

PROFILE OF ECOTOURISTS IN APUSENI MOUNTAINS NATURAL PARK

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Abstract: *Profile of Ecotourists in Apuseni Mountains Natural Park.* In the last decades, new forms of tourism have emerged, thus increasing the ways tourism resources are used. One of these alternative new forms of tourism, known as ecotourism, represents a friendlier way of doing business. Apuseni Mountains, located in Western Romania, represent one of the most impressive tourist attraction of our country. Our paper tries to offer a series of characteristics of ecotourism and also to create a profile of the ecotourist who visits the Apuseni Mountains.

Key words: mass tourism, sustainable tourism, ecotourism

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Introduction

Tourism is at the same time one of the most significant yet misunderstood phenomenon in the world today. It is something that is engaged in by many people in the developed world and is regarded as an important mechanism for economic development not only in the industrialized countries but also in many developing countries. The extent of tourism activities across the globe and the sheer number of people who travel means that tourism is often described as one of the world's largest industries. Yet tourism is simultaneously an agent of cultural and change and a substantial contributor to environmental change, including at the level of global environmental change (Cooper, Hall, 2008, p.7).

It is a well known fact that tourism, either mass or sustainable, has an impact on both the society and the environment. "Until the late 1970s, in many regions and countries, tourism was considered a smokeless golden goose, an industry reaping more benefits with fewer financial resources and causing negligible damage on human society and nature" (Choi, 2005, p.98). However, there is current and growing concern about the impact that some forms of tourism developments are having on the environment. There are examples from almost every country in the world, where tourism development has been identified as being the main cause of environmental degradation. In the wake of

countless reports by hundreds of researchers, the environmental movement has pressured the tourism industry and governments to refashion the conventional tourism development framework to meet the needs of new environmentalism standards while sustaining an optimal level of socioeconomic benefits.

1. From mass to sustainable tourism

It can reasonably and safely be assumed that demand for international travel has now been firmly established in modern societies and that it will be followed suit from within emerging economies (Handszuh, 2008, p.75). Mass tourism is responsible for most of the negative impacts, because of a series of factors: the growing number of visitors, lack of respect for the environment, total absence of legislation and rights for protecting the local communities and the environment, etc.

Sustainable tourism, on the other hand, is a friendlier form of tourism towards the locals and the environment. It evolved from the concept of sustainable development. The concept appeared at the end of the last millennium, and it is considered to be new way of doing business with a smaller impact on the environment. The first definition of sustainable development was published in the Bruntland report: sustainable development is the “development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Bruntland report, 1987). In the following years, sustainable development has appeared on the agenda of international organizations like the UN (the UN has created a Division for Sustainable Development in the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs), private firms (the Corporate Social Responsibility policy) and local authorities.

Sustainable tourism “is an industry which attempts to make a low impact on the environment and local culture, while helping to generate income, employment, and the conservation of local ecosystems. It is responsible tourism which is both ecologically and culturally sensitive” (www.ecoindia.com last access 5th may 2009).

Tourism specialists offered a series of features of sustainable tourism: 1. it helps the integrity of the region - because tourists are looking for the local characteristics of a destination and in turn the revenues from tourism raise the local value of these assets; 2. it stimulates quality not quantity - the locals do not measure their incomes according to the number of visitors, but by their length of stay and money spent, and at the same time Tourism in communities is not simply a case of whether to encourage visitors or not, but also what type of visitors and what type of tourism the community decides it wants and needs (Beeton, 2007, p.4) 3. it doesn't abuse its product - the local firms anticipate the increasing pressure and they apply some limitations in order to protect the resources; 4. it's informative - on one hand travelers not only learn about the destination, they learn how to help sustain its character while deepening their own travel experiences and on the other hand residents learn that the ordinary and familiar may be of interest and value to outsiders; 5. it is profitable for all the members of the society - firms can hire locals, acquire local products, thus the local and regional authorities should help raise the economic and social attraction of the region; 6. conservation of resources – tourists favor the firms that reduce pollution, energy and water consumption and the use of chemical products; 7. it means great trips - satisfied, excited visitors bring new knowledge home and send friends off to experience the same thing - which provides continuing business for the destination (Badulescu, 2005, p.32).

