



ECODESTINATIONS

A Model of Leadership and Sustainable Local Development

This program has been developed by the Romanian-American Foundation, the Romanian Environmental Partnership Foundation and the Association of Ecotourism in Romania

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INTRODUCTION

It is somewhat ironic that the natural, cultural and traditions potential that makes Romania one of the most interesting destinations for sustainable tourism is perceived as a hindrance against development. If by development we understand an industrial model, based on mass tourism, and a replacement of local cultures with the stereotype of urban culture, this may be true. However, as we have seen in our long experience of working in communities, local development is only sustainable if mingled with the particularities of the area. The effort to create programs that capitalize on the potential of an area in a responsible and economically efficient manner is, essentially, an effort to change mentalities. It is also a long-term process, which can't be imposed from the outside, because it relies on the idea that the local community finds its solutions to protect this potential and put it to good use. The Ecodeestination Development Program is an ambitious move: it means to bring economic development to seven areas of Romania, by transforming them into attractive ecotourism destinations. The Romanian Environmental Partnership Foundation has used its extraordinary experience of working in communities and for environmental programs to select suitable areas and local organizations to implement such an approach. As ecotourism is, in itself, an industry which requires

specific expertise, the Association of Ecotourism in Romania played an important part in defining the success criteria and connecting the destinations with the rest of the world. This long-term approach, relying heavily on entrepreneurship, involves much higher risks than a classical program. Whereas in many areas the Romanian-American Foundation uses the principles of a venture capital fund, the design of the program and the funding process were very collaborative and flexible. The soundest local development is the one that springs from the community. It requires strong leadership, a network of involved local partners and a support and funding system that is willing not only to create the rules but to push forward and learn on the go. After this first five-year stage, the Ecodestinations Program will continue with a new step. We hope that it may inspire other organizations devoted to sustainable investments either to join as partners of the program or to take steps to develop their own programs.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

LOCAL LEADERSHIP TRANSFORMATION

Romania has all the basic data to become a truly exciting ecotourism destination. It is one of the richest European territories in terms of biodiversity. The 27 natural and national parks, over 350 Natura 2000 sites, along with local traditions and culture, represent a heritage whose value, if wisely used, can change the map of local economic and social development.

There is a good context to focus on this potential: in 2012, Romania was one of the first countries in Europe that created, through the contribution of the Association of Ecotourism in Romania, a certification scheme for ecotouristic destinations, based on the Global Council for Sustainable Tourism criteria and European standards. At present, there are five such certified destinations: Zărnești-Piatra Craiului area, Mara-Cosău-Creasta Cocoșului, Țara Hațegului- Retezat National Park area Țara Dornelor area and the Vânători-Nearmț area.

In addition, at global level, tourism is one of the fastest growing industries, and sustainable tourism

develops by 10-15% annually.

According to the Centre for Responsible Tourism, travelers are more and more concerned about the environmental and cultural impact of tourism. The percentage of those looking to stay in environmentally friendly venues increased from 65% in 2017, to 68% in 2018.

There is, however, a considerable discrepancy between potential and reality due, in part, to the fact that this huge potential is often perceived as a barrier against development: local communities are bothered by specific restrictions imposed in protected areas rather than seeing the possibility

Photo Mihai Moiceanu

A Global Trend

A booking.com survey of 2019 shows that sustainability influences booking decisions:

1. 73% of global travelers intend to stay at least once a year in an ecotourism location.
2. 70% say that the likelihood of booking is higher if the location is environmentally friendly. More than half of the global travelers are determined to make sustainable accommodation decisions.

According to the Centre for Responsible Tourism, travelers are more and more concerned about the environmental and cultural impact of tourism. The percentage of those looking to stay in environmentally friendly venues increased from 65% in 2017, to 68% in 2018.

of sustainably using these resources. Local traditions and culture are many times perceived as signs of “being stuck “ in the past and of underdevelopment, rather than elements of an area’s unique traits. Beyond all this, coordination and collaboration within local communities are often absent and the country lacks a coherent idea to aggregate the effort at national level. Legislation is not enough to stir the emergence of an offer to meet this extraordinary global trend and to build on the potential. The entire ecotourism phenomenon depends on a local context (nature, attractions, traditions, gastronomy, etc.) and it takes two

essential elements: local leadership and coordination of local efforts as part of a larger framework.

The Ecotourism Destinations Development Program (Ecodestinatons Program) accelerates the creation of ecotourism destinations and supports the establishment of a national network of destinations in Romania. The aim of the program is to contribute to the economic development of local communities, the conservation of local nature and culture and the positioning of Romania as an important destination on the ecotourism map.

The basis for this endeavor is the experience of the Romanian-American Foundation (RAF) and the Romanian Environmental Partnership Foundation (REPF) in economic and community development programs in rural areas.

