

Opportunities for the Development of Tourism in Letea River Levee of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve

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Abstract

At the level of the Delta rural areas dominate. The river levee is Letea – C. A. Rosetti locality and it is considered the most isolated settlement in Romania. Making a strategic tool for tourism development in the Rosetti locality from turning its entire natural and cultural heritage has proven to be a multi-step problem, given the economic and social context of human settlements. Lifetime socio-economic development depends on a minimum shipping and road access.

The main problem is to change the management of existing resources and to reduce the phenomenon of accentuated depopulation and the current economic underdevelopment. There are many drawbacks, and the last 20 years have brought essential positive changes to the community life.

The degree of geographical isolation does not need to be primordial and may diminish its influence by expanding and upgrading communication lines and standard of living by making facilities and utilities, by diversifying local occupations. There are real opportunities for investment to start work and develop rural tourism in this situation.

Keywords: *Letea river levee, rural community, tourism development*

Rezumat. Oportunități de dezvoltare a turismului pe digul râului Letea din rezervația naturală a biosferei Delta Dunării

La nivelul Deltei Dunării domină zonele rurale. Digul râului este Letea- localitatea C.A. Rosetti fiind considerată cea mai izolată așezare din România. Realizarea unui instrument strategic pentru dezvoltarea turismului în localitatea Rosetti pentru a transforma întregul său patrimoniu natural și cultural, s-a dovedit a fi o problemă cu mai multe etape, având în vedere contextul economic și social al așezărilor umane. Dezvoltarea socio-economică depinde de un transport minim și de căi de acces rutiere.

Problema principală este de a schimba gestionarea resurselor existente și de a reduce fenomenul de depopulare accentuată și subdezvoltarea economică actuală. Există multe dezavantaje, iar ultimii 20 de ani au adus schimbări esențiale pozitive în viața comunității. Gradul de izolare geografică nu trebuie să fie primordial și își poate diminua influența prin extinderea și modernizarea liniilor de comunicație și a nivelului de trai prin crearea de facilități și utilități, prin diversificarea ocupațiilor locale. Există oportunități reale de investiții pentru a începe lucrările și pentru a dezvolta turismul rural în această situație.

Cuvinte-cheie: *digul râului Letea, comunitate rurală, dezvoltare turistică*

Introduction

The Danube Delta biosphere reserve (DDBR) owns an exceptional tourist potential as a UNESCO Patrimony component. For many years, it has been one of the most valuable symbols of Romanian tourism, being promoted at most of the internal and international tourism fairs. The recent study dedicated to the possibilities of developing tourism in this protected area is concentrated on the natural, cultural and accessibility characteristics of some localities from this delta area.

From the physical-geographic point of view, the Delta is divided crosswise on the river branches in two big natural sub-regions: river delta and sea delta. The river delta occupies over 65% of the total surface of the delta and lies from the Izmail islet to the lower part of the river, to the Letea and Caraorman sand banks, on the Periprava line (on the Chilia branch) – Crisan (on the Sulina branch) – I Vancea (on the Sf. Gheorghe branch) – Crasnicol – Perisor.

The sea delta occupies less than 35% of the Danube Delta surface, to the east of the Periprava-Crișan-I Vancea-Crasnicol-Perișor line. Within this wild nature space, there are 327 bird species, of

which 218 species nest here and 109 species come here, while passing to other lands. The different origin of birds: Mediterranean, Mongolian, Siberian, European, Chinese, Arctic makes the Danube Delta be considered one of the most interesting deltas of the world.

This is a main tourist attraction of the country, with a unique status. Romania received the Blue Globe for the Danube Delta biosphere reserve inside the 10th reunion of the Parts Conference at the Convention for Biologic Diversity in Japan, in 2010, granted for the best management practice of wet areas on Terra.

River transport is the most important way to enter the delta; its specific making the circulation in its interior is almost exclusively by water, a fact which represents one of the most important tourist attractions. To this purpose, the natural hydrographic network is used, including the Danube branches, ponds, lakes, as well as the channels created through dredging for reed-fishing facilities. The geographic conditions of the delta and the navigation characteristics of its main branches and secondary channels determine the use of certain types of ships which should have access to all areas.

