

## THEORETICAL CONCEPTS OF RURAL TOURISM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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**Abstract:** The intense deterioration of the environment in recent decades requires a sustainable approach in tourism, just as in other industries. Rural tourism is of the kind that, in form and concept, takes a holistic approach and applies the sustainability principle. The aim of this study is to demonstrate the variety, attractiveness and potential of rural tourism in Serbia, to emphasise the need to co-ordinate planning and development strategy, as well as to indicate the opportunities for better positioning in the market and thus obtain a number of positive economic and other effects promoting sustainable development. The Republic of Serbia does not have a long tradition of rural tourism, but there have been attempts to introduce best European practices to revive rural areas by diversifying economic activities.

**Key words:** rural tourism, sustainable tourism, sustainable development, Serbia

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In global terms, tourism is one of the fastest growing industries of the world economy. Globalisation, economic liberalisation, stimulating fiscal measures, simplified government administration, together with new forms of attractions and demand generated by changes in the lifestyles and habits of tourists, who nowadays have more free time and money have all contributed to the transformations that have been underway in tourism in recent decades [1].

In parallel to the quantitative changes manifested in high turnover and revenue rates, significant changes in terms of quality have also been apparent as “a great part of demand has left traditional sources, forms and rules of tourism behaviour in search of new forms and contents of tourism recreation” [2].

The existing practice in international tourism has proved that area or territory is the main consideration for the development of tourism. The quality of the area and its facilities are primary motivating factors for travel and attracting tourists. The impact of industrialisation and urbanisation has resulted in relatively few places on the planet not being directly modified by anthropogenic factors, while the number of places which have been modified to a greater or lesser extent has increased [3]. In this context and in view of the increasing importance of environmentally friendly tourism, rural tourism is becoming more significant.

### 2. THE TERM AND DEFINITION OF RURAL TOURISM

A number of tourism scholars such as Knickel [4], Bramwell [5], Kušen [6], Clark [7], Ploeg [8], Derek [9], Hall and Kirkpatrick [10], Lane [11] and others, have studied the terms and concept of rural tourism. The majority of discussions and scientific debates have dealt with the definition of the terms rural tourism and agritourism, and it has consequently, been widely accepted that rural tourism is a wider term than agritourism. Specifically, agritourism is often used in foreign professional literature to mean “Farm-Based Tourism” (FBT), and covers only one form of rural tourism. Strategy documents from some European countries, such as Italy and France, use the term agritourism as a synonym for tourism on farms, thus connecting it with agriculture, which actually is the essence of agritourism. In this way, agritourism fits into the wider definition of rural tourism, hence its development connotation. This is further supported by a number of scholarly findings and practical examples indicating that agritourism is too narrow an area to be independently planned, developed, promoted or marketed. The term rural tourism is the most encompassing and the most relevant term accepted by the European Union (rural → agritourism → farm tourism) and it applies to all tourism activities in rural areas.

The concept of rural tourism has been defined in many different ways by scholars. Some authors [12] define it as tourist activity in a non-urban territory dominated by agriculture, while others [13] connect rural tourism to a non-urban area and environment such as wild areas, national parks and forests. The term “country vacation” [14] is also used to mean active recreation in the rural environment of a farm or ranch and its surroundings. It is also indicated [15] that the term rural tourism is a synonym for agritourism based on traditional accommodation capacities in rural areas. Key elements of rural tourism are [11]: it is developed in rural areas, it represents heritage and reflects a traditional way of life and work, and clients are expected to be functionally in touch with nature and to take part in the activities and lifestyle of the local population.

Definitions of rural tourism vary in both scope and understanding. As the European Union promotes rural tourism in many different ways, it has accepted the European Council’s definition, according to which rural tourism is “a tourism that covers all activities in a rural area and its main characteristics are a peaceful environment, preserved natural environment, lack of noise, communication with the hosts, home-made food and familiarisation with rural activities” [16].