Program Closure

In the Green Entrepreneurship Program (2010-2014), the RAF and REPF provided financial support, counseling and expertise to help establish and develop five social entrepreneurship initiatives in underdeveloped rural areas. All of them were aimed at the sustainable use of unique local resources related to protected areas. The experience of this first local economic development pilot program showed two things: that an “engine” of local development has the ability to create change, but that a social enterprise has a limited potential to produce a ripple effect of change in a community. Ecotourism has the potential to create greater impact and to cover a wider range. The Ecodestinat-



Densuș Church, Țara Hațegului – Retezat Destination. Photo by Remus Suci

tions Development Program keeps the original principles of 2010 unchanged: that local development starts from communities and cannot be dictated from top to bottom, that local assets are a valuable and handy resource, that economic interests should be merged with long-term sustainability. However, its ambition is to create a model of local economic development based on ecotourism at micro-region level. While the program consisted of grants, it followed the principle of a venture capital investment rather than the philosophy of a classical financing program; this means flexibility and on-the-go adjustment to local realities and to the conclusions of interim steps, assistance in the period of deployment and the direct involvement of funding organizations throughout the program. At the same time, unlike other programs in rural

areas which pursue an isolated objective (setting up guesthouses, encouraging small businesses or financing infrastructure, etc.), the Ecodestinatons Program assumes that, by helping to create a local leadership core in the area, it will aggregate other resources (the collaboration of the authorities, the development of ecotourism services, the creation of infrastructure, the encouragement of sustainable entrepreneurship, etc.). Overall, the entire program architecture is based on the idea of “leverage”, namely that a reasonable, well-placed investment will entail a resource mechanism to start (from local authority, other partners, other grant programs) and lead to the area’s economic development. At the end of the program, each of the seven destinations is at a different development stage, depending on the size of the area, the destination

Ecodestinations Program

- **Deployment period:** 5 years (2014-2019)
- **Consortium Management**
Funder: Romanian American Foundation
Program Manager: Romanian Environmental Partnership Foundation
Technical Partner: Association of Ecotourism in Romania
- **Total budget:** 1.77 million USD RAF grant + 1.8 million USD grants attracted by RAPF

• 7 Ecodestinations

- Băile Tușnad and Surroundings
- Eco Maramureș (Mara Cosău – Creasta Cocoșului)
- Transylvanian Highlands
- Țara Hațegului – Retezat
- Pădurea Craiului
- Țara Dornelor
- Ținutul Zimbrului

Main objectives:

1. Support local organizations to draft and apply sustainable plans and create local institutions for the development of the area as an ecotourism destination.
2. Contribute to public policies in ecotourism.
3. Create a network of destinations and a communication strategy to promote Romania as an ecotourism destination.

manager's local leadership quality, the involvement of other local actors or stakeholders in the area.

Actually, the aggregate performance of the seven regions shows:

- the number of guesthouses tripled;
- an increase of almost 70% in the number of tourists;
- a 50% increase of the average length of stay in the destination;
- a 170% rise of the number of overnight stays.

Beyond the statistical outcome, a critical consequence of the program is that it created a framework of local collaboration and a goal that focuses the efforts of local actors who, until then, had not worked together. Also, the fact that it set a standard of what infrastructure means for ecotourism is also an important result, albeit difficult to quantify. One of the most important outcomes is the creation of a mechanism for monitoring the ecotourism activities, as the basis for any strategy, for the first time. Building a destination is not a short or medium-term mission, but a process that requires a decade or more. The Ecodestinations Program is a strategic intervention, whose role was to steer a model of change and build a basis for the future. This document summarizes the Program, the principles on which it was built, its operating mechanisms and the conclusions of this model of community development. It aims to be a working tool and an inspiration for organizations, authorities or funders looking for new investment models. It is also a resource for public policies to support and encourage sustainable local economic development.



Traditional house from Maramureș Mara – Cosău – Creasta Cocoșului Destination. Photo Peter Lengyel

THE THEORY OF CHANGE

FROM FRAGMENTATION TO STRATEGIC VISION

There can only be sustainable economic development in an area with natural, cultural and historical potential if this potential renders benefits to the local communities. And this is possible when the effort is led by a local leader with strategic vision.

Most of the time, protected parks and natural areas seem to be a problem rather than an opportunity: traffic, exploitation or infrastructure restrictions seem to prevent the authorities and local communities from developing. But this is

just the appearance of a dilemma. International experience shows that profitable and sustainable development does not need to remove restrictions but provide a different model that uses the local potential wisely.

“The basic assumption of this program is that the ecodestination becomes a focal point of local development. The local partner network is essential for the model to catch on.”

