

ROMANIA'S NATIONAL AND NATURAL PARKS AND THEIR ECOLOGICAL AND ECOTURISTIC IMPORTANCE

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Abstract

Ecotourism is essential to protect and preserve the natural and cultural heritage, to develop local communities socially and economically and to increase the environmental education. To conserve the biological diversity, Romania has established many protected natural areas (over 7% of the country's area or about 18% if Natura 2000 sites considered). Romania has 32 protected natural areas of national interest: the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, 13 national parks and 18 natural parks. Besides these major protected areas, there are 941 scientific reserves, nature monuments and nature reserves nationwide, exceeding 300,000 hectares. Although Romania has a significant ecotourism heritage with great potential for valuation and an adequate legislative framework, ecotourism is still a fairly narrow segment of tourism market, facing many problems, such as: poor local cooperation, modest national and international promotion, limited supply, poor diversification, poor development of ecotourism infrastructure in protected areas, labor migration, low level of training of those employed in the field. Using a proper management and infrastructure, these protected areas could receive more visitors, which would increase tourism revenue and improve the current precarious situation of financing protected areas.

Keywords: ecotourism, environment protection, national park, natural park, Romania.

1. INTRODUCTION

Romania's ecotourism resources are particularly rich and varied. The natural heritage is defined according to the legislation in force (Law No. 49/2011) as follows: *"The set of physical-geographical, floristic, faunal and biocenotic components and structures of the natural environment, whose ecological, economic, scientific, biogenic, sanogenic, landscape and recreational importance has a relevant significance in terms of conservation of floristic and faunal biological diversity, the functional integrity of ecosystems, the conservation of genetic, plant and animal heritage, as well as the living, welfare, culture and civilization requirements of present and future generations"*.

The natural and semi-natural ecosystems represent about 47% of the country's area. 783 habitat types were identified and characterized on the territory of the country, (13 coastal habitats, 143 wetland habitats, 196 pastures and hayfields habitats, 206 forest habitats, 90 dunes and rocky areas habitats and 135 agricultural land habitats), in other words, a great diversity of flora and fauna (The National Strategy of Ecotourism Development in Romania, 2009):

- 3700 species of plants, of which 23 are declared natural monuments, 39 are endangered, 171 vulnerable and 1,253 are rare;
- 33,792 species of animals, of which 33,085 invertebrates and 707 vertebrates: 191 species of fish (9 endangered species, 16 vulnerable species and 11 rare species), 20 species of amphibians (3 endangered species, 9 vulnerable species), 30 species of reptiles (4 endangered species, one vulnerable species), 364 species of birds, of which 312 migratory species (18 endangered species and 17 vulnerable species) and 102 mammal species (19 endangered species, 26 vulnerable species and 13 rare species).

There are important populations of large carnivores: wolves (3,000 specimens - 40% of the European population), brown bears (5,600 specimens - 60% of the European population) and lynx (1,500 specimens - 40% of the European population), these species being a symbol of wildlife and natural habitats.

To conserve the biological diversity, Romania has established many protected natural areas (over 7% of the country's area or about 18% if Natura 2000 sites considered) and this network is planned to be expanded in the future. Romania has 32 protected natural areas of national interest: the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, 13 national parks and 18 natural parks. In addition to these major protected areas, there are 941 scientific reserves, nature monuments and nature reserves nationwide with an area exceeding 300,000 hectares. Besides these natural resources, Romania has an ethnographic and folkloric potential of great originality and authenticity.

Although Romania has a significant ecotourism heritage with great potential for valuation and an adequate legislative framework, ecotourism is still a fairly narrow segment of tourism market, facing many problems, such as: poor local cooperation, modest national and international promotion, limited supply, poor diversification, poor development of ecotourism infrastructure in protected areas, labor migration, low level of training of those employed in the field (The National Strategy of Ecotourism Development in Romania, 2009).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research consisted of data collection on the main indicators characterizing the national and natural parks of Romania and the ecotourism activity within (the representative indicators are the number of visitors and those related to the infrastructure for ecotourism). We also consulted the information in a series of publications and documents of the Ministry of Tourism and parks' administrations, as well as and the Romanian legislation on environment protection and ecotourism.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The ecotourism legislation in Romania

The activity of tourism on ecological principles in Romania is supported by the Romanian legislation and other EU normative or directive acts in this field. When Romania joined the U.E. structures, a series of laws were adopted regarding environment protection, the regime of protected areas and natural monuments, the environmental agreement for urban planning and spatial planning, the ecological and social impact studies, the environmental assessment:

- Law no. 82/1993 regarding the establishment of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve;
- Law on environmental protection no. 137/1995, republished in 1999 and in the Official Gazette no. 70/2000 with amendments;

- Law no. 5/2000, section III, protected areas. This law established the protected natural areas of national interest and the natural monuments, as well as the values of national cultural heritage: 3 Biosphere Reserves, 14 national or natural parks, 827 nature reserves and monuments and 681 heritage values of national interest;
- Law no. 462/2001 on approving the Government Ordinance no. 236/2000 on the regime of protected natural areas, conservation of natural habitats, wild flora and fauna;
- Law no. 49/2011 on approving the Government Ordinance no. 57/2007 on the regime of protected natural areas, conservation of natural habitats, wild flora and fauna, published in the Official Gazette no. 262/2011.

In addition, there is a series of government decisions and orders of the ministries in the field of environment, health (use and protection of balneo-therapeutic resources), tourism (use and protection of sea beaches, mountain areas and resorts, tourism organization and development in Romania).

The protected areas and the natural monuments can enter the tourist circuit, offering the possibility to visit for scientific, educational, recreational and tourist purposes, except for the strictly protected scientific reservations, the conservation areas and the special avifauna protection areas. The last two categories fall under the Directive 92/43 EEC/1992 on the conservation of natural habitats, of wild flora and fauna; they belong to the European NATURA 2000 Network and recognized by the European Commission (Government Ordinance no. 236/2000).

Ecotourism is essential to protect and preserve the natural and cultural heritage, to develop local communities socially and economically and to increase the environmental education.

Tourism in protected natural areas generates income for local communities and those who manage them, achieving the sustainable development of those areas. However, a chaotic, uncontrolled development of tourism can have negative effects. This has been legally statuated and since 2003 important steps have been taken to recognize this form of tourism and to develop an ecotourism strategy (The National Strategy of Ecotourism Development in Romania, 2009):

- the Government Decision no. 230/2003 demarcates the Biosphere Reserves, the national parks and the natural parks and establishes their administrations, emphasizing the importance of the ecotourism strategies that conserve the biodiversity and use the natural resources sustainably;
- the Ministry of Transport, Construction and Tourism was the first institution which drafted the guide entitled "Romania's ecotourism strategy", in 2004;
- in 2005, at the initiative of the Ministry of Transport, Construction and Tourism, a UNWTO consultant prepared a technical assistance report as the base of the ecotourism strategy;
- the National Authority for Tourism developed in 2006 the "Romanian Tourism Development Strategy for the period 2007-2013", with separate chapters for ecotourism and other forms of tourism (such as mountain, spa, seaside, cultural, congress and event, rural and religious tourism);
- the Master Plan for the Development of National Tourism 2007-2026 supports ecotourism development in the Danube Delta, the national parks and rural areas;
- the Government Decision no. 120/2008 and the Government Decision no. 314/2009 on the approval of the Annual Marketing and Promotion Program and the Annual Tourism Product Development Program include actions to develop sustainable tourism, such as: developing and completing the ecotourism strategy in protected areas, raising the awareness on sustainable tourism development, updating the classification system of the tourist accommodation structures, lowering the pollution connected to the tourism industry, taking over the concept of "ecological label" in the hotel system in Romania;

- in 2009, the National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism issued “The National Strategy of Ecotourism Development in Romania, 2009”.

Therefore, Romania ensures the legislative conditions regarding ecotourism development - in the strict sense - the capitalization of protected areas, but also of tourism, in general, which must be carried out on ecological principles, in the context of sustainable economic development, in general and tourism activity, in particular.

The ecological and ecotourism importance of the national and natural parks in Romania

The national and natural parks represent the support for ecotourism activities in Romania. According to the Law no. 49/2011 on approving the Government Ordinance no. 57/2007 on the status of protected natural areas, conservation of natural habitats, wild flora and fauna, a protected natural area is defined as “*a terrestrial and / or aquatic area where there are species of wild plants and animals, biogeographical, landscape, geological elements and formations, paleontological, speleological or of another nature, with special ecological, scientific or cultural value, which has a special regime of protection and conservation, established according to the legal provisions*”.