There have been a lot of discussions regarding the differences between sustainable tourism and mass tourism. But according to the World Tourism Organization: “Sustainable tourism development guidelines and management practices are applicable to all forms of tourism in all types of destinations, including mass tourism and the various niche tourism segments. Sustainability principles refer to the environmental, economic

and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee its long-term sustainability” (concepts & definitions 2004 – www.unwto.org last access 5th may 2009).

2. Ecotourism – definition and characteristics

Among these alternative forms of tourism one has really achieved the objectives regarding the environmental protection. It is called ecotourism. “It can be viewed as an extremist form of sustainable tourism” (Badulescu, 2006, p.17). Ecotourists are not trying just to reduce their impact on the environment. They actually try to help the environment and the locals in different ways. They have a social consciousness and a responsible attitude.

The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people.” (http://www.ecotourism.org/webmodules/webarticlesnet/templates/eco_template.aspx?articleid=95&zoneid=2 Last access 6th May 2009).

Others, consider ecotourism to be: “low impact nature tourism which contributes to the maintenance of species and habitats either directly through a contribution to conservation and/or indirectly by providing revenue to the local community sufficient for local people to value, and therefore protect, their wildlife heritage area as a source of income” (Fennel, 2008, p.20).

The international community admitted the importance of ecotourism and the UN International Year of Ecotourism was held in 2002. It provided a global focus for efforts to link sustainable tourism development with the conservation of natural areas (Zeppel, 2006, p.15).

There are a series of principles that those who implement and participate in ecotourism activities should follow (Badulescu, 2006, p.19).

Firstly, people involved in ecotourism should minimize impact because tourism causes damage. Ecotourism strives to minimize the adverse affects of hotels, trails, and other infrastructure by using either recycled materials or plentifully available local building materials, renewable sources of energy, recycling and safe disposal of waste and garbage, and environmentally and culturally sensitive architectural design. Minimization of impact also requires that the numbers and mode of behavior of tourists be regulated to ensure limited damage to the ecosystem. The best way to avoid negative environmental impacts and reinforce positive impacts is to plan tourism properly, using the environmental planning approach, before development. This planning must take place at all levels – national, regional and site-specific areas for hotels, resorts and tourist attraction features (Lickorish, 1997, p.128).

Secondly, they must build environmental and cultural awareness and respect. Ecotourism means education, for both tourists and residents of nearby communities. Well before departure tour operators should supply travelers with reading material about the country, environment and local people, as well as a code of conduct for both the traveler and the industry itself. This information helps prepare the tourist as The Ecotourism Societies guidelines state “to learn about the places and peoples visited” and “to minimize their negative impacts while visiting sensitive environments and cultures”. Essential to good ecotourism are well-trained, multilingual naturalist guides with skills in natural and cultural history, environmental interpretation, ethical principles and effective communication. Being aware of the consequences of visitation is not just important in terms of environmental and social responsibilities but also in terms of good business practice (Cooper Hall, 2008, p.161).

Thirdly, investors should provide direct financial benefits for conservation. Ecotourism helps raise funds for environmental protection, research and education through a variety of mechanisms, including park entrance fees, tour company, hotel, airline and

airport taxes and voluntary contributions. At the same time they should provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people - National Parks and other conservation areas will only survive if there are "happy people" around their perimeters. The local community must be involved with and receive income and other tangible benefits (clean water, roads, health clinics, etc.) from the conservation area and its tourist facilities. Campsites, lodges, guide services, restaurants and other concessions should be run by or in partnership with communities surrounding a park or other tourist destination. More importantly, if ecotourism is to be viewed as a tool for rural development, it must also help shift economic and political control to the local community, village, cooperative, or entrepreneur. This is the most difficult and time-consuming principle in the economic equation and the one that foreign operators and "partners" most often let fall through the cracks or that they follow only partially or formally. Some specialists consider that "a community approach to tourism development is a prerequisite to sustainability. The logic behind this is that it is the communities living in and around conservation areas that are best placed to manage the environment in a sustainable fashion" (Butcher, 2008, p.68).