Roxana Vitan, Romanian-American Foundation President



Photo: Mihai Moiceanu

The 8 Principles of Ecotourism

- 1. It is based on natural areas.** It assumes that tourists have a direct and personal experience outdoors, it takes place within nature and relies on its use.
- 2. Interpretation of the ecotourism product.** Tourists and the local community receive information and experiences in connection with the potential of the area, its natural and cultural values.
- 3. Minimal impact on nature.** All ecotourism activities respect best practices for nature conservation and sustainable development.
- 4. Conservation of natural areas.** Those who operate the area contribute to its preservation.
- 5. Development of local communities.** An important part of the ecotourism benefits stays in the communities.
- 6. Minimal negative impact on local culture.** Ecotourism also highlights the cultural component of the area and contributes to the preservation of local culture and lifestyle.
- 7. Meeting the tourists' expectations.** People who choose ecotourism areas have a high level of education and expectations. Satisfaction with the tourist product is essential.
- 8. Responsible marketing.** It gives customers complete and responsible information that leads to an increased respect for the natural and cultural environment of the visited areas and tourists' satisfaction.

Ecotourism is a responsible way to travel to natural areas, which preserves the environment and improves the lives of local communities - The Ecotourism Society

The working hypothesis of the Ecodestinations Program is that protected parks and natural areas can become the core of a local economic development model. And the development "engine" is the concept of a tourism ecodestination coordinated by a management team, i.e. the destination management unit.

The concept of ecodestination implies a coherent and strategic construction that brings together the local authority, local entrepreneurs, small artisans, local tourist guides, schools and the local community at large. The purpose of this construction is to create tourism products and packages based on the nature, tradition, culture and history of the place, so that the destination will attract a certain kind of tourists and provide revenue that remains in the area.

The Ecodestinations Program is not just a funding program for local development. This kind of development implies a change of mindset: if the guesthouse owner in a classical tourist area thinks about how many tourists he can bring on, the guesthouse owner in an ecotourism destination thinks about how he can integrate his offer in a larger array, because he knows that his business prosperity depends on the growth of the destination.

The role of the destination manager is to understand and create the destination as a single resource assembly that needs to work together to create a multiplier effect. Most of the resources in the Ecodestinations Program focused on creating these local

leadership teams called the Destination Management Units (DMU's), which are the missing critical component. Over time, the local community entrusts the role and power to coordinate and implement community plans to the DMU. The destination development strategy, once agreed and assimilated by the local community, guides the local stakeholders' plans.

The main indicators that the Program took into account are specific enough to be measured, but also highly strategic. Once reached, they actually show how well the system works as a whole:

- 1. Average stay in the destination** (more than three days). Slow tourism, specific to ecodestinations, assumes that tourists spend time in the area, consume local products and visit local attrac-

tions, while generating financial resources for the community. At the same time, for this to happen, there must be a coordinated infrastructure of services, attractions, routes, and local offers.

- 2. The degree of guesthouse occupancy** (more than 100 days/bed/year). Ecotourism works differently from classic tourism. The accommodation capacity in itself is less important than how consistent the flow of tourists is over a year.
- 3. Consistency of tourist activity.** The peaks specific to classic tourism are not indicated in the case of ecotourism, because they are extremely resource intensive and the area cannot cope with such a level of consumption. An ecotourism destination cannot absorb very high oscillations: natural heritage risks destruction and revenues do not remain in the area.

THE FOUR PILLARS OF THE MODEL

- 1 Local leadership:** Aggregation of local development is organized around a local core - management unit - led by a local leader who is specialized in the environment or in community aggregation.
- 2 Local partnership:** The model's key link is the relationship of trust and partnership with important local actors - local authority, local business, other non-governmental organizations. The local partnership is a formal entity, set up to represent the community and lead the building of the destination.
- 3 Local identity:** The destination is built around a natural park and uses the local natural, historical, cultural and gastronomic traits sustainably. Identity exploitation makes each destination unique and keeps the money in the area. The local community recognizes and protects this uniqueness.
- 4 Complementary resources:** once management and strategy are consolidated, the destination attracts additional resources, either public or private. The program produces a "leverage effect" for other community development resources.



ECODESTINATIONS PROGRAM MODEL

THE MISSING LINK IN ECOTOURISM

A definition: the Ecodestinatons Program is an intervention at community level that creates a local leadership and management mechanism to bring together and channel resources in one area to develop an identity based on sustainable tourism activities, which benefit the community.

Romania has a remarkable and unique ecotourism potential, but the ability to achieve this potential is limited especially by fragmentation: the local offer of products and services is not aggregated, tourism and infrastructure development are not coordinated, the identity of the various areas is not

defined, local and national communication efforts are scarce. The immediate consequence of this atomization is that local efforts are not focused on achieving a long-term common goal - building a destination with a coherent identity and offer - but

"We analyzed which of the activities in the Green Entrepreneurship program were worth extending and we stopped at ecotourism. We have found areas that have potential and, then, we focused on the local organizations that could have led the process."

László Potozky, Romanian Environmental Partnership Foundation Director



An Ecodestination Model

The baseline of an ecotourism approach is the protected area. Whether we are talking about a national park or any important protected area, it is essential for it to gather all the ingredients which make it exciting from a tourism point of view: some notoriety, natural attractions, interesting or unique species of flora and fauna.