Having in view these characteristics of the Danube Delta, some localities have been selected which could be more attractive from the tourist point of view by creating some camping spaces, adequate for an organized and protective tourism to the existent wild nature.

Consequently, initially, before presenting the current documentation, the following localities have been selected:

- the Chilia branch – the localities: Pardina, C.A.Rosetti;
- the Tulcea branch – the Tulcea municipality;
- the Sulina branch – the localities: Maliuc, Crișan, Sulina;
- the Sf. Gheorghe branch – the localities: Beștepe, Mahmudia, Murighiol, Nufăru.
- the Razim –Sinoe complex – the Corbu locality - the Constanța county.

Currently, in the Danube Delta 4 authorised campings function, in the localities: Chilia, Sfântu Gheorghe, Partizani, Sulina, in the Gura Portiței area ('Ecomagazin', 4 June 2011, www.ecomagazin.ro). The initiation of the whole study was carried out by contacting town-halls, for obtaining relevant data and information in order to select the real possibilities of direct investments through public-

private partnerships for finding and building some camping fields. Having in view that few administrations have responded to our requests, formulated as official documents, sent by fax, others by telephone (the telephone calls were made by NIRDT during 27 June-12 July 2011).

After analysing these data and telephone discussions, we have remarked that only some of the delta localities selected in this study own opportunities to create such tourist accommodation objectives. Later, after travelling there and discussing with the local officials about the real opportunities for tourist camping, other completions were made.

Finally, the following localities can be mentioned: Corbu, Beștepe, Sulina, C.A.Rosetti, Murighiol, Maliuc, Mahmudia which have formulated the option for direct investment in camping. Some of the localities do not own available fields (Nufăru, Pardina) or are affected by periodic floods (Crișan) or have proved less interest for this opportunity (Maliuc). Of these localities, C.A.Rosetti locality has the best chances to develop tourism, having in view that agricultural occupations have a secondary role due to the poor quality of the soils.

In these localities, the local public administrations have not understood that tourism, together with fishing and agriculture can become an activity with ascendant evolution, economically attractive, having in view the beauty and originality of natural landscapes and the possibilities of getting to know the Danube Delta specific bio-diversity, practice of sport fishing, water easy sports.

The economic activities will have to be carefully harmonised and with the new Danube Delta law (In early July 2011, the Romanian President promulgated the new Delta Law by Decree no. 614/2011 on 04.07.2011 as an organic law (Law no. 136/2011). The law draft was initiated in the Danube Delta Biosphere Administration (DDBA) after a series of consultations), promulgated at the beginning of July, that imposes strict restrictions concerning the activities in the strictly protected areas inside the Danube Delta biosphere reserve (DDBR), human activities being forbidden, except for research, education and ecotourism ones, with the limits initially described in the management plan.

Consequently, the greatest attention was offered to C.A.Rosetti locality which includes several villages, lying entirely on the Letea sand bank. Creating a strategic instrument for the tourist development of C.A.Rosetti locality, starting from the capitalisation of

its whole natural and cultural patrimony has proved to be an idea with multiple problems given by the economic and social context of this human settlement. The whole socio-economic life depends on the river navigation and a minimal route access.

Methodologic and documentary aspects

Most rural localities in the delta are confronted with a clear economic sub-development. The essential problem is that of changing the way of administrating the natural and cultural resources, to diminish the depopulation phenomenon, improving the life level of the local population. There are many delays and the last 20 years have not brought positive, essential changes in the community life.

The whole bibliographic and field documentation represents the start of a process of recuperation of some existing values with tourist valences, as a pre-condition of re - dynamization and diversification of tourism in this delta area. Consequently, an extended investigation of local problems and the main institutions with decision-making and implementing attributions have been consulted.

In this aspect, the data and information obtained from the two field trips, 13-16 July and 28-30 August 2011 on the Letea sand bank are very useful. This study has been a preparative action in order to support the carrying out of some investment works for the tourism development in this rural locality. In this context, we have asked for opinions and information from the Danube Delta biosphere reserve, the Danube Delta research-development institute, both from Tulcea, the town-hall of the C.A.Rosetti locality, the Environment ministry – the Biodiversity conservation, the “Vier Pfofen” Foundation, multiple interviews and articles from the central and local press.

