Bucur, 2006;

Mazilu, 2006). The common element of these studies is the intrinsic value of the Romanian village – i.e. object of study, raw material, offer, tourist product, all in one or taken separately, which are profitable elements in the perspective of the re-evaluation of this type of tourist product for marketing.

The identity is applied in activities as a resource and as a marketing instrument (external and internal)

for obtaining the competitive advantage, as well as in the case of entities (ethnic or geographical) for the

strengthening of the trust, the respect for oneself or for attracting new investments or tourists (fig. 1).

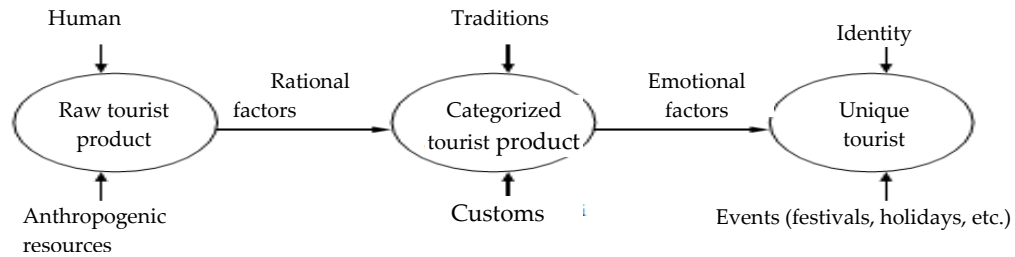


Fig. 1: The elements of differentiation/uniqueness for the tourist products

The attractive elements of Romania in the field of rural tourism are special. A strong tradition and a multi-millenary rural culture have been and are still found nowadays. The folkloric customs, as well as the whole richness of the folklore, constitute constant elements in the rural entire ambiance. The attractive elements are: the natural beauty of the landscapes (mountains, lakes, forests, etc.), the history and the famous people, the commercial areas, the cultural, recreational and entertainment objectives, the sports arenas, the events and different occasions, buildings, monuments and sculptural ensembles, the people and other attractions. In fact, this analysis (called "the audit of attractiveness" in the literature) represents the basis of determining the regional marketing objective and the actions within the marketing program for the respective region.

Within the context of the regional entities, the identity may be viewed as an instrument of putting into practice a complex marketing planning process as a part of the strategic marketing process and, respectively, a marketing program.

The rural areas folklore, respectively the village, offers the identity of each geographical region of the country. In time, the purity of the old culture has been preserved mainly unaltered. Due to its vitality, the folkloric culture has been preserved over time with different accents, imposed by the specific touch of each rural community. It is necessary and important that the direction of the Romanian culture to not move towards an unknown direction, because at the moment, due to the modern media, the message of modernism has been spread everywhere and sent rapidly to the world of the village, triggering messages and elements opposite to the traditional values.

The rural architecture represents another attractive element of rural settlements, being the work of different communities and of time and it must be preserved as a cultural heritage of humanity.

Globalisation and the accelerated industrialisation brought out problems in each country related to the preservation of the rural habitat, without opposing to its evolution. Globally, the traditional rural settlements are threatened by different factors, although almost everywhere their value is related to the habitat. Behind these settlements, there is a philosophy, an attitude, a conception in relation with the social life and work, which confers the quality of a document specific for each people. However, the preservation of the villages enters into conflict with the wish of their people to take advantage of the modern elements of life. We must take into account the integration of the new in the traditional area when solving this problem. The development of rural tourism is a solution to ensure the transmission of traditions to future generations, not to deprive the future generations of identity.

The development of tourism/the recovery of the rural areas are proposing to solve, outside the essential objective of its activity, the satisfaction of the tourist motivation and the economic problems of the areas related to:

- ❖ the depopulation caused by the rural population migration to the urban centres, thus ensuring conditions for practicing some profitable activities in the villages aiming at the improvement of the life conditions, the protection and the preservation of the environment as a recreational and recovery factor of the creative potential of the individual;
- ❖ the creation of conditions for the development of economic, industrial, agricultural, commercial conditions in the rural areas.
- ❖ the stimulation of the state institutions, the private sector and the associations in the field to intensify the efforts for obtaining a corresponding infrastructure related to the level of tourist development.

Being considered a special and more complex form of tourism, rural tourism has an advantage in terms of the possibilities of spending the spare time,

the originality, the specificity and the idealism shown by the local people. The rural tourism connection to the sustainable development concept is quite recent. If, in the past the development of tourism has aimed only the economic side, the achievement of its objectives being considered a total success, lately the attention of the specialists in the field has focused on other sides as the social and cultural consequences on the local population, as well as the ecologic impact.

These new directions are the component elements of the sustainable development, achieving thus a bridge between this new concept and the rural tourism.