Anything that builds up begins around this base. The rest of the ingredients consist of the specific traits of the communities concentrated around the protected area: history, traditions, local culture, gastronomy, architecture.

These local assets differentiate destinations and render them unique. Organized as tourist packages, they must have the ability to generate a certain type of tourism that is not based on fast consumption, but on longer stays, of at least several days.

In contrast to transit tourism – which implies visits of several hours per objective, then leaving – slow tourism brings with it more money that is going to remain in the area, and contributes to local development. The ecodestination model involves fewer tourists, who spend somewhat longer periods in activities with a minimal impact on the area and provide financial resources for sustainability and local development.



Photo: Ovidiu Bodean

rather to satisfy the short-term needs, and the punctual and disparate interests of different actors in the community. Owners of guesthouses, local artisans, local authorities, guides and “architects” of trails and experiences, cultural or environmental organizations work individually and without any coordination.

The result is a waste of potential and resources, and often the degradation or destruction of the cultural or natural local heritage, as collateral damage.

The Ecotourism Destinations Development Program starts from the following assumption: that the emergence of a “local” catalyst, of a leadership core able to gather local actors around a coherent ecotourism strategy can lead to sustainable local development.

In other words, an area of great potential may become a functional ecotourism destination if it is designed and administered as such. This implies the creation and consolidation of a Destination Management Unit (DMU) as a focal point of the development model.

THE THREE IMPACT LEVELS OF THE ECODESTINATIONS PROGRAM

a) Economic Impact.

Ecotourism provides additional income for local entrepreneurs (guesthouses, local products and various activities) and encourages new small and medium-sized businesses. At the same time, it helps develop a market for local products and gets small producers involved in a local economy system. The growth of local economic activity means that local authorities will get higher incomes from taxes, especially in rural areas.

b) Social Impact - New Job Opportunities.

New jobs appear in rural areas, some in underdeveloped economic areas, and many of them for young people. New entrepreneurship opportunities also appear as a result of the development of the area.

c) Preservation of Cultural and Natural Heritage.

A significant environmental consequence is the fact that ecotourism becomes one of the main justifications for conserving protected areas.



“This is not a short-term intervention. It takes ten years to see a direct and consistent economic impact of ecotourism on a certain area.”

László Potozky, Romanian Environmental Partnership Foundation Director



“In general, neither the local authority, nor the entrepreneur, nor the manager of the park have a holistic approach. The destination manager must have the ability to see and create a mechanism.”

Andrei Blumer, Association of Ecotourism in Romania, President



The main role of the DMU is to aggregate resources and local actors, and to coordinate the effort in an agreed direction, so that:

- The identity of the destination becomes clear, visible and attractive to ecotourism.
- Local actors become directly involved in the process and obtain measurable and clear economic benefits from the development of the region.
- Natural and cultural heritage is preserved and developed as an integral part of the identity and value of the destination.

Obviously, there are many ways of conducting local interventions to facilitate the development of a destination, from funding programs for guest-houses, to the funding of infrastructure or communication programs.

The decision to focus the intervention around the growth of **a local leadership and management core** - the center of the ecodestinations program - is based on the idea that the development effort needs to be coordinated at local level, that success depends on the alignment and the collaboration of important local stakeholders and that decision-making must be kept at the local level, where the specifics of the situation lead to the next step.

It is important to remember that the existence

of a single functional ecotourism destination in an area of Romania cannot bring about relevant change, neither locally nor at national level. A single destination does not have the power to invest in national and international communication, to be an important voice in matters of economic and public policy, nor does it have negotiating power or resources to invest in research.

Therefore, a second essential component of the Ecodestinations Program model is linked to **the creation of a network of destinations**. The purpose of this strategic component is not only to facilitate the collaboration and exchange of good practices, but also to make a more efficient use of resources and to coordinate the representation effort and public policies.

The third important component of the model is linked to **the representation of the destinations' interests at national level**. As is the case with many environmental conservation and resource use areas - such as organic farming or recycling of materials - sustainable tourism needs a framework of local and national legislation and a change of mindset. Without a continuous and focused advocacy effort, this is hard to get.



Shepherds in Ținutul Zimbrului Photo: Lucian Iancu

MANAGEMENT CONSORTIUM

What differentiates the ecodestinations program from other interventions in tourism is the focused approach on creating local leadership for destination development. Direct financing is an important, but not sufficient, component. The Management Consortium is essential in providing the expertise and support for the success of the program.

The Ecodestinations Program was not founded as a financing program, but as a complex interaction with components that are related to funding, know-how, community leadership development, communication and identity building, and public policies. This is a flexible approach, which calls on the management authority to adapt the strategy as the project advances.