The Encyclopaedia of Tourism [17] states that rural tourism is a form of tourism that includes a set of all activities and aspects of the overall tourist product (recreation, leisure, peace and quiet, nature, national parks, natural parks, cultural tourism, tourism in rural households). While existing definitions of rural tourism have the sustainable development concept as their main element, different forms of tourist activities can be found in rural areas, such as: agritourism (rural households, farms), different activities in the countryside such as rest and recreation, ecotourism, cultural tourism and other combined forms of tourism based on different interests.

Such a wide definition covers not only tourism in rural households or agritourism, rest and recreation in the countryside, trips to the countryside and residential tourism, but also accommodation services, different events and festivals, and the manufacture and sale of handicrafts and agricultural products. The complexity and scale of rural tourism raise many theoretical and practical questions.

According to Eduard Kušen [6], rural tourism includes more than 20 different forms of tourism, such as: adventure, sport and recreation, tourism in rural households, indigenous residential, health, educational, cultural, religious, transit, camping, nautical, continental, hunting, fishing, gastronomic, enotourism, nature-close tourism, ecotourism, mixed and other forms of tourism. Following this definition, which is accepted by many scholars, a fundamental question arises as to whether rural tourism is just one form of tourism or a development concept reaching far beyond any specific form of tourism.

### 3. RURAL TOURISM AS A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FACTOR

The concept of sustainable development signifies balanced economic, social and cultural development which does not jeopardise the environment, thus enabling future generations to develop to the same or higher levels as the current generation. It is a process that provides for development without the degradation or depletion of the resources on which it is based. Despite the different interpretations that can be found in publications, the concept of sustainable development is a focal point in considering the long term perspective on the survival and progress of humanity. It is a key precondition, as well as the final objective of the efficient organisation of different human activities on Earth and it is based on three main principles: ecological, economic and socio-cultural sustainability.

The UN General Assembly Report on Human Development, 1994, [16] pointed out the vital importance of some systemic and institutional factors for the implementation of sustainable development, such as:

- a political system which ensures the participation of citizens in decision-making;
- an economic system which produces an economic surplus on a sustainable basis;
- a social system which provides solutions to possible social tensions;
- a technological system which is receptive to new research and development;
- an international system which promotes sustainable trading and financing between states;
- an administrative system which is flexible and adjustable.

Tourism is an economic activity completely dependent on the quality of the environment, and with proper organisation it can be very effective in protecting and improving the environment. However, the collision between environmental protection and the development of tourism is often emphasised, while disregarding several common features of these two concepts [18]:

- they are both relatively new concepts and represent organised social activities;
- they are both the result of the adverse effects of urbanisation, social and economic development and cultural needs;
- they should both ease these adverse effects and create resources and conditions for healthy life and recreation.

Nevertheless, the rapid and uncontrolled development of tourism in recent decades has had a number of ecological, social and cultural consequences, which have generated the need for sustainable development in this area too. The World Tourism Organisation and the UN Environment Programme point out that sustainable tourism is meant to satisfy the needs of tourists, as those who generate tourism demand, and tourist areas, as those who generate tourist offers,

while at the same time ensuring that these needs can be met in future at the same or a higher level [19]. The development of tourism in recent decades has defined economic indicators such as profit, employment, GDP contribution and satisfaction of tourists as the main indicators of success. However, the same authors emphasise that such “one-sided” tourism can bring about only short-term economic results, while causing a whole range of negative environmental consequences. This is a very important consideration for tourism itself, as the quality of the environment and the satisfaction of the local population are prerequisites for its optimal long-term development. The aim, therefore, is the sustainable development of tourism while focusing equally on all aspects – the environment, customer satisfaction, and economic, social and cultural dimension.

In his study, Hetzer [20] calls for a reconsideration of the relationship between culture, education and tourism, promoting the idea of sustainable development and ecotourism. He believes that responsible tourism satisfies four main criteria:

- minimum environmental impact;
- maximum respect for the local culture;
- maximum benefit for the local population;
- maximum satisfaction of the recreational needs of the tourist.