The evaluation focused on the C.A.Rosetti locality. The analysis included the tourist, natural and cultural potential, demographic, economic aspects, others related to the town infrastructure and communication ways, environment quality and tourism development which are specific to C.A.Rosetti locality with all the component villages - Cardon, C. A. Rosetti, Letea, Periprava, Sfiștofca; an important aspect was the presentation of some solutions for managing the wild horses on the Letea sand bank. More than that, the current level of tourism development on the locality territory has been evaluated and a series of proposals to support

the development of the tourist function for this rural settlement have been made.

The tourism development level

C.A.Rosetti locality lies in the north-eastern part of the Danube Delta and of the Tulcea County. The distance between the Tulcea municipality and this locality is of 102 km and from the Sulina town of 18 km. This locality is one of the most isolated human settlements in DDBR. The component villages on the homonymous sand bank can be found at the following distances: Letea – 4 km from C.A.Rosetti; Periprava – 14 km from the locality residence village, Sfiștofca – 2 km, Cardon – 8 km.

The only route access is the DC3 locality road which connects the locality to Sulina and the component villages. Letea village lies at 23 km north-west of the Sulina town, the village being connected to Sulina through a stone road. Between the villages of the commune there is a land connection road covered with stone (big crushed granite), circulating for strong cars and those equipped with adequate tyres or tractors.

Naval access – excepting for C.A.Rosetti residence village, all the other four villages are connected to a stream - Letea to the channel Magearu; Periprava to the Chilia channel; Sfiștofca and Cardon to the Sulina channel and the Popina Fisheries Facility (data owned by the Vox Delta association.ro/e-town-halls). The main gateway to the sand bank is the Sulina channel with a length of 69.7 km, average width of 348 m and the second is the Chilia channel, 120 km long 340 m wide (Gâstescu, Știucă, 2008). Another access to the Letea village is made through the Dunarea Veche branch, through the Magearu channel that separates almost equally the smaller sand banks in the south (information in conformity to the Tourist map of the Danube Delta, by F. Huber și Niculescu, Niculescu publishing house, 2008, București).

In the villages there are no boat mooring pontoons, some are improvised by the local people from wooden beams or simple metal bars. Local people more and more rarely use the more traditional boats, with wooden paddles on the small channels, on short distances and for local fishing or for walking tourists. For a better navigation on the smaller channels, they must periodically be declogged.

The Letea river-sea sand bank consists of joining other smaller sand bank (ARBDD- Visitor’s guide (2011) – boards 99, 100, 108, 116 – Sub-sand banks

Răducu, in south-west, Ichim, Părului, Chirilă in the south, and centre, Pocora, Semiraci, Movilă, Șchiopu, Ilie, Sulina in south-east, Mostiștea, Cherhanalei, C.A.Rosetti in north-east) and has a triangular shape with a pointed peak to the north and the basis to the south (Petrescu, 1957, p.106). The western edge of the sand bank is an extension of the Bugeac shore that lies in the north of the Delta, in Ukraine. Its existence is due to the accumulative processes of the Chilia branch, with sedimentary deposits of marine origin.

For large waters, of over 7 hydro-degrees, the sand bank has an area of 8758 ha and at low waters, 3 hydro-degrees and has an area of 12,710 ha. Compared with other sand banks, Letea has the largest area no matter of the river waters height. The average altitude is 5.1 m.

On this sand bank there is a complex of lakes which lie on the same direction with the sub-sand banks, on the north-south direction (Petrescu, 1957, pp. 111-112). The lakes are billeted to the northern part of the sand bank and a more known lake is Nebunu, in the Periprava village. The current landscape of the sand bank is uneven, including sand dunes to the north and west but also small depressions created by the old lakes that were covered by sand and vegetation. The presence of the nature reserve in the Letea forest, with valuable flora items, some with unique value, the sand dunes specific vegetation and the forests of hasmace type is a great tourist attraction.

