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Sustainable Tourism Development in Croatian Rural Areas – Tourist Experiences, Economic and Social Benefits

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Rural areas, because of their special features, require a carefully planned tourism development which should be based on principles of sustainable development. Besides economic characteristic, these areas are characterized by demographic problems and by the abandonment of traditional economic activities such as agriculture, animal husbandry and forestry.

Republic of Croatia is highly tourism-oriented country but more than 80% of this tourist traffic is carried out in coastal parts of the country and on islands along the Adriatic coast. Since the 1970s, rural settlements in these coastal areas are recording a shift in terms of major economic activities of the local population. In fact, tourism generally becomes the main source of local population's income, either directly or indirectly. However, completely different situation is taking place in continental rural areas of Croatia, and those inland areas are the research object of this paper. The growth of tourists' interest for visiting these very areas has encouraged the residents of inland villages to the new development and new entrepreneurial orientation – tourism. This general trend worldwide indicates a growing demand for services and facilities that are connected to tradition and to typical and authentic rural experiences but at the same time it emphasizes the need for sustainable development and the protection of resources.

Key words: rural areas, sustainable tourism development, economic and social benefits, local community

Republic of Croatia is worldwide known for tourism, which has been, and still is, one of the main economic sectors in Croatia. According to Croatian Bureau of Statistics in 2011, as compared to the same period of 2010, the number of tourist arrivals in the Republic of Croatia increased by 8.0% and the number of tourist nights by 7.0%. Among 60.354.275 tourist nights, 9.3% were realised by domestic and 90.7% by foreign tourists. Nevertheless, more than 80% of this tourist traffic is carried out in coastal parts of the country and on islands along the Adriatic coast. Since continental parts of Croatia are authentic, rich with natural, cultural and historical heritage, original architecture and ecological preserved nature, there is huge potential and great opportunity for those parts to seriously get involved in rural tourism development. Moreover, rural tourism has become a very important and fast growing industry creating increased competition for tourists among international destinations. In such conditions, the success of marketing destinations should be guided by a thorough analysis of tourist motivation, their satisfaction and loyalty. There has been limited research regarding tourist satisfaction with Croatian continental rural destinations. This paper provides theoretical background of sustainable rural tourism development and reports the findings of a study carried out to determine tourist motivations for visiting Croatian rural destinations and their satisfaction with destinations' attributes.

Sustainable rural tourism development

Rural areas in Croatia have been and some of them still are unjustifiably economically and tourism-wise neglected. The consequence of all of that has been migration, especially of younger population and devastation of inland villages. Among diverse types of tourism, rural development through tourism has been regarded as one of the most effective strategies to revitalize the countryside and overcome the rural economic crises derived from the decrease of farm revenues, decline in job opportunities, and demographic imbalance from out-migration (Wilson, Fesenmaier, Fesenmaier & van Es, 2001). One of the important reasons for local residents to get involved in rural tourism is the possibility of creating additional income. By being involved in rural tourism, local residents can benefit from the sale of accommodation units, operation of experience programs or activities, the sale of agricultural products and food, among other things (Lee & Kim, 2009). Consequently, rural tourism and demand for labour-intensive products such as crafts and agricultural products will lead to increased employment. The number of rural holiday accommodation units and rural tourists has continuously grown in Croatia in past years (National Bureau of Statistic). This can be explained by the changes in behaviour of consumers of tourism and the search for new products which allow them more independence and flexibility and which meet their immediate needs and wishes (Aguiló & Juaneda, 2000; Yagüe, 2002). Since there is an increasing demand for new products in tourism (Campbell & Herald, 2009), it is necessary to find the ways for exceptional experiences that exceeds guest satisfaction. A large number of authors have established that both overall tourist satisfaction and tourist intention to return are partially determined by his/her assessment of the destination's performance by analyzing declared tourist satisfaction with different aspects of destination (Alegre & Cadera, 2006; Alegre &

Garau, 2010; Baker & Crompton, 2000; Kozak, 2002; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Therefore, the objective of this research was to find out what is tourist satisfaction level regarding different elements of tourism offer in rural parts of continental Croatia, and what are tourists' motives for visiting this part of Croatia where development of rural tourism is at a very beginning.