Fourthly, they must raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climate. Ecotourism is not only "greener" but also less culturally intrusive and exploitative than conventional tourism. Whereas prostitution, black markets and drugs often are by-products of mass tourism, ecotourism strives to be culturally respectful and have a minimal effect on both the natural environment and the human population of a host country. This is not easy, especially since ecotourism often involves travel to remote areas where small and isolate communities have had little experience interacting with foreigners. And like conventional tourism, ecotourism involves an unequal relationship of power between the visitor and the host and a modification of the relationship through exchange of money. Part of being a responsible ecotourist is learning beforehand about the local customs, respecting dress codes and other social norms and not intruding on the community unless either invited or as part of a well organized tour.

Fifthly, they must offer support to international human rights and labor agreements. Although tourism often is glibly hailed as a tool for building international understanding and world peace, this does not happen automatically; frequently in fact tourism bolsters the economies of repressive and undemocratic states. Mass tourism pays scant attention to the political system of the host country or struggles within it, unless civil unrest spills over into attacks on tourists. Ecotourism demands a more holistic approach to travel, one in which participants strive to respect, learn about and benefit both the local environment and local communities. Although not part of The Ecotourism Societies definition, giving economic benefits and showing cultural sensitivities to local communities cannot be separated from understanding their political circumstances. In many developing countries, rural populations living around national parks and other ecotourism attractions are locked in contests with the national government and multinational corporations for control of the assets and their benefits. Ecotourists therefore need to be sensitive to the host country's political environment and social climate and need to consider the merits of international boycotts called for by those supporting democratic reforms, majority rule, and human rights. When thinking of the above we have to take into consideration the fact that just over 1 in every 17 civilian employees is employed in an activity supported by travel expenditures. The travel industry contributes to job growth well in excess of its size. Employment in the last decade has consistently grown more rapidly than employment in the economy as a whole (Barrows, Powers, 2009, p.426).

Finally, they must provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts, because everybody can and should learn from each other in order to enrich their own knowledge and experience. Over time, "managers have learned that sound planning and development of public and private lands must be viewed as the best means by which to

ensure the safety of the resource base first, even over the needs and expectations of participants” (Fennel, 2008, p. 55).

The ecotourism practiced according to its principles, has a series of features: the ecotourism consumer is educated, responsible, aware and appreciative; the small number of tourists in a group, the means of transport and the accommodation have to be environment friendly; it eliminates the exploitation of all local resources, including the human resources.

Ecotourism often involves numerous actors, including: “visitors; natural areas and their managers, including both public and private areas; local communities; businesses, including various combinations of local businesses, in-bound operators, outbound operators, hotel and other accommodation providers, restaurants and other food providers; government, in addition to its role as a natural area manager; and non-governmental organizations, such as environmental and rural development NGOs” (www.fao.com last access 6th may 2009)

The relevant actors will vary across sites. For example, local communities may be present at some sites, but not others. Likewise, businesses may play a large role at some sites, but little or no role at others.

A common phenomenon is that ecotourism can generate both symbiosis and conflict between the actors. The potential for ecotourism to result in symbiosis between conservation (e.g., natural areas) and development (e.g., businesses) has been widely touted, but the potential for conflict should not be ignored. For example, natural area managers and ecotourism businesses have a shared interest in conserving the natural environment. However, there often is conflict regarding the point at which tourism activity jeopardizes this conservation.

The ecotourism activity has started to develop in the 1980s. In the present, although it is not one of the most important forms of tourism it attracts a lot of attention and individuals. It has recently been declared the form of tourism with the highest growth rate. In 1990s ecotourism accounted for approximately 20 % of the international tourism and 7 % of the total incomes of tourism (<http://www.unwto.org/edsco/index.php> last access 6th may 2009). In the same period, international tourism had an annual growth rate of 4 %, while ecotourism had a rate of 10-30 %. In 1994 there were 317 million ecotourists accounting for 250 million dollars (<http://www.unwto.org/edsco/index.php> last access 6th may 2009).

The fact that ecotourism is not regulated by the conventional rules of the economic development determines its fast growing rate. Thus ecotourism, because of its features and principles, is more common in developing countries.

Wildlife and its habitats in developing countries are becoming increasingly popular attractions for international tourism. Many of the richest areas, biologically, are in the developing world. Growing numbers of ecotourists are flocking to the mountains of Nepal and Madagascar, the tropical forests of Costa Rica and Thailand, and the beaches of Belize and Sri Lanka. Nature tourists bring with them money to spend, money that creates jobs and incomes for households and communities in and around national parks and other protected areas. Ecotourism enterprises tour agencies and guide services, lodges and private reserves as well as such satellite activities as crafts industries and transportation and food services, also generate revenues and foreign exchange. Governments can use this income in operating and protecting natural habitats.