In the space of this delta, corresponding to C.A.Rosetti locality, there are two axes that concentrate the sightseeing attractions, namely:

✓ objectives belonging to the natural environment, as part of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, represented by: the Letea forest, the sand dunes on the sand bank, 'Sărăturile mari', the Magearu channel, the fishing areas in the surroundings, Matița lake - with an area of 652, 5 hectares, Merhei lake - with 1057.5 ha.

✓ on the basis of HG no .1284 of 2007 concerning the Natura 2000 network in Romania there are the following areas listed in ROSPA0031 – the Danube Delta and the Razim-Sinoe complex (published in MO, part I, nr.739/31.10.2007) and through Order M.1964/2008- ROSC 10065 - the Danube Delta (published in MO nr.68 bis/07.02.2008), legal documents where the share of the owned territories is presented. On the Letea sand bank there are several types of landscape, such as:

- aquatic surfaces landscapes, with forms of specific flora and fauna;
 - landscapes of the Letea forest, as distinct forest area, as flora and fauna biodiversity;
 - landscapes of the steppe meadows which include herbal and flower associations, which can also include the semi-wild horses;
 - landscapes of sand dunes, including specific vegetation forms ;
 - landscapes of the fishing villages, through the specific of the buildings and cultivated lands.
- ✓ a large number of endemic species makes the Romanian deltaic area be considered an important and valuable zoogenetic center (Drugescu, 1994, p.90). **The Letea and Caraorman sand banks are two cores of species of maximum value.** The Danube Delta went through a period of changes after the establishment of human settlements around 1800 and after the drainage interventions in 1976-1980, with the reduction of the number of aquatic species and increasing pests. After 1995, interventions were made for the renaturation of land areas and restoration of the water circulation.
- ✓ objectives related to the anthropic environment, due to preserving houses in time, churches, traditional architecture, popular technical facilities - Lippovan churches, old rite Orthodox of Periprava (a church dedicated to "St. Dumitru") and Sfiștofca (church dedicated the "Mother of God"), the windmill in the Rosetti village, fisheries in the Cardon and Periprava villages; the sweep wells in the old households, the ruins of the camp at Periprava;
- ✓ the "Annunciation" hermitage of 1990, in the clearing of the C.A.Rosetti-Cardon forest, the construction being carried out between 1990-1998, the cells and the church have already been completed, the first service took place in 2003. One can reach it from the Cardon channel and hence 1.5 km walking up to the monastery; it is at about halfway between C.A.Rosetti and Letea.
- ✓ objectives given by the existence of traditional old houses; these are mainly made of trellis work, adobe, wood, painted on the outside, beaten and cut thatch roofs, put in several layers, wooden fences; for some old houses the fretted wooden roof models from the roof top are impressive;
- ✓ traditional events - May 1st - Day of the village; the community celebrations of Lippovan Russian, orthodox of old rite – "Maslenitza", Jesus Resurrection, Jesus Birth, family traditions - baptism, wedding, funeral, specific cuisine: glapi,

varenki, piroghi, Blini, etc. (the site of the Lipovan Russians' Association in Romania);

✓ the possible tourist trails for the locality territory are given by the routes:

- Sulina – Periprava, on the direction Sulina – Cardon channel – Sfiștofca channel – Periprava;
- Sulina – Periprava, on the direction channel Cardon – Musura gulf – Musura branch – Stambulul vechi branch – Chilia branch – Periprava;
- Letea - C.A. Rosetti – Letea forest (proposed by ARBDD, 2010);
- Sfiștofca - C.A. Rosetti - the Nebunu lake and return;
- hiking is also made on a route in the dunes area on the direction Letea village – C.A.Rosetti village – Letea forest –Nebunu lake and back (Data of the Vox Delta Association, 2010).

From the above data, there results that the area has significant tourism potential, focused on natural resources, but the cultural ones, even if few, are not valued for being part of an attractive tourist offer. The local public administration has failed to find those instruments to develop local tourism or attract the local population in carrying out this approach.