Partners of the Program

Romanian-American Foundation (RAF). Architect of the program together with the Romanian Environmental Partnership Foundation, provides basic funding. The financing is fixed for a year, but flexible in terms of budget lines. This allows for the adaptation of the program to the concrete needs and the evolution of the “situation in the field”, which implies consultations with the partners in the Consortium. In addition, RAF ensures connecting the program with other potential strategic partners like the Foundation for the Promotion of Agriculture and the Local Economy (capacity development for farmers and small local entrepreneurs) or the Friends for Friends Foundation (marketing and communication education).

Romanian Environmental Partnership Foundation (REPF). Provides the implementation and general management of the program, contracting grants and monitoring implementation performance periodically. It is the main link with ecotourism destinations. The management model is adaptive, which means that REPF responds to changes or needs that occur throughout the Program. For example, the original Program did not provide a measurement tool for tourism in ecodestinations; this component was added along the way, when the need was determined. Therefore, tourist monitoring is now an activity in all destinations.

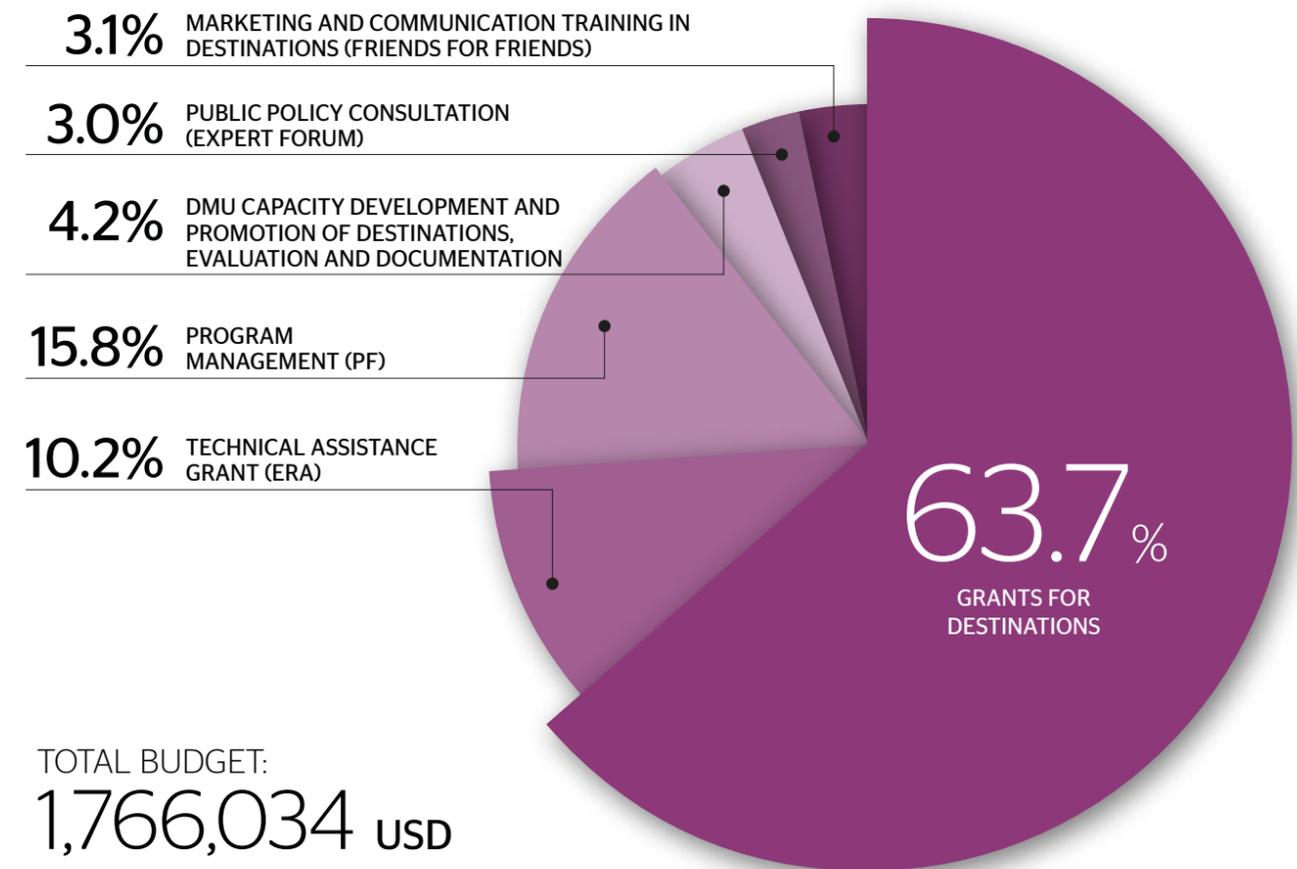
The Association of Ecotourism in Romania (AER). This is the “umbrella organization” for the ecodestination network and provides expertise in ecotourism, technical assistance for destinations, coordination and facilitation. It plays an essential role in advocacy, representing the interests of ecotourism and the ecodestination network at national level. The communication and marketing strategy for Romania as an ecotourism destination is also part of the AER mission in the Program.