A number of authors have subsequently studied sustainable tourism (and ecotourism) versus mass tourism: Fennell & Eagles [21], Beaumont [22], Valentine [23], Orams [24], Blamey [25], Fennell [26], and Swarbrooke & Horner [27]. An analysis of these studies indicates that the majority incorporated education, conservation, the participation of local communities, the importance of cultural resource, and minimum environmental impact as vital factors determining sustainability.

A well-preserved environment is of high value for tourism. It is an important factor which determines protected and preserved locations as the most attractive tourist destinations, and is also a prerequisite and starting point for the sustainable development of tourism. These attractive features frequently influence the intensity of tourism development to a greater degree than the number and the quality of tourist services [28] offered in a certain destination. Consequently, destinations unable to offer such features suffer negative effects, such as lower visitor numbers, lower spending and lower revenues.

The concept of rural tourism is an integrated rural experience based on the interaction between rural activities, tourist facilities and rural accommodation, as well as the combination of active and passive entertainment and educational experience. Tourists are looking for a quality offer in a well-preserved natural and rural environment. If the existing order of natural and cultural values is diminished, the attractiveness of the rural environment is threatened and a destructive cycle initiated.

It is important to consider the concept of sustainability in rural tourism as broadly as possible. Sustainability cannot be based only on principles of environmental protection but also on the following:

- preserving the culture and identity of the local community;
- maintaining the sustainability of the rural economy;
- developing and supporting the local authorities and institutions responsible for the long-term development of the rural area;
- ensuring the balanced development of tourism and other activities in the rural environment.

The basic principles of sustainable rural tourism are ecological, social, cultural and economic. The ecological principle means respecting the natural diversity of a destination while setting an ecological balance. The social principle is based on the assumption that cultural diversity, the local community and heritage are protected by means of tourism development, while the development of forms of tourism undermining sustainability is prevented. The cultural principle stresses the authenticity of the destination’s culture and heritage, avoiding the uniformity that has frequently occurred in tourism. The economic principle is based on stimulating employment to prevent and mitigate adverse demographic processes in rural areas, stimulate traditional jobs and promote the manufacture and sale of local products.

The concept of sustainable rural development should be based on an integral holistic principle which involves the relationship and co-operation of all the factors influencing the development of tourism. The implementation of sustainable tourism requires joint activities by all the actors, from planning agencies to different professionals and decision makers of all hierarchical levels. The continuous application of the principle of sustainable development brings about a number of advantages for tourism, tourists, local communities, environmental protection activists and society in general. The integral approach to sustainable tourism respects the specific features of all the actors and their common interests. The advantages of such an approach are numerous, some of which are that sustainable tourism:

- promotes profitability in the economy;
- increases local employment in tourism and complementary activities;
- raises living standards in receptive areas;
- includes all segments of the local community in decision-making;
- improves communication between people;
- proves the importance of natural and cultural values for the social and economic prosperity of the local community.

The concept of sustainable development promotes rural destinations, as well as tourism and other complementary activities. The European Union has taken significant steps to contribute to these positive processes. The EU rural

development policy is based on different development models which suit the specific conditions and needs of certain areas. This approach is implemented by harmonising four different components of the rural development programme, namely [29]:

- increasing competitiveness by supporting agriculture;
- improving the state of the environment and nature;
- reforming the rural economy and upgrading the quality of life in villages;
- supporting the implementation of rural development strategy through LEADER programmes.

The EU rural development policy from 2007 to 2013 was focused on three main points in the respective legislation on rural development, specifically: increasing competitiveness in agriculture, improving the quality of the rural environment by supporting land management, upgrading the quality of life in rural areas and reforming the rural economy. The European Union issued a Directive to provide guidance for the development of rural areas through the European development model of managing the quality of rural tourist destinations (Integrated Quality Management (IQM)). The model is based on the experience of fifteen successful tourist destinations in Europe.