By recognizing the importance of protecting biological diversity, ecotourism is raising appreciation for biological resources and leading to better conservation practices by developing country populations. It must of course be properly regulated and managed to protect against adverse environmental and cultural effects that can come with overbuilding of tourist facilities and influx of populations around fragile ecosystems. Assuming such oversight, nature tourism can benefit both the environment and economic development.

At the same time, there are critics who consider that “The term ecotourism has been applied widely, to the point that it has to some degree become meaningless. This situation is undesirable and counterproductive to the development of ecotourism. It disadvantages both operators who may be unsure of the values, motivations and expectations of visitors, and tourists who may be unsure of the product offered by ‘eco’ operators and the qualities of experience that they seek to provide” (Higham, 2007, p.6).

In conclusion, there is a strong connection between sustainable tourism and ecotourism. They are both trying to decrease the negative impact of visitors and tourism activities in the environment. But while sustainable tourism should be applied on all types and forms of tourism, ecotourism is a very well defined new form of alternative tourism.

3. Empirical findings regarding the visitors of Apuseni Mountains Natural Park

Although Romania’s tourist attractions are very complex, from the seaside of the Black Sea to ski resorts in the mountains, there are also numerous ecotourism destinations: the Danube Delta (bird’s paradise), large carnivores (wolves, bears and lynxes), Carpathian Mountains (mountain landscape, un-fragmented natural forests), rural areas and numerous natural and national parks.

The Danube Delta is on the UNESCO World Heritage List since 1991. It hosts over 300 species of birds as well as 45 freshwater fish species in its numerous lakes and marshes (whc.unesco.org/en/list/588 last access 5th may 2009). More than 40 % of the entire European population of wolves, bears, and lynx live in Romania.

One of the most important destination for ecotourists, the Apuseni Mountains are located in the Western part of Romania. Within a small distance from Oradea, the Apuseni Mountains can be reached by car on European roads (E60 and E70), and then by following several county roads that will take you even closer. They are also accessible by train, on the railroad linking Oradea to Cluj-Napoca, Cluj Napoca-Alba Iulia, Alba Iulia-Deva-Arad.

The Apuseni are part of the Western Carpathians and comprise a variety of geographical forms, beautiful landscapes and traditional livelihoods. What makes them special are the unique limestone phenomena, the local people who inhabit them and their lifestyle, as well as the extraordinary mixture between these two: human beings and nature.

These mountains hold attractions for numerous types of tourists. For an active person, there are a series of options for spending a group holiday in the Apuseni: caving (in some of the hundreds of unique caves that are found here), hiking and trekking on marked and non-marked trails, kayaking and white-water rafting on mountain lakes and streams, cycling, rock-climbing (a complete range of climbing routes), and canioning.

For tourists interested in something really special, there are programs for cross-country skiing, bird watching, wild animal searching or photo safari.

Interesting attractions are folk traditions and one can understand how an authentic lifestyle has been preserved here for thousands of years. Pottery, chest-making, weaving, wood-carving, lime-making are but a few of the habitual occupations and crafts that contribute to the charm of these areas, keeping their spirit alive. The traditional architecture, the work people do in the forest or in the field preserve a way of life that is typical for the mountain area, where human destiny interweaves closely with the deep meanings of water, earth, air, fire.

We can notice the vast types of activities and the numerous attractions this mountain region holds. This is why a large part of these mountains have been declared a Natural Park, resulting a surface of approximately 75.000 km².

The Apuseni Natural Park land constitutes the administrative territory of 16 communes and the property of 25 communes. In what concerns the communities, inside ANP there are 53 settlements and 3 holiday villages and resorts (Boga, Fântânele and Vârtop), while another 8 settlements are situated on the park’s limits

(http://parcapuseni.ro/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=22&Itemid=38&lang=en last access 5th May 2009). Although one can notice the large surface of the park, the rules and regulations are extremely hard to impose because of the small number of rangers and the lack of the implication of the local authorities.