To ensure special measures for the protection and conservation of natural heritage assets, a differentiated regime of protection, conservation and use has been established, according to the following categories of protected natural areas: national parks (category II International Union for Nature Conservation), natural parks (category V International Union for Nature Conservation), Biospheres reserves and geoparks. These are large protected areas, suitable for carrying out ecotourism activities and are defined and established according to the legislation in force (Law no. 49/2011).

Due to the beauty, rarity, uniqueness and the need to conserve landscapes and other geomorphological, hydrological, floristic and faunal elements in Romania, 32 protected natural areas of national interest have been established, namely: the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, 13 national parks and 18 natural parks (Table 1). 20 national and natural parks (including 2 Biosphere Reserves) are located in the Romanian Carpathians.

In addition to these, there are other 941 scientific reserves, nature monuments and nature reserves totalling 316,012.6 hectares. Many of these protected areas are included in national or natural parks, and therefore the total protected natural areas in Romania count for 1,702,112 ha, representing over 7% of the national territory (The National Strategy of Ecotourism Development in Romania, 2009).

In addition, the European Natura 2000 Network cover approximately 17.84% of the country's surface and include:

- 108 Areas of Special Avifauna Protection (11.89% of the country's surface), established by Government Decision no. 1284/2007;
- 273 Sites of Community Importance (13.21% of the national territory), established by Order no. 1964/2007 of the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development.

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Table 1. The national and natural parks in Romania

<i>Pos.</i>	<i>The name of the Biosphere Reserve</i>	<i>Location (county)</i>	<i>Area (ha)</i>	<i>Year of establishment</i>	<i>Website</i>
1	Delta Dunării*	Tulcea, Constanța	580000	1991	deltadunarii.ro

<i>Pos.</i>	<i>The name of the national park</i>	<i>Location (county)</i>	<i>Area (ha)</i>	<i>Year of establishment</i>	<i>Website</i>
1	Retezat Mountains *	Hunedoara	38047	1938	retezat.ro
2	Rodnei Mountains *	Bistrița-Năsăud, Maramureș, Suceava	46599	1990	parcrodna.ro
3	Buila-Vânturarița	Vâlcea	4186	2005	buila.ro
4	Călimani	Bistrița-Năsăud, Harghita, Mureș, Suceava	24041	1975	calimani.ro
5	Ceahlău	Neamț	8396	1995	ceahlaupark.ro
6	Cheile Bicazului - Hășmaș	Harghita, Neamț	6575	1990	chbicazului-hasmas.ro
7	Cheile Nerei - Beușnița	Caraș	36758	1990	cheilenereibeusnita.ro
8	Cozia	Vâlcea	17100	1966	cozia.ro
9	Defileul Jiului	Gorj, Hunedoara	11127	2005	defileuljiului.ro
10	Domogled - Valea Cernei	Caraș, Mehedinți, Gorj	61211	1982	domogled-cerna.ro
11	Piatra Craiului	Argeș, Brașov	14733	1938	pcrai.ro
12	Semenic - Cheile Carașului	Caraș	36664	2000	pnscc.ro
13	Măcinului Mountains	Tulcea	11321	2000	parcmacin.ro

* *Rezervație a Biosferei*

<i>Pos.</i>	<i>The name of the natural park</i>	<i>Location (county)</i>	<i>Area (ha)</i>	<i>Year of establishment</i>	<i>Website</i>
1	Apuseni	Alba, Cluj, Bihor	75784	1990	parcapuseni.ro
2	Bucegi	Brașov, Dâmbovița, Prahova	32663	1974	bucegipark.ro
3	Cindrel	Sibiu	9873	2000	sibiul.ro
4	Defileul Mureșului Superior	Mureș	9156	2007	osrgh.ro
5	Grădiștea Muncelului-Cioclovina	Hunedoara	38184	1979	gradiste.ro
6	Dinosaurs Geopark Țara Hațegului	Hunedoara	102392	2005	tarahateguluigeoparc.ro
7	Maramureș Mountains	Maramureș	148850	2005	m.maramuresului.ro
8	Porțile de Fier	Caraș, Mehedinți	115665	1990	portiledefier.ro
9	Putna-Vrancea	Vrancea	30204	2005	putnavrancea
10	Vânători-Neamț	Neamț	30818	1999	vanatoripark.ro
11	Cefa	Bihor	5002	2010	-
12	Comana	Girgiu	24963	2004	comanaparc.ro
13	Dumbrava Sibiului	Sibiu	993	1963	-
14	Lunca Joasă a Prutului Inferior	Galați	8247	2005	luncaprut.ro
15	Balta Mică a Brăilei	Brăila	17529	1978	bmb.ro
16	Lunca Mureșului	Arad, Timiș	17455	2005	luncamuresului.ro
17	Mehedinți Plateau Geopark	Mehedinți, Gorj	106000	2005	-
18	Văcărești Lake	București	190	2016	parcnaturalvacaresti.ro