“This project that manages cultures is based on a marriage between two worlds: ecology and business. It asks important questions like “do we want a sustainable development, or an intensive one?”

Romeo Vasilache, RAF Senior Program Director



FINANCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE GREEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP PROGRAM



LOCAL LEADERS

The Ecodestinations Program, just like any other community development and change program, has two components: the first, technical part, conducting activities and measuring indicators; the second, much more subtle but more important for the success of the endeavor, changing of mentality and coagulating the community around common interests.

In rural communities, as are most of those the program covers, immediate economic interests often prevail over the long-term ones. A guest-house owner is more concerned to receive enough tourists today, to cover his expenses, than to invest in the long-term benefit of the result of an ecotourism destination, not guaranteed. The local authority would rather fix a pressing common infrastructure problem than a tourist route with long-term benefits (unsecured).

The building of an ecotourism destination is a long-term goal, in which the result of investments is not immediately visible and which needs a build-up of conditions (local attractions, accommodation capacity, local cuisine, tourist infrastructure) before collecting a relevant result.

Therefore, the Ecodestinations Program focused on creating these cores - Destination Management Units - able to gather together and coordinate local resources.

“The challenge of this program is that it is based on a leadership core that aggregates and coordinates the interests of very different local stakeholders.”

Romeo Vasilache, RAF Senior Program Director

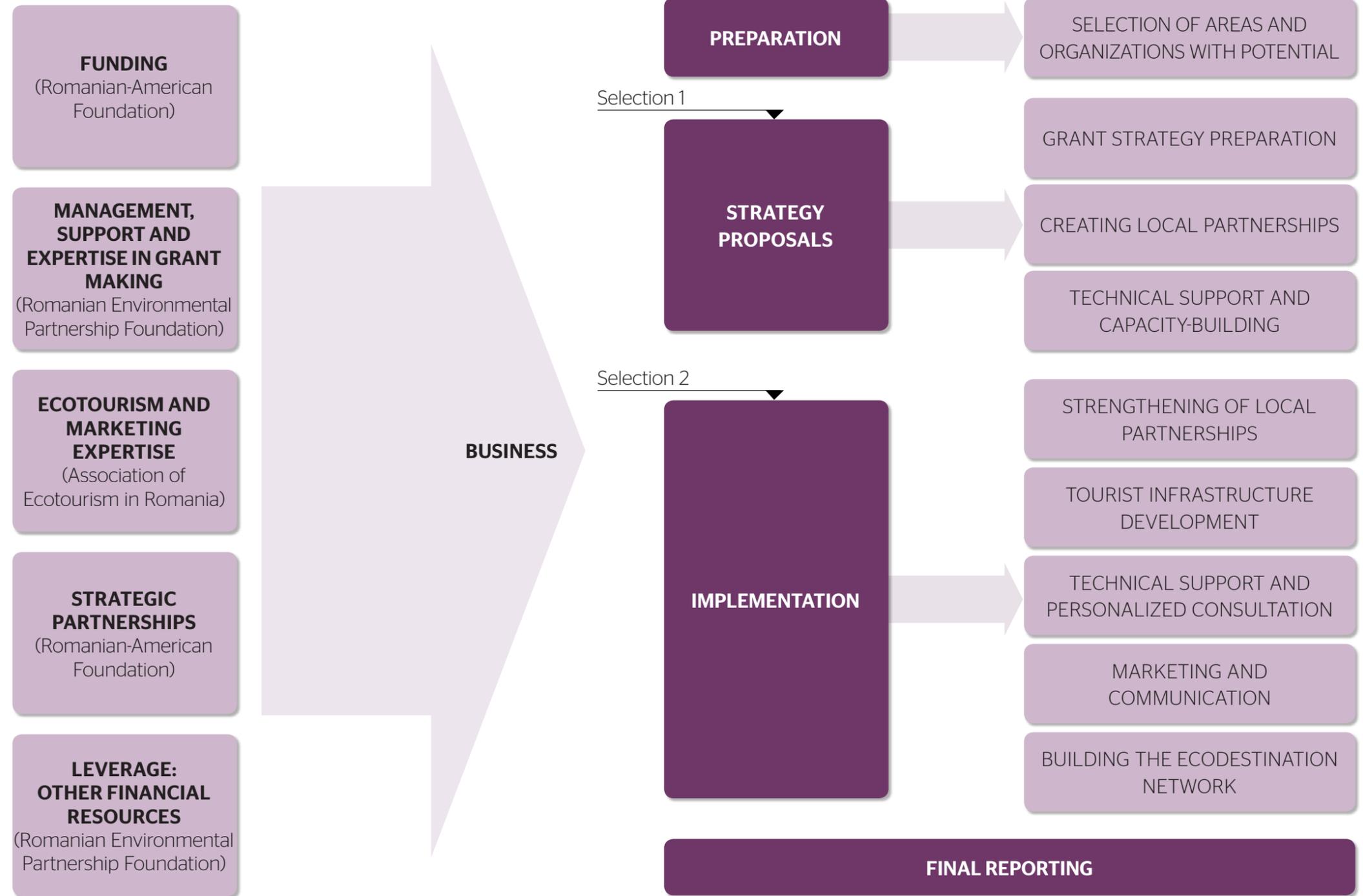


The Role of the DMU Resides in Several Important Components:

- 1.** To know and “bring to the table” all the local stakeholders involved in building the ecodestination and to attract other resources to develop it.
- 2.** To put in place a strategic plan for the development of ecotourism in the region, taking into account the unique advantages of the area: traditions, nature, history, architecture.
- 3.** To put in place marketing practices meant to aggregate and “sell” the most interesting items in the region, at the same time increasing respect for nature, traditions, and local culture.
- 4.** To monitor tourist activities and work with local actors to continuously develop the offer, infrastructure and tourism services.

RESOURCES AND STAGES

Essentially, the model of the ecodestinations program consists in the selection and financing of seven local management entities - Destination Management Units - for four years, in seven areas of great ecotourism potential. There were no such functional entities in Romania previously, which makes this program a pioneering endeavor. Consequently, the management consortium intended to focus the investment and resources on setting up and supporting the local leadership cores which, in their turn, will put a whole local change mechanism in gear. The working and financing model is characterized by flexibility; during the five years of implementation, new components were added, based on the program's evolution: a marketing and communication component for destination managers, an additional grant for the institutional development of the DMU's, etc. The Program also benefited from additional resources, i.e. grants of around 1.8 million USD, attracted by the Romanian Environmental Partnership Foundation from other sources.



AGGREGATED RESOURCES OF THE CONSORTIUM

FUNDING

One of the important criteria was for the main funding, granted by the RAF, to build a base for attracting complementary financial resources.

ROMANIAN AMERICAN FOUNDATION

The main grant was intended for the creation of the Destination Management Units, by covering the costs of human resources for a management team made of one or two people, for four years.

ROMANIAN ENVIRONMENTAL PARTNERSHIP FOUNDATION

Complementary resources attracted throughout the program, grants from other organizations or corporations managed by REPF, were a little bit higher as compared to the main grant. These were awarded through a competitive system (selection of projects) to develop important activities or objectives for ecodestinations: marketing activities, monitoring, local tourist infrastructure, etc.

EXPERTISE

ROMANIAN ENVIRONMENTAL PARTNERSHIP FOUNDATION THE ECOTOURISM ASSOCIATION

Environmental and local development expertise. The role of this component in the Program is not only to assist each destination manager, but also to detect needs that appear along the way - the opportunity to bring new components and resources in the Program - and to find local good practices that can be shared in the network of destinations.

Expertise in public policy and ecotourism. The role of AER was essential in: establishing and explaining the standards required for a functional destination, supporting managers in the process of certifying a destination. In marketing activities - strategy, participation in fairs and exhibitions - for the destination network and shaping the image of Romania as a destination for ecotourism.

PUBLIC POLICY AND ADVOCACY

The development of ecotourism implies the existence of legislation and public policies at local and national level to support this kind of tourism. For example, without an adequate environmental policy, the principles of ecotourism can easily contradict local construction rules; similarly, at national level, the legislation on certification or policies regarding protected areas is essential for the destinations.

THE ECOTOURISM ASSOCIATION

AER contribution to the national legislation on ecotourism destinations and the certification process is crucial.

EXPERT FORUM ASSOCIATION

Analysis of local public policies in the destinations included in the Program.

MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION

One of the program's components is the creation of distinctive identities for each destination, as well as marketing and positioning plans that require specific knowledge, a new level of involvement for destination managers.

FRIENDS FOR FRIENDS FOUNDATION

Created a personalized program - Marketing Clinic - for destination managers and their teams. It provided mentoring and practical tools for communication.

MONITORING

ROMANIAN ENVIRONMENTAL PARTNERSHIP FOUNDATION

Because the Ecodestinations Program has a flexible character, the purpose of monitoring has not necessarily been to control and check, but more to assess to what extent reality met the plans.

Measuring the progress in relation to the original development plan for each destination, every 6 months.

"We refined the proposal and the original assumptions, based on what happened in reality. Flexibility is essential in local economic development."

Roxana Vitan, Romanian-American Foundation President



MODEL STEPS

PREPARING THE PROGRAM

Months 1-12

Based on the experience in the previous program - Green Entrepreneurship - RAF decided to continue making grants for local economic development through entrepreneurship, but for activities that can have greater impact and increased multiplier power. Ecotourism proved to be the answer to the question.

1. The Romanian Environmental Partnership Foundation, based on its extensive working experience in protected areas and with local organizations, selected 13 potential development areas of the project.
2. There were visits to each potential destination and discussions with local organizations to assess if they have development vision and if they are interested in participating in the Program.
3. The Association of Ecotourism in Romania was invited to submit the assistance strategy to become a technical partner of the program.
4. 10 local organizations with experience in the environment and local development (custodians of protected areas, community development organizations) from 10 areas were invited to submit letters of intent.