The tourist reception units in this village are very few. There is a rural guesthouse of 4* with 15 rooms (30 beds) and 3* rooms for rent, respectively 8 rooms with 16 seats belonging to SC Gelmin SRL, near the Popina Fisheries Facility; the data can be found in the database of the Minister of Regional Development and Tourism, September 2011.

Another villa is Tado in the Letea village of 3 stars, a new building, used since 2008; it has 5 rooms with 2 beds and 3 rooms with three beds, each room equipped with bathroom. Both the villa and furniture have a style similar to the traditional one, specific to the delta. Inside the villa there is a restaurant, a bar and a conference room. In the courtyard, there are two pavilions, where people can have lunch or engage in any other outdoor activities. The location at only 3 km of the Letea forest will make it become a special attraction for tourists.

A land area of 9402 square meters in the built-up area of C.A.Rosetti, in the Sand bank area, right next to the Popina - Periprava Fisheries Facility, the SC. Ecoturism Danube Delta SRL company owns a number of 10 holiday huts, fully equipped, built of wood, thatched roof, each equipped with indoor bathroom and a dining room (fully equipped) which includes a kitchen, a bathroom and as annex - a boiler.

The holiday huts are destined for tourists accommodation (as well as for security personnel and employees) who come in the area, in particular to enjoy hunting and fishing, but also for making boat trips on certain routes in the Danube Delta, the main attraction point being the Letea forest where tourists can travel by foot, this being very close to buildings and huts (about 3 km). They are not registered by the Minister of Regional Development and Tourism-MDRT.

On the ruins of the former camp in Periprava, the French S. Remeter built the "Last Frontier" hotel, 4 *, which is already operational from 2011. This unit has 30 accommodation places in double rooms. The building, to the exterior, has kept something of the previous appearance, when the communist camp existed, but now, tourists have a special comfort inside.

This entrepreneur bought the land in 2006, transforming it into a resort for fishermen and nature lovers, with the support of EU funds. Also, he intends to transform the 46 military huts in a small museum.

The owner proposes to conduct several leisure activities, i.e.: fishing, bird watching, electric cars rental, kayaking tours, customized trips, guidance lessons, survival lessons, traditional cooking lessons, photography classes, Romanian interactive courses, Sulina beach, archery, volleyball, wii, games, petanque (data selected from the site of the accommodation unit, 2011).

The causes are multiple, but show that neither before, nor after 1990, there were no projects to support local people to find solutions for local development. Neither the local agriculture was supported or local handicrafts and tourism. The living conditions are below subsistence, which explains the high level of poverty and lack of urban facilities or medical assistance, better communication ways to reduce the degree of isolation.

Units of tourist reception with catering functions - there are no homologated food units in the MRDT database (updated on 20/06/2011); field studies have shown that there is a local buffet place which serves mainly alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, mineral water, soft drinks in pet bottles, packaged sweets, cans in every village.

The locality does not have a tourist information centre/point.

The recreational opportunities are given by the natural environment, in that one can go on trips to the villages by foot, go fishing, hunting and

participate in the few events related to holidays and patron festivals of churches and to sports performance about water sports and cooking, or ethnic minorities, but held in Tulcea and Sulina.

The tourism development possibilities in C. A. Rosetti locality

The locality has several specific aspects that can lead to the diversification of tourism activities here. The first aspect is given by solving the presence of horses and other by the modernisation of infrastructure and communication means between the component villages.

The recent history of these horses begins 80-100 years ago, when they were used for farming or transhumance. Although they were not many, were let free when the locals no longer exploited them economically. From the point of view of the race, the horses are the result of a cross between the 'huțul' and Arabic races and hence their colour and appearance. It is estimated they have reached the 7-8th Generation (considering some historical data, the civilization of the horse in delta lands would be much older, but the reality of their existence must be reported to the first farms and villages, when horses were used in agriculture, transport and sheep transhumance).

The strong numerical growth of the livestock dates from the last 20 years. The problem of the horses was due to the fact that there is no designed wilderness. A grazing fee is also required, being much higher than the local revenues.

The negative phenomena are generated by the increased number of these animals in an uncontrolled manner; they have not received adequate food resources and therefore, have found shelter and food in winter in the Letea forest, a strictly protected nature reserve. In addition, the horses had no identification chips (elapid species) and many have no ownership documents.