Tourism management of protected areas in Romania

Most natural and national parks were officially settled immediately after 1989 and their administrations were established between 1999-2004 and 1993 for the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve. The major protected areas in Romania are managed as follows:

- The National Directorate of Forests Romsilva manages 22 parks, of which 12 national parks and 10 natural parks;
- The Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Administration, a public institution subordinated to the Ministry of Environment, manages the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve;
- Neamț County Council manages the Ceahlau National Park;
- Mehedinți County Council manages the Mehedinți Plateau Geopark Natural Park;
- The University of Bucharest, Faculty of Geology manages the Dinosaurs Geopark Țara Hațegului Natural Park;
- Lunca Joasă a Prutului Inferior Natural Park and Defileul Mureșului Superior Natural Park do not have their own administrations.

The *management plan* of a protected area represents an official document statuing objectives measures to achieve an efficient, responsible management of the respective areas. It summarizes the information existing at the time of drawing up the plan, the management objectives and an action plan for a certain period of time, usually 5 years. The plan statues the short and medium term activities for all landowners / administrators and for all those who intend to carry out activities within the respective protected area.

The *objectives of a management plan* fall within these categories:

- preserving biodiversity;
- rational use of land and natural resources;
- preserving and promoting cultural heritage;
- tourism and recreation management;
- environmental education;
- park management;
- other additional activities.

The management plan also provides the *internal zoning of national and natural parks* and approved by the central public authority for environmental and forest protection. The management plan should be completed within 2 years from the signing of the administration contract. The internal zoning of a protected area is provided by this document (Law no. 49/2011), by defining and delimiting, as the case may be, the following areas:

- *strict protection areas* - areas in protected natural areas, of great scientific importance, which include wild areas with no or very low human interventions. It is forbidden to carry out any human activities here, except for research, education and ecotourism<
- *integral protection areas* - include the most valuable assets of the natural heritage inside the protected natural areas. Some ecotourism activities that do not require construction-investments are allowed;
- *buffer areas* (sustainable conservation areas within the national parks and sustainable management areas in natural parks) – represent the transition between areas with integral protection and those of sustainable development. Some ecotourism activities that do not require construction-investments are allowed;
- *ecological reconstruction areas*, where measures are taken to restore the damaged environment;

- *areas of sustainable development of human activities* - investment / development activities are allowed, with priority those of tourist interest, but respecting the principle of sustainable use of natural resources and prevention of any significant negative effects on biodiversity.

As an exception to these provisions, the following activities may be carried out within the integral protection areas, outside the perimeters of scientific reservations:

- scientific and educational activities;
- ecotourism activities that do not require construction-investments;
- the rational use of meadows for mowing and / or grazing only with domestic animals, the property of members of the communities that own pastures or have the right to use them in any form recognized by the national legislation in force, on areas, during periods and with species and herds approved by the park administration, so as not to affect the natural habitats and the species of flora and fauna present;
- location and operative extinguishing of fires.

The legislation in force (Law no. 49/2011) also establishes the ***administration structures of national and natural parks***. They have between 12 and 23 employees, with the following composition: director of the park; security chief; economist; responsible for community relations and environmental education; biologist; information technology specialist; between 6 and 17 field agents.

The ***visitor management plan*** represents a useful tool in managing protected areas (The National Strategy of Ecotourism Development in Romania, 2009). It directs the visitor through the park to fulfill the visitor's imagined experience, spending free time in nature, with minimal negative impact on nature and local communities. As a result of the requirements imposed under the Environmental Structural Operational Program, many Romanian national and natural parks have developed visitor management plans.

Analysis of specific infrastructure and ecotourism flow for the main ecotourism destinations in Romania

The *tourist accommodation units* related to the national and natural parks in Romania are insufficient. The *accommodation units* in the protected areas vary in number and type. The number of accommodation units is insufficient in the parks Măcinului Mountains, Balta Mică a Brăilei, Grădiștea Muncelului-Cioclovina, Comana, but there are accommodation structures located near the protected areas (for example, the parks Rodnei Mountains, Ceahlău, Bucegi, Cozia, Piatra Craiului). The National Directorate of Forests Romsilva, which manages 22 national and natural parks, considers that there are no problems with the capacity to receive visitors in the parks under its administration.