In the summer of 2008 on the Padis Plateau – a camping site located in the park - a group of students from our Faculty have applied a questionnaire to the tourists. The aim of this project was to create a profile of the ecotourist that visits the Park and to try to find out the main advantages and disadvantages of the park.

Regarding the nationality of the tourists, most of them came from Romania and Hungary. There are small numbers of tourists coming from Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Belgium and France.

Most of the tourists (Figure 1) have found out about the park in the mountains, 17 % have heard about it from the mass-media, 8 % have been informed by the employees of the guesthouses from the region, and 37 % from other sources (friends, internet, tourism guides). This is a clear indication of the fact that the advertising of the park is not very well organized, and information provided by third parties might be false or imprecise.

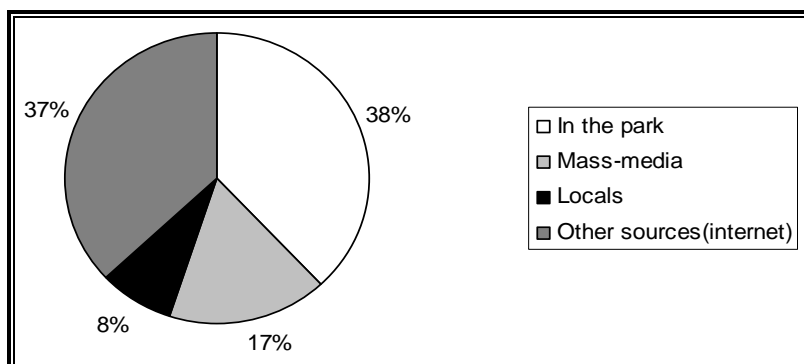


Figure 1. Source of information about the Apuseni Natural Park

The tourists were interested (Figure 2) in finding information regarding: accommodation facilities (31 %), camping spaces (44 %), state of the roads and transport (72 %), existing tours (52 %), tourism attractions in the region (37 %) and the weather forecast (56 %).

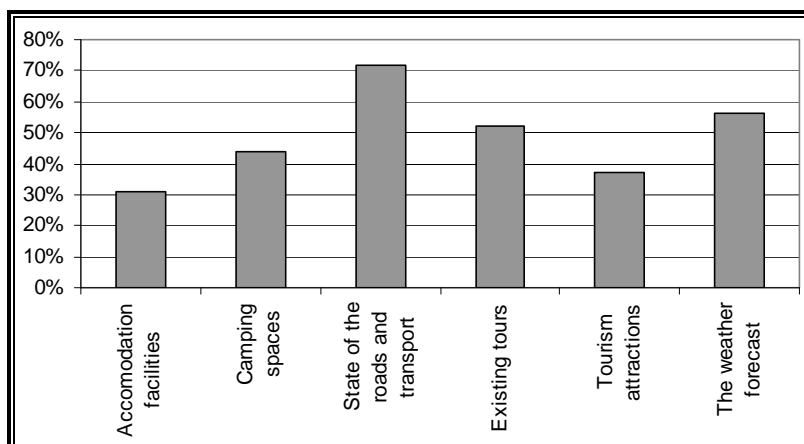


Figure 2. Main interests of visitors in the Apuseni National Park

Taking into consideration the fact that 73 % of the visitors use their personal cars, we need to stress the importance of the access to park. Tourism and transportation are inextricably linked. Air travel dominates long - distance and middle – distance tourism. The private automobile dominates for shorter trips and is the most popular means of travel for most domestic journeys. The automobile is also very important in regional and international tourism (Goeldner Ritchie, 2009, p.118). Most of the tourists come from Romania and Hungary, so the quality of the roads is quintessential for the tourism activities in the park. Unfortunately, investments in infrastructure can't be made by the local entrepreneurs and investors, thus the implication of regional and national authorities is needed in order to help tourism.

The most important reasons for visiting the Apuseni Natural Park are: the spectacular scenery and hiking tours (27 %), the caves (18 %), the fauna and the flora (12 %), and the brand of the region (3 %).

Most of the tourists prefer to stay in tents, in order to stay close to the main attractions. Mainly they choose to camp in Padis or Glavoi Plateaus. On average, a tourist stays in the park for 6 days.

The activities of the tourists (Figure 3.) are: hikes (92 %), caving (21 %), alpinism (12 %), horseback riding (8 %), cycling (4 %).