The DDBR officials estimate that there are, according to the Sanitary-Veterinary Tulcea department, about 4,000 semi-wild horses and thousands of cattle and pigs belonging to the natives that grow freely in natural areas of the delta villages. The number of horses has been greatly diminished by the severe winter in 2009-2010 (fig. 1, 2, 3, 4).

At C.A.Rosetti locality level, the Vier Pfoten NGO (procedure started in 2010), estimates there are about 750-800 horses, but their number is greatly/ by far exceeded by that of the free cattle, about 2,000, for which state subsidies are collected. The town-hall has the right to take unclaimed animals which do not have property and evidence documents, but it has no resources to feed and care for them.

The chosen solution on the short term was for these to be held in quarantine, with medical monitorisation, castrated and then kept in a large pen (about 1,000 ha). Another solution would be to create an association, local support for the local people raising horses, applying the current legislation for horse rearing, the auctioning of youngsters, building a riding center, as the one in the Rhône - Camargue delta (there is an International league for the protection of horses (ILPH) with the headquarters in the UK).



Fig. 1: Traditional house hold in Cardon village



Fig. 2: Typical house in Letea village



Fig. 3: Narrow street in the Letea, to the church



Fig. 4: Narrow street in the to Magearu Channel

Source: photos realized by T.Simon at Letea, August 2011

In addition, for the Danube Delta situation, the horses can be used for equestrian rides, gig rides or riding lessons, thereby bringing income to their care, beyond those allocated by different government local public institutions or NGOs.

They would have left a very small number of horses in freedom as mere tourist attraction. For the protection and care of horses, the Vier Pfofen foundation, according to the protocol signed in August 2011, needs about 1,000 hectares of land, an administrative and record center of the animals and feed store (for a period of 10 years). The document provides, among other things, micro-chips for horses, identification of the owners, sterilization of stallions genetically unworthy, a local community involvement in their care and educating people about the indirect benefits that horses can bring to the localities in the Delta. This project will have to be continued by local authorities, after the 10 years grace period.

Another important proposal was to create new possibilities for tourists; this is because on the C.A.Rosetti locality territory, the accommodation possibilities are very few, being one of the most isolated villages in the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve. Of all the villages in the C.A.Rosetti locality, Periprava is the most easily accessible, with a port at the Danube, on the Chilia branch; this is the only village of the locality which has water supply network, being in stage of completion.

The proposed site is very picturesque, being situated on the border of Nebunu Lake and near the Letea forest. The camping platform was created to include more buildings and accommodation specific facilities in camping structures, except that the particular location, i.e. inside the DDBR area, without car access, but only by ships, restricts the access of trailers and auto-caravans.

Nine modules of bungalow-type, with 18 rooms and 36 places were provided. The rooms have single beds, with 2.00x0.90 m with bedsteads, mattresses and protection mattress, nightstands, two doors wardrobe, table with chairs, luggage holder, hanger, and mirror, buffet-bar equipped with television and minibar refrigeration. The terrace of the building will have PVC furniture (round table and chairs with arms). The + / - 0.00 rate will be at 0.60 m above the ground.

These two proposals are just some of those that have been proposed, but financial resources lack and the town-hall does not have the ability to contribute to the support of some projects with European funds and its involvement is not very active.

The development of the communication ways and tourist infrastructure requires more investments to cover the needs of the locality and tourists. The emphasis was put on upgrading the inter-locality roads, de-clogging of side channels, the diversification of the local economy through the re-continuation of crafts, ending some contracts for the use of fisheries facilities abusively, affecting local people, making boat mooring pontoons, in the marginal area of channels leading to the Cardon, Letea and Periprava villages; creating some camping grounds in the mentioned villages, tourism panels in Cardon, Letea and Periprava, where at the entrance in the village information about the Letea sand bank-DDBR could be posted, with the distances between villages and main tourist attractions, building new towers for watching nature, inside the branches, for bird-fauna and watching 4 horses, etc. Knowing in detail the inhabitants' needs in these unique regions is important, for tourism to become part of a sustainable local economy.

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