In order to ensure benefits from rural tourism development, it is essential that it is based on principles of sustainability. Sustainable tourism intends to provide optimum use of environmental resources, it intends to be respectful with social-cultural authenticity of host communities and ensure long term, viable economic activities (Sagustín Fons, Moseñe Fierro & Gómez y Patiño, 2011). Because of the fact that depopulation of villages is a rather big problem in Croatian rural areas, a very important positive effect of sustainable rural tourism development for Croatia is retention and return of younger population in the countryside. In order to achieve sustainability, government, private sector and the local population have to work together. Apart from local population needs, sustainable tourism development has to meet tourists' expectations as well. Therefore it is necessary to understand the nature of rural tourists, their needs and expectations. According to Konu and Kajala (2012), detailed information on tourists and customer segments helps to develop well targeted products and services that meet the customers' needs. Since there are many studies connected to the satisfaction level of tourists involved in nature based tourism in different countries (Devesa, Laguna & Palacios, 2010; Kastenholtz, Davis & Paul, 1999; Konu & Kajala, 2012; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012; Fang, Yodmanee & Uysal, 2008), but limited research on rural tourists' satisfaction in Croatia, it was found valuable to conduct the current study.

Methodology

Data was collected by a survey designed for tourists who visited rural tourism destinations in north continental Croatia. The survey instrument was a self-administered questionnaire, where the first part of the questionnaire was related to the background of tourists and the second part included importance and satisfaction rating scales related to destination attributes. Research was carried out in a range of places, in several continental counties (Međimurje County, Osijek and Baranja County, Slavonski Brod and Posavina County, Varaždin County, Vukovar and Srijem County) at different periods between April and June, 2011. A total of 179 questionnaires were completed, with a response rate of 89.5%. Respondents consisted of individuals who spent at least one night at rural accommodation. The collected data were analyzed using statistical package SPSS for Windows 19.0.

Findings and results

Analysis of the respondents' demographic characteristics showed that 51% of the respondents were female and that majority of the respondents were domestic tourists (54%). The age of the respondents varied from 16 to 66+, with the most common age

of respondents falling within the 36–55 years, accounting 46% of the total sample.

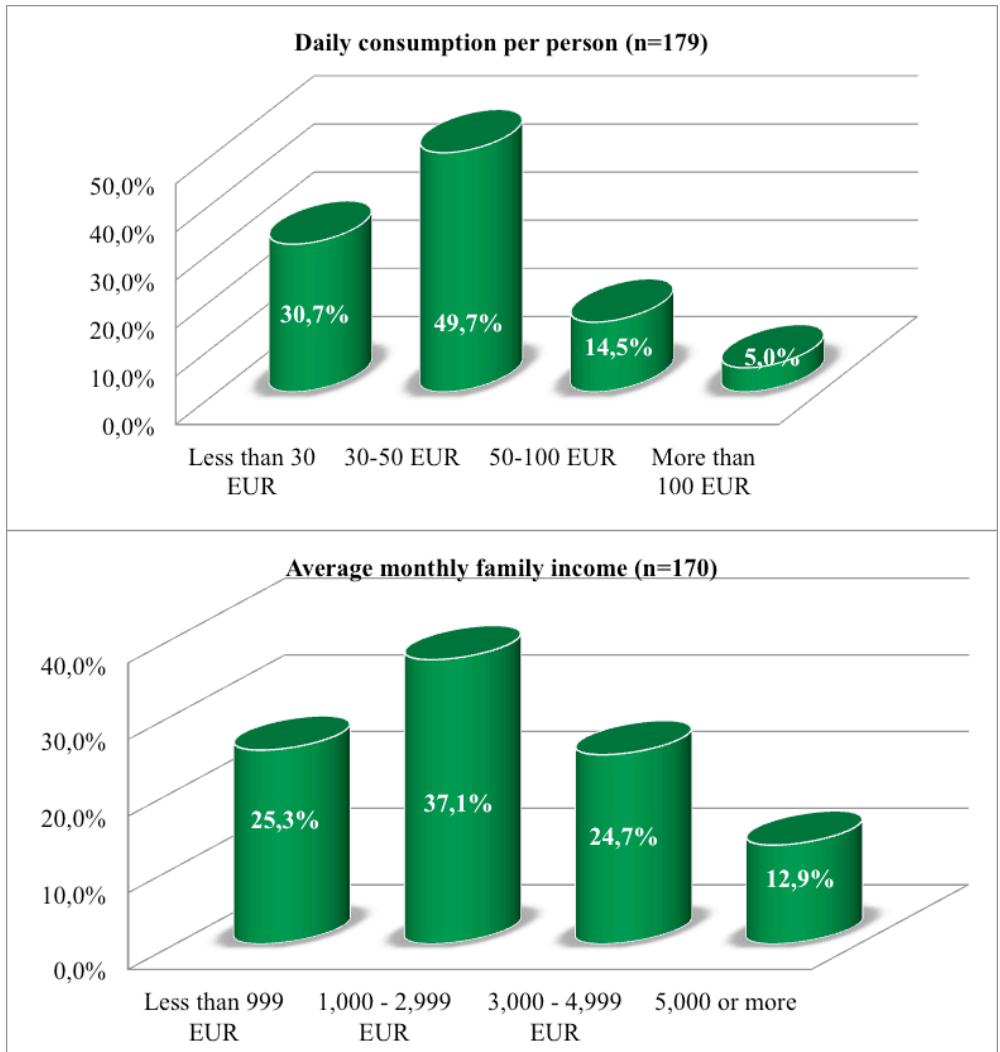
The length of stay for 43% of respondents was between 1 and 3 nights, followed by another 43% who stayed between 4 and 7 nights, and 14% who stayed for more than 7 nights. The results indicate that majority of the respondents are staying in inland rural accommodation more than 4 nights, which can be considered as a very good length of stay. According to Eurostat (2011) the typical holiday areas in the European Union with the longest average visitor stays are coastal regions; none of the 21 NUTS 2 (Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics) regions where the average length of stay of visitors is five nights or more is completely landlocked.