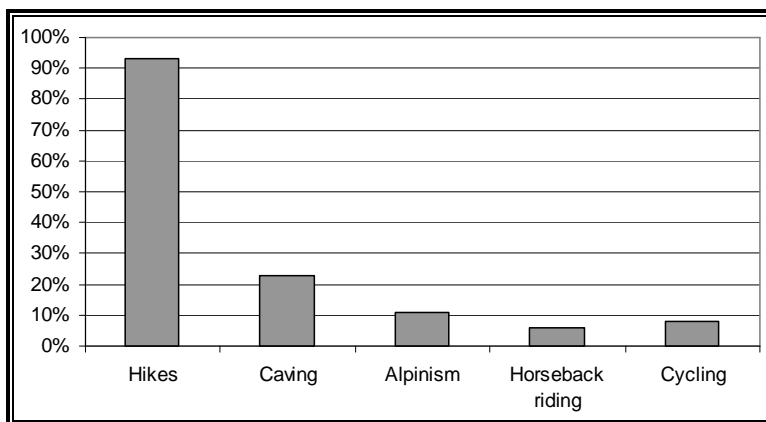


Figure 3. Main activities in the Apuseni National Park

Regarding the restrictive measures applied inside the Park, tourists strongly agree with them and respect them. The most important facilities needed by the tourists are: public toilets, garbage disposal facilities, shower cabins, water sources, fire places, information points, electricity and lodges.

According to our study, we can't talk about a clear profile of the ecotourist, but it is very clear that the visitors have pointed out most of the weak points that need to be addressed by the local authorities and the local community.

Conclusions

Tourism's interest in sustainable development is logical given that it is one industry that sells the environment, both physical and human, as its product (Murphy, 2005).

In the near future, ecotourism will have to face a series of challenges. Firstly, reducing, denouncing and avoiding the many cases of "greenwashing" (unfair and inappropriate use of the concept, especially related to the exploitation of local communities and degradation of the environment) in ecotourism.

At the same time, investors have to find solutions for financing the transfer of the technology gained by North America and Europe – and, more and more, also by Southern

practitioners (Asia) - in ecotourism (mobility, incubating small and medium sized enterprises, guiding and interpretation techniques, private/public partnerships such as concessions, protected area visitor management, stakeholder planning, marketing) to developing destinations

Secondly, getting the conservation-oriented and community-based ecotourism to the mainstream through efficient marketing and reservation systems, and increasing customer acceptance of products with basic quality standards. The beneficial effects of ecotourism are still too small to make a difference! Also, coordinating various donor and sponsor investments in ecotourism to increase standards, and produce guidelines for projects to avoid common problems (business feasibility, marketing research, entrepreneurial capacity, and private sector matching funds). Although a number of donors have incorporated ecotourism components in their project portfolios, little inter-institutional exchange is promoted;

Thirdly, creating and implementing common quality and operational standards, potentially leading to certification and accreditation and disseminating best practices in community land-use rights, and planning/development control mechanisms for steward (including indigenous) communities.

Fourthly, local revenue retention through capacity building and at the same time, value-added supply chain management and convincing the pioneers of ecotourism to become more professional.

Because of the features of ecotourism, most of the companies involved are small or medium sized enterprises, run by local families. The promotion of ecotourism is extremely difficult and is mainly done by projects and NGOs financed by foreign sponsors that offer a wide range of services: advertising, information, guides and transport.

The fact that the government or the local authorities are only partially involved has both advantages and disadvantages. Although infrastructure is needed for tourism and most of the work and investments in infrastructure is done by the government, this means that the region can remain natural and unmodified. Thus, the lack of infrastructure can be considered an advantage. But the locals need assistance both informational and infrastructure in order to take care of the garbage disposal issues.

It is very difficult for NGOs to fight against: wood and forest exploitation which is considered by many locals the only source of income, lack of respect of tourists and locals towards nature because of the legislation void in this field. Although the costs of writing legislation are smaller than the investments in infrastructure, the Romanian Government shows a total disinterest for tourism in general and ecotourism in particular.

In the near future, the Apuseni Natural Park will need a stronger cooperation between the local communities, NGOs and authorities in order to face the above mentioned challenges.

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