The Romanian Ecotourism Association has ecolabelled a series of accommodation units (over 12 tourist pensions, with over 200 accommodation places), most of them located inside or in the immediate vicinity of protected areas.

Tourist refuges and campsites are the preferred accommodation units for the ecotourists visiting national and natural parks, but these structures are deficient in most protected areas. Ecotourism programs could include the hunting lodges (223 nationwide). Although the National Directorate of Forests Romsilva has developed this network of lodges to support hunting tourism (some lodges have a surprisingly high level of comfort, being used for protocol visits), they are an important potential for ecotourism development.

Visitor centers and information points promotes the management objectives of a park and establishes measures to preserve the natural species / habitats. Usually a building that acts as a visitor center includes exhibition spaces, a tourist information point, a conference room, the park administration offices and accommodation rooms. Currently, the national and natural parks in Romania are poorly equipped from this point of view (there are 3 visitor centers in the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, 11 visitor centers and 31 information points in the national and natural parks, but there are also large protected areas without such structures), and where these structures have been developed, there are generally problems in their exploitation due to the lack of funds or in other cases due to a poor cooperation between the park administration and the local public authorities (for example, in the Balta Mică a Brăilei Natural Park, the visitor center was closed). However, there is an opportunity that these structures can be financed through structural funds (The National Strategy for Ecotourism Development in Romania, 2009).

Networks of *tourist routes* have been created in most of the Romanian national and natural parks. Most of them are hiking trails, but there are also cycling routes or water trails (in the parks set up in wetlands). Recently, several educational routes have been developed, through Life Natura projects (Ceahlău, Rodna Mountains, Balta Mică a Brăilei), GEF (Vânători Neamț, Măcinului Mountains) or projects financed by the Partnership Foundation (Buila Vânturarița, Retezat Mountains). In most cases, the administration of tourist routes is handled by the County Councils, park administrations or public mountain rescue services (The National Strategy of Ecotourism Development in Romania, 2009).

In some parks with tradition in tourism, various other *access* options have been developed - cable transport (Bucegi Natural Park, Rodna Mountains National Park, Apuseni Natural Park), narrow railway (Vaserului Valley - Maramureș Mountains Natural Park), boats and ships of different sizes (Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve).

The internal accessibility in natural and national parks is considered to be poor (poor trails) and it should be improved. For example, the Gradiștea Muncelului Natural Park benefits from the existence of cultural objectives of international importance (Dacian fortresses), inscribed on the list of UNESCO monuments, but which are not sufficiently capitalized from a tourist point of view.

Within the protected natural areas where the development and promotion of activities such as animal species observation is desired, the construction of *specific infrastructure* has started (Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, Lunca Mureșului Natural Park, Balta Mică a Brăilei Natural Park, Lunca Joasa a Prutului Inferior Natural Park, Buila Vânturarița National Park), but still the initiatives in this field are still in the pioneering phase.

The National Directorate of Forests Romsilva has allocated about 3.4 million Euros a year, which hardly covered the operating expenses of the parks. It is estimated that the current financial resources represent only about 50% of the basic level and 30% of the optimal level of financing. The ranger positions in the subordinate parks have been reduced, given that all the parks have a shortage of trained personnel and there are parks where a ranger has to cover an area of 10,000 ha. However, important progress has been made: many park administrations have been equipped with headquarters, off-road vehicles, dedicated staff (The National Strategy for Ecotourism Development in Romania, 2009).

In terms of *ecotourism flow*, many resident and foreign tourists, especially from the Central European countries choose to visit the protected areas in Romania. Since there is no system to record the number of visitors, the estimates count for 2.3 million visitors annually: Bucegi (about 1 million visitors), Vânători-Neamț (400,000 visitors), Apuseni (300,000 visitors), Danube Delta

Biosphere Reserve (almost 100,000 accommodated tourists), Iron Gates (60,000), Putna-Vrancea (40,000 visitors), Piatra Craiului (80,000 visitors), Semenic-Cheile Caraşului (60,000 visitors), Cozia (50,000 visitors), Ceahlău (33,000 visitors). Only a few protected areas have initiated systematic actions to monitor and register visitors by now (The National Strategy for Ecotourism Development in Romania, 2009).

Using the right management and infrastructure, the Romanian national and natural parks could receive more visitors. A high tourism revenue could improve the precarious situation of financing national and natural parks.