The majority of the respondents (59.6%) were repeat visitors while 40.4% of respondents were on their first visit. It can be noted that 58% of respondents are planning to come again, 8.9% of them are not coming again, and 32.4% do not know if they are coming back or not. Majority of the respondents (85.5%) travelled to Croatian continental rural destinations individually. The main motives for coming to these rural destinations were rest and relaxation (26.6% of the respondents), hobbies (19.2%) followed by fun and new experiences (18.6%) and visiting relatives/friends (18.6%).

Available information regarding destination is an important factor for tourists in deciding which destination to visit. This research showed that friends' and relatives' recommendation occupies the first place (64%), while only 8.4% of the respondents obtained information from internet. These results show that most important source of information is recommendation, which could lead to a conclusion that previous visitors have been satisfied with their stay in Croatian continental rural destinations.

The majority (62.4%) of the respondents have monthly family income of less than 2,999 € (Figure 1). About half (49.7%) of the respondents are those whose daily consumption per person is between 30 and 50 € (Figure 1), which is less than average daily consumption per tourist in Croatia. According to Marušić, Čorak, Sever & Ivandić (2011) the average daily consumption per tourist in Croatia year 2010 totalled 58 €, however with the largest share being 30 €.

Figure 1. Daily consumption per person and average monthly family income of the respondents.



Next part of the questionnaire included importance and satisfaction ratings scales relating to different attributes of the destination. Tourists were asked to provide ratings on a 5-point Likert Scale. Regarding satisfaction scale, concept of multidimensionality is recommended since the evaluation made by individuals of their own experience is the result of a complex process involving a high number of elements (Devesa et al., 2010). Table 1 reveals the tourist satisfaction with destination attributes during their stay. Respondents are most satisfied with *friendly and hospitable residents and local atmosphere*, with means scores of 4.40 and 4.35, respectively. At the same time, the highest importance is given to the mentioned attributes indicating that the attributes that are considered to be most important for tourists are also evaluated with highest satisfaction rates. Satisfaction with shopping opportunities and excursion offer obtained lowest mean scores as follows: 3.52 and 3.42.

Table 1. Satisfaction and importance mean scores and Gap Scores (n=179).

Attributes	Satisfaction	Importance	Gap scores
	1=extremely low satisfaction; 5=extremely high satisfaction	1=not important; 5=extremely important	(satisfaction – importance)
	Mean	Mean	Mean difference
Value for money	4,20	4,48	-0,28
Quality of accommodation facilities	4,02	4,28	-0,26
Entertainment opportunities	3,74	4,00	-0,26
Transportation links	3,89	4,13	-0,24
Clearly signposted tourist directions in the destination area	4,10	4,33	-0,23
Foreign language skills of tourism employees	3,92	4,13	-0,21
Tourist information prior to arrival	3,88	4,08	-0,20
Shopping opportunities	3,52	3,72	-0,20
Personal safety and security	4,34	4,50	-0,16
Friendly and hospitable residents	4,40	4,56	-0,16
Cleanliness of the destination	4,13	4,28	-0,15
Available parking space	4,11	4,26	-0,15
Excursion offer	3,42	3,55	-0,13
Local atmosphere	4,35	4,47	-0,12
Cultural events	3,89	4,01	-0,12
Local gastronomy	4,28	4,35	-0,07
Quality of the catering facilities	3,92	3,96	-0,04
Typical and true rural experience	4,15	4,19	-0,04
Attractive landscapes	4,31	4,33	-0,02
Preserved environment	4,23	4,23	0,00
Facilities and events for children	3,63	3,59	0,04
Sports facilities	3,54	3,47	0,07
Walking lanes	4,31	4,21	0,10
Cultural and historic heritage	4,17	4,05	0,12
Souvenirs and handicrafts	3,94	3,73	0,21
Average	4,02		
Minimum	3,42		-0,28
Maximum	4,4		0,21