The sustainable development answers to the present needs without harming the development ability of the future generations. This is closely related to tourism and the problem of the environment, of maintaining it within normal parameters so that the objectives and its beauties should have continuity in time, in tourism, thus creating a privileged relation between them.

Rural tourism from the perspective of the sustainable development takes into account the ecological problem, meaning the transmission of a healthy environment to future generations, with certain limits in its development. This problem is worldwide and it has become a current issue now. Actions and measures representing the interest and the preoccupation of all individuals are necessary at a national level, focusing on the educational side and on the awareness of each individual. A large number of developed countries have started to put into practice the application of special programs launching the so-called "*Green Revolution*". For the protection of the environment, the great world organisations (UNO, FAO, NATO, and UNESCO) have brought to light the problem of the environment.

One of the most important organisations at a national level supporting the development of the rural tourism is ANTREC (National Agency for Rural, Ecological and Cultural Tourism), member of the European Federation for Rural Tourism, EUROGÎTES. Created in 1994, ANTREC proves to be the most viable of all the existing associations and foundations, mostly achieving its objectives as follows:

- the identification and the promotion of the tourist potential of the village space;
- the professional training through courses, seminars, symposiums of its members;
- specialty scholarships;

- the experience exchanges in the country and abroad;
- the publishing of magazines and informational newsletters;
- the setting up of a database about rural tourism;
- advertising campaigns for the hostels and the agritourist farms;
- creating a booking system in the Romanian rural tourism.

The same problems are followed - up with interest by other organisations as well, such as: the Foundation of Dornelor Land, Brain Impex with regional feature.

The elements, which constitute the basis of the elaboration of rural development strategies, are:

- ✓ the holiday administration manner constitutes the defining criterion for tourists;
- ✓ rural tourism presents specific particularities compared to the resort tourism due to the physical and human environment (interpersonal connections, an affective climate);
- ✓ the poor experience of the small entrepreneurs related to the appearance of this new trend - *organised rural tourism* - it has to be improved by pushing forward through public subsidies based on the fundamental strategic plan.

One of the most recent strategies that of Edward Inskeep, aims at "*the sustainable and integrated development*" of rural tourism complying with this feature of the region, because not all the regions can apply it. There are limits for the development within a given area; the practical application means particular management techniques to prevent the destruction of the ecological balance of the community. The experts want to determine key elements of the rural tourism sustainable development.

The involvement of the authorities and the local communities in rural tourism and agritourism

Rural tourism and agritourism represent a social and economic activity that re-evaluates the material, spiritual and human resources of a rural community and benefits from the services and technical and building endowments of the community. It appeared the need for the direct involvement of the local authorities in the organisation, the development and the promotion of this form of tourism as a component of the general activity of the locality.

This participation of the local community may be achieved through:

- The conclusion of a partnership between authorities and the local tourist association, the economic agents from tourism or other associated fields, which lead to a more efficient organisation, development and promotion of rural tourism/agritourism. Within this partnership, the tourism associations and the economic agents involved in the tourism activity must contribute financially to the achievement of the general economic development objectives of a locality (access ways, water supply, and telecommunications, technical and urban endowments). This may be achieved through the takeover of a share of the business volume and its assignment to the mentioned purpose, thus a larger contribution of tourism to the general development of the locality with indirect beneficial effects is created;
- The development of the commercial supply network and the service provision;
- The development and the diversification of the recreational and entertainment features to the local specific features;
- The development of the technical and urban endowments and of the general infrastructure;
- The diversification of the cultural activities, fairs, traditional manifestations;
- The support of the local initiative in the development of the crafts and local traditional art;
- The creation of facilities and the support of the development of hostels and agritourism households network;
- The achievement of some micro-complexes of agro-food production for the supply of the population and of the tourists with local products;
- The support of the tourist association in the promotion and the sustainable development of rural tourism/agritourism;
- The management of the tourism activity and of the actions of protection and preservation of the environment, of the natural tourist and historic-cultural resources and of the built heritage.

Materials and discussions

The European integration of the Romanian tourism represents a gradual-sequential process, seriously evaluating the chances to re-launch the purpose of its development at the same time with the protection of the environment and of the growth of the quality of services, tending to become similar to the one existing in the European Union.

The article tries to underline the role of identity in the promotion of a tourist product: the Romanian village, a valuable treasure up to the present based

on an adequate methodology for the tourism geography research (questionnaires, diagnosis, analytical prospecting, etc.).

Through rural tourism, the natural, historic and cultural richness of a rural area shall form the object of a remarkable economic activity, able to create incomes and to ensure a sustainable development.

The promotion and the preservation of a great image of the tourist activity needs the existence of an optimal ratio between the nature of the offer, the quality of services and the price, ratio that need protection from the financial abuses and professional negligence.