Ecotourism programs developed in the protected areas of Romania

The *ecotourism programs* in Romania have developed recently. In 2000, some national or natural parks developed projects including ecotourism activities (Retezat, Piatra Craiului, Vânători-Neamţ, Apuseni). Some local tour operators sell ecotourism programs (Discover Romania, Carpathian Tours, InterPares, Tioc Nature & Study Travel, Equus Silvania). The travel agencies Paralela 45, J'Info Tours, Perfect Tour, Transilvania Tour sell nature tourism programs in Romania.

The main protected natural areas with ecotourism programs are:

- Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve: knowledge tourism (for exploring the variety of wild landscape, combining hand-propelled boat rides on scenic canals with hiking along canals or on river and sea ridges), specialized tourism - scientific (for ornithologists, specialists, researchers, students), special youth programs (for knowing, understanding and appreciating nature), rural tourism (in which tourists are hosted and guided by locals), tourism for water sports, photo-safari, tourism for sport fishing (www.ddbra.ro);
- Piatra Craiului National Park: programs based mainly on observing large carnivores (wolf, bear, lynx) and specific plant species, equestrian tourism, cycling, hiking, etc.;
- Apuseni Mountains Natural Park: speotourism, themed hiking, cultural programs, cross-country skiing, equestrian tourism, cycling tourism, etc.;
- other protected natural areas, some with the status of national or natural park: Retezat National Park, Ţara Haţegului Dinosaurs Geopark, Măcinului Mountains National Park, Rodna Mountains National Park, Călimani National Park, Lunca Mureşului Natural Park, Vânători-Neamţ Natural Park, with programs focused on equestrian tourism, cycling, themed hiking, cross-country skiing, flora and fauna observation, cultural programs, canoe expeditions;
- Transylvania - Târnava Mare area: discovery of Saxon and Szekler culture, horseback riding, themed hiking;
- Maramureş: nature discovery programs, horseback riding, cycling, discovering occupations and traditional architecture;
- Bucovina: nature observation programs or themed hikes are combined with cultural tourism and monastic tourism.

The *ecotourism activities* encouraged in the protected natural areas managed by the National Directorate of Forests Romsilva are (www.rosilva.ro): hiking on official tourist routes; trips with specialized tourist guides (trips to discover the flora and fauna, trips to the local communities); horseback riding on specially designated routes; forest road cycling; rock climbing.

A number of park administrations are making serious efforts to create and market *ecotourism programs / packages* (Călimani, Cheile Bicazului-Hăşmaş, Comana, Cozia, Domogled-Valea Cernei, Lunca Mureşului, Semenic-Cheile Caraşului, Vânători-Neamţ, Rodna Mountains).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Romania's ecotourism resources are particularly rich and varied. To preserve the biological diversity, Romania established 32 protected natural areas of national interest. In addition to these natural resources, Romania has an ethnographic and folkloric potential of great originality and authenticity. The activity of tourism on ecological principles in Romania is supported by the Romanian legislation and other EU normative or directive acts. Ecotourism is essential to protect and preserve the natural and cultural heritage, to improve the living of the local communities and to increase the environmental education.

Although Romania has a significant ecotourism heritage with great potential for valuation and an adequate legislative framework, ecotourism is still a fairly narrow segment of tourism market, faced with many problems, such as: poor local cooperation, modest national and international promotion, limited supply, poor diversification, poor development of ecotourism infrastructure in protected areas, labor migration, low level of training of those employed in the field.

The ecotourism activities encouraged in the protected natural areas in Romania are: themed hiking; hiking on official tourist routes; trips with specialized tourist guides (trips to discover the flora and fauna, trips to the local communities); horseback riding on specially designated routes; forest road cycling; rock climbing; knowledge tourism (for exploring the variety of wild landscape), specialized tourism - scientific (for ornithologists, specialists, researchers, students), special youth programs (for knowledge, understanding and appreciation of nature), rural tourism (in which tourists are hosted and guided by locals), tourism for water sports, photo-safari, tourism for sport fishing; programs based on observing flora and fauna, equestrian tourism; speotourism; cross-country skiing; themed hiking; rural tourism with cultural programs to know the traditions of the local population. A number of park administrations are making serious efforts to create and market ecotourism programs / packages.

Using a proper management and infrastructure, these protected areas could receive more visitors, which would increase tourism revenue and improve the current precarious situation of financing protected areas.

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