The EU Development Foundation, or the LEADER Foundation (Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale / Links between Actions for the Development of the Rural Economy), which is focused on local development, adopted its programme based on decentralisation and an integrated approach. The LEADER programme is based on a new understanding of rural development and on “bringing closer” development factors, activities and local elements; setting up “connections” between participants, activities and areas by organising and conducting “horizontal” local partnerships to strengthen existing structures and by decentralising financing and management, networking and establishing local and cross-border partnerships between rural areas. This program encompasses seven main principles, namely: area based, bottom-up, public-private partnership, innovation, integration, networking and co-operation between the areas and local financing and management [30].

Changing economic activities in villages, preserving the rural landscape, protecting the environment and reaffirming the traditional cultural values of villages serve as prerequisites and foundations for the development of rural tourism. It is for this reason that every country, depending on its resources and specific conditions, should strive to adopt international and European development models and thus promote its natural, social and material potential. It provides an opportunity to less developed countries to take part in the international tourism market. It is important to note that tourists from developed countries are shifting their interest towards new “undiscovered” destinations and all forms of rural tourism. There are several global associations actively promoting rural tourism, such as: EUROGITES (European Federation for Rural Tourism), ECEAT (European Centre for Ecological and Agricultural Tourism) and IAERT (International Association of Experts in Rural Tourism).

#### **4. THE CURRENT SITUATION IN SERBIAN RURAL TOURISM AND THE PLANNING AND STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK**

Serbia is a country with diverse tourism potential and opportunities. Rural tourism is considered to be an important element of integral and sustainable development and the promotion of local agricultural and other products. However, tourism is not well organised due to the social, economic and demographic transformations Serbian villages have undergone in recent decades. Rural tourism in Serbia does not have a long tradition, as the pioneering steps in this area were taken by the villages of Seča Reka, Deviči and Sirogojno only in the 1970s. Small rural estates, insufficient appreciation of the rural environment, and emphasis on other forms of tourism are some of the factors that have hindered the development of this particular form of tourism. During the Yugoslav period, the Adriatic coast was the main tourism focus (i.e. investment in tourism infrastructure and superstructure), while nowadays the focus is on the main administrative centres, spa towns and mountains. However, rural areas in Serbia have a number of comparative advantages such as:

- well-preserved traditions and handicrafts;
- cultural activities, events and festivals;
- clean environment;
- a great number of cultural monuments;
- willingness to co-operate.

There are, nevertheless, certain factors undermining the development of rural tourism in Serbia, specifically:

- decades of population decline;
- unresolved property disputes;
- poor infrastructure;
- lack of institutional support;
- absence of a clearly defined development concept for rural tourism.

**Table 1: SWOT analyses of rural tourism in Serbia**

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Natural resources, environment and landscape	Serbia is unrecognised as a tourist destination	Growing demand for new destinations	Environmental pollution
Rich cultural and historic heritage	Insufficient number of professionals	Chance to use EU development funds	Competition from the surrounding countries
Great number of different events during the year	Insufficient connection between stakeholders	Participation of locals in creating and providing services	Unfavourable demographic structure
Mostly clean environment	Unintegrated tourist attractions	Preservation and restoration of original environment and architecture	Unplanned urbanisation
Recognition in the local tourist market	Inadequate infrastructure and superstructure	Improvement of the quality of life in rural areas	Lack of investments
Strong feelings of identity and pride among local population	Passivity of relevant institutions	Creating a market for local agricultural and other products	Indifference of local communities

Area and strategic planning are very important stimuli for sustainable tourism and should become an integral part of the national plan for economic and social development, especially in view of the fact that area is a limited resource. The existing practice has proved that making plans for tourism without taking into consideration other sectors can have long-term consequences for the specific area and society.