The gap score for each 25 destination attributes was calculated by subtracting the importance mean scores from the satisfaction scores (Table 1). This was included in analysis to reflect the fact that satisfaction/dissatisfaction with an item that is of high importance to a respondent is likely to have greater influence on overall satisfaction than is satisfaction/dissatisfaction with an item that is not as important to the respondent (Murphy, Moscardo, Benckendorff & Pearce, 2011). Five attributes (*souvenirs and handicrafts, cultural and historic heritage, walking lanes, sports facilities and facilities and events for children*) have positive gap, which means that respondents rated those elements with higher grade than they rated their importance. On the other

side, 19 attributes obtained negative gap scores, showing that satisfaction with these features is below the importance rating, which could indicate a level of dissatisfaction. Nevertheless it is important to note that also the negative scores are minimal, the ranging from -0.02 (*attractive landscape*) to -0.28 (*value for money*). It can be concluded that respondents are very satisfied with destinations' attributes given that the average rate is 4.02, where the smallest satisfaction mean score is 3.42 and the maximum is 4.4.

Furthermore, given that target market of analysed rural destinations is the one that consists of those tourists who are spending more than 50 € per day (in this case it is 19.5% of the respondents, Figure 1), particular attention was drawn to their satisfaction and to the attributes they rated as most important. An analysis of their responses showed that average satisfaction mean is 3.96, which is lower than the average satisfaction mean of the rest of the respondents (4.03). These tourists are most satisfied with *Value for money* 4.29; *Sports facilities*, *Local atmosphere*, *Personal safety and security* (4.17 each) and *Cleanliness of the destination* 4.14. At the same time they gave highest importance to the *Value for money* 4.34; *Sports facilities*, *Cultural and historic heritage*, *Souvenirs and handicrafts* (4.29 each) and *Local atmosphere* 4.26. The gap analysis showed that 18 elements gained negative gap scores. The highest negative gap score was obtained by the *Souvenirs and handicrafts* (-0.40), and at the same time for these respondents this attribute is high on the importance rank, at the fourth place. It is also recorded that there was only three positive gap scores (*Clearly signposted tourist directions in the destination area* 0.03; *Typical and true rural experience* 0.05 and *Excursion offer* 0.08). The results indicate that respondents that are spending more than 50 € per day are slightly less satisfied than those that are spending less. Tourist satisfaction is one of the most important concerns of competitive destinations as it considerably impacts on tourist's choice of the holiday destination, and the decision to visit destination in the future. It is recommended to measure tourist satisfaction with individual destination attributes because assessing attributes will help detect areas of strengths or shortfalls within destination (Naidoo, Munhurrun & Ladsanut, 2010). In this case, generally there are more strengths than weaknesses, but in order to expand target market, improvements are always necessary and most welcome.

Conclusion

Rural tourism in Croatia is a growing segment of the market and very valuable resource for the inland counties, but its development is still at the very beginning, especially in the continental Croatia. Local communities are beginning to engage in the planning process since they are aware that rural tourism can mitigate depopulation process; it gives opportunity to get an extra income keeping the authentic resources, by nurturing local customs, values and lifestyle. This research presents valuable information to the tourism sector about tourist satisfaction through its use of importance-satisfaction analysis. The results show that for majority of respondents, friends' and relatives' recommendation is the most cited channel of information about visited rural destinations. Further, results show that the majority of the respondents

have monthly family income less than 2,999 €, and that majority of them is spending daily between 30 and 50 € per person.

Satisfaction analysis shows that respondents are very satisfied with more than half of the destination attributes (14 out of 25). Since the target market of these destinations is the one that consists of tourist that are spending more than 50 € per day, additional analysis of their responses was done. It showed that the tourists spending more than 50 € per day are slightly less satisfied than the rest of the respondents. Altogether, there were no attributes that obtained low mean scores that would suggest that the majority of them were dissatisfied or extremely dissatisfied, but there were no attributes with which majority of respondents were extremely satisfied, either. Improvements are required in terms of upgrading tourism offer (excursions, shopping and entertainment opportunities, sports facilities, improving quality etc.).

Finally, there is an issue associated with this study's limitation that should be discussed to provide guidance for future research. Since the findings of this research are based on the responses of tourists who stayed in five continental counties in northern Croatia, it is not possible to draw conclusions from the results beyond this region. Therefore, it is suggested to implement studies in different rural destinations in order to confirm, modify and compare the findings obtained in this paper.

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- Yoon, Y., & Uysal, M. (2005). An examination of the effects of motivation and satisfaction on destination loyalty: A structural model. *Tourism Management*, 26(1), 45–56. Table 1. Satisfaction and importance mean scores and Gap Scores (n=179).