On the other hand, the possibilities of including the rural settlements in the tourist circuit are practically unlimited, taking into account the variety of the rural space. When talking about the Romanian rural space, there is allowed the elaboration of an extremely various range of tourist products, according to the specific resources and the territorial localisation. The tourist villages located along the main communication axes within the well-known tourist regions may be taken into account (the seaside, the Prahova Valley, the Olt Valley, Bucovina, Maramureş, etc.) The mountain villages may be taken into account as the support points for the mountain tourism, as well as the ones specialised in certain types of agricultural activities (vineyards, orchards, agricultural villages, pastoral villages, etc.). These villages might be locations for the agritourism and so on.

The wide range of offers constitutes a major advantage for the Romanian tourism, as well as for the rural one. Beyond the medium and high-comfort hotels, specific to the cities and tourist resorts, the rural space offers infinity of profitable possibilities: hostels, boarding houses, accommodation in the peasant households may support a wide range of activities as well as walks, cultural tourism, fishing, hunting, horse riding, winter sports, cycling, etc.

Each type of rural settlement offers particular possibilities and raises specific problems. Hence, the tourist product offered must be drawn up according to the presence of different components, in relation with the individualised feature of the settlement.

The various correction measures of the unbalances try to maintain the population living in the country in the European countries, from two main reasons:

- The need to maintain a human structure in the rural environment as a basis for the family structures;

➤ The diversification of the economic activities, when the ones purely agricultural become insufficient in order to maintain some corresponding incomes to the ones obtained in the enrolment of the productive activities in other sectors.

Finally, within the current context of globalisation imposing the integration of each country within a certain space (example, the European one), the efforts must be directed towards the adoption of models or standards, but with the re-evaluation of traditions, of customs and of national specific features, which are the elements creating the identity at any level (local, regional, national or European) in any field of activity and especially in tourism, where the emotional factors are especially active when choosing a destination and may constitute the main reasons for the chosen and preferred tourism forms by tourists everywhere.

These identity models must be achieved within a process of planning the regional marketing, with a well-set objective and with marketing actions emphasising the specific of the respective place.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the classical tourism seems to be in crisis, maybe because of the oversaturation of certain traditional areas or of the autonomy of movement of the European population who tries to allocate the holiday period along the entire year, distributing the periods of stays in traditional places and reaching other alternatives in the rural environment. "Identity Tourism: Imaging and Imagining the Nation" examines the role of tourism in the construction of national identity. To imagine a nation, nationalists must construct a national story about their history and culture that defines them as people, and counters the negative story circulated by their enemies. One of the objectives of this book is to identify the necessary historical and cultural components of a compelling national story. Yet, a story is of no use unless it is heard, so nationalists need media through which the national narrative can be told. The main objective of this article is to show that the identity in the Romanian tourism is a medium that can be used to tell the national story, both to group members and to outsiders too. Thus it is particularly useful in the construction of a national identity sense. Identity tourism, which incorporates both ethnic and heritage tourism, includes museums, heritage centers, performances, and other attractions in which collective identities are represented, interpreted, and

potentially constructed through the use of history and culture. One of the strengths of tourism is that it can convey a message to a broad, mass audience, and it can present that message in a vivid and lively way. A weakness of tourism is that vivid and lively presentations can degenerate into trivializing history, culture and politics to the point that any meaningful message is lost. Thus one of the main challenges in identity tourism is to balance educational goals against the entertainment imperatives of the medium.

Due to the fact that the international experience has proved that the countries that do not have a tourism policy and do not make efforts for the development and the promotion of tourism lose time and the position on the international market, favouring the profit of international competitors. The future solutions for a tourism policy, needed to regain the market of rural tourism, are difficult to find; the Romanian village must draw the attention and the will, but also the strategy of the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism on a period without time restrictions, due to the warranty given by the value of the Romanian village itself.

References

- Bran, F., Marin, D., & Simion, T. (1997). *Turismul rural. Modelul european*, Editura Economică, București
- Bran, F., Istrate I. (1995). *Perspectiva dezvoltării durabile a turismului românesc*, Tribuna Economică, nr. 20, 21, București
- Bucur Sabo, M. (2006). *Marketing turistic*, Editura Irecson, București
- Mazilu, M. (2006). *Ecoturism și amenajări turistice*, Editura Scrisul Românesc, Craiova
- Mitrache, St., Manole, V., Bran, FL., Stoian, M. & Istrate, I. (1996). *Agroturism și turism rural*, Editura Fax-Press, București
- Nistoreanu, P. (1999). *Turismul rural - o afacere mică cu perspective mari*, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, București
- *** (1990 - 2010), *Anuarul statistic al României*, INS, București
- *** (1992 - 1997), *OMT, Annuaire de Statistique du Tourisme*, vol.1-2
- *** (1983, 1984, 1987, 1992), *Geografia României*, vol. 1, 2, 3, 4, Editura Academiei, București
- *** (1992), *OCDE, Politiques du Tourisme et Tourisme Internationale dans les Pays membres des L'OCDE*, Paris