Setting priorities is one of the most important and most disputed issues in tourism planning. This complex process makes use of objective criteria supplemented by subjective ones, leading to the conclusions needed to make key decisions for the development of tourism [31]. The planning process has several stages, beginning with situational analyses, establishing facts relevant to rural development, defining development targets, drawing conclusions based on research data and ending with the implementation and evaluation of the outcome. During the suggestion and recommendation stage, different options concerning the development of tourism’s influence on the local community and other factors are assessed in order to design development plans and policies. The implementation and management stage is a continuous process aimed at monitoring progress in achieving the targets of rural development. Managing the development of rural tourism requires appropriately educated professionals.

The most significant planning document in tourism is the *Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia*, which sets long-term planning and development targets in accordance with economic, technological, communication, IT, climate, social, psychological and other trends and tendencies [32]. The expected results of the Strategy are the enhanced competitiveness of Serbian tourism, increased hard currency revenues, and higher tourism turnover and employment rates, resulting in the Republic of Serbia becoming a competitive tourist destination. Rural tourism is considered to be an important part of the overall tourism policy of Serbia, and should serve to develop agricultural production and attract the younger generation to stay in rural areas.

A tourism development strategy is the starting point of tourism policy in every country, and the foundation for other supplementary documents on tourism. Local authorities tend to adopt their own strategies of economic and sustainable development which ensure incentives for all areas of the economy, including tourism. A number of local authorities consider rural tourism to be important (Knić, Golubac, Majdanpek, Valjevo etc.). In order to facilitate the implementation of the *Tourism Development Strategy* in Serbia, sixteen master plans for leading tourist destinations have been drawn up. The idea is to use these master plans to evaluate tourism potentials of selected areas and to stress the importance of creating a planning and strategic development framework. One of these master plans is the *Sustainable Development of Rural Tourism in Serbia* [33], which was designed by the UNDP, FAO, UNWTO, UNICEF and UNEP in co-operation with the Ministry of Economy and Regional Development, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management and the Tourist Organisation of Serbia in 2011 and was adopted in 2012 with an accompanying action and implementation plan [34].

In parallel, the World Tourist Organisation, together with 19 local authorities, has striven to strengthen the local public, private and civil sectors to implement the master plan and enable competitive and sustainable rural tourism. The aim of the plan is to create conditions to diversify the rural economy in Serbia which would in turn give impetus to the overall development of the selected cities and municipalities. In addition, this master plan would strengthen the capacities of rural tourism entrepreneurs and support local projects. According to the master plan, twelve clusters have been selected for rural tourism (Upper Danube Region, Northern Banat, Fruška Gora, Southern Banat, Central Serbia, Zlatibor-Zlatar, Golija, Kopaonik, Lower Danube Region, Sokobanja, Eastern Serbia and South-eastern Serbia),

## 5. CONCLUSION

The intensified development of rural tourism is related to the postmodernist period and is the result of the modern lifestyle and the growing need for a clean, genuine and authentic environment. Rural tourism covers a wide range of activities and it is therefore not only a form of tourism, but a whole concept of tourism development. It reaches far beyond the specific form of tourism and becomes a factor of social and economic development in rural areas.

Rural tourism is a significant driver of the sustainable development of rural areas, and it contributes to the preservation of nature and cultural heritage and calls for the restoration of authentic values. It helps to maintain local identity, protect the environment, strengthen traditional environmentally friendly production and support the development of rural areas by means of sustainable development. Sustainable tourism promotes balanced development of both tourism and environmental protection.

In order to implement the strategy of sustainable rural tourism, an integral, holistic and comprehensive approach is needed. The overall strategy for rural tourism development requires compromise between different participants, local communities, the tourism industry and visitors.

The Republic of Serbia does not have a long tradition of rural tourism development. There are attempts to follow European practice and apply new models for the revival of rural areas through the diversification of economic activities. By implementing existing regulations, the conditions for the strategic management of the sustainable development of rural tourism will be created.

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