The purpose of this step was to assess the potential, both for areas and for organizations that were to lead the strategy for each of them.

The purpose of this stage was to support the 9 organizations that submitted a letter of intent to create a proposal for an Ecotourism Development Strategy for the areas in which they operate.

1. The strategy included the assessment of the area (tourism potential, local traditions and culture, cuisines, natural attractions etc.), the identification of the unique traits which differentiate each destination from the others, proposals for positioning and marketing, a development draft, and a business plan.
2. It was important that, at this stage, each organization would take steps to create a local partnership with the local authorities, local businesses and other entities, a partnership that would support the DMU develop the destination.
3. The Romanian Environmental Partnership Foundation provided each organization with a grant which could be used according to the needs of each organization.
4. REPF and AER provided assistance and feedback in strategy development.
5. This stage included a capacity building workshop for the invited organizations.

SELECTION

Month 18

All 9 organizations included in the previous stage sent ecotourism development strategies.

1. Selection criteria were based on the quality and realism of the strategy and the business plans, as well as each organization's capacity to create the local partnership.
2. The selection committee included external specialists in strategy, marketing and communication.
3. 7 organizations were selected
4. The 7 organizations were invited to a working visit to the Neusiedler See Park in Austria, one of the most successful ecotourism destinations in Europe.

The most important stage of the program was divided, theoretically, in two sub-stages: the first two years for the creation of local infrastructure, the next two years focused on marketing, communication, internal and external representation, and building the ecodestination network.

1. Local infrastructure development consisted in strengthening the local partnership and building of the proper tourist infrastructure, from thematic trails to signage in the destination.
2. Marketing, communication and building the network mainly referred to creating an ecodestination brand in each area, creating communication tools (website, materials), tourism monitoring tools, participation in local and international fairs and exhibitions.
3. The role of the management consortium in this step was essential in adapting the program to reality. For example, after a year of implementation, the RAF added a new customized consultancy component to the program and communication training for each destination. In the second year, the RAF approved a new grant for capacity building, strengthening and marketing.
4. Also in this step, REPF and AER organized team-building sessions for destination managers.
5. REPF monitored the progress every 6 months through reports and visits to ecodestinations. The support and monitoring was more focused on helping destination managers create an operational ecotourism destination.

IMPLEMENTATION

Months 19-66

PREPARING STRATEGIES

Months 13-17

FINAL REPORTING

Month 66

The aim of the final report is to assess progress in the four years of implementation and to measure, based on the unified indicators, the impact of the program in each ecodestination and at an integrated level, nationally.

RESULTS OF THE FIRST FIVE YEARS

The building of an ecotourism destination, as is the case of any large-scale change program, is an objective that requires constant effort for long periods of time. In fact, building never ends: it implies sustainable and long-term management of an area to benefit local communities.

Similar to other programs funded by the RAF and REPF, the Ecodestinations Program aimed at getting tangible and measurable results. But more important than the final result was the progress recorded in a specific direction and the qualitative outcome visible in the local communities.

For example, one of the objectives was to create destination management entities which are self-sustainable financially. Although this objective was not achieved, the change of mentality that this objective has produced is more important, namely that at the end of the program, each management unit experimented with various financial formulas and is actively looking for a long-term sustainability model.

The Ecodestinations Program resulted in a major development of a collaborative mechanism

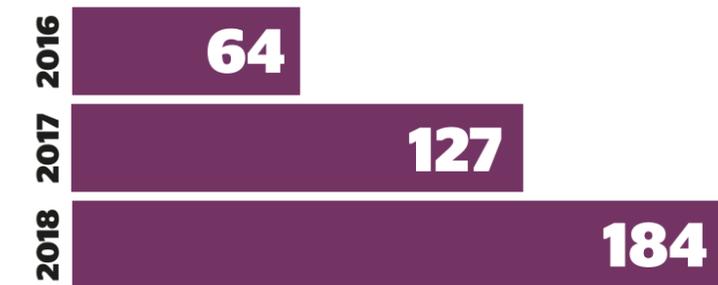
and local dialogue. The destination management unit aggregated a network of local partners, and opened a completely new conversation about the concept of ecodestination in nine communities.

Often times, it brought around the same table stakeholders who did not know each other previously and had no communication channel. Also, the existence of the Ecodestinations Program made it possible to aggregate, around the management units, various complementary financial programs that totalled almost two million dollars.

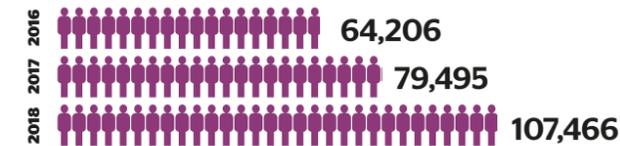
This kind of change is essential: in the long run, the sustainability of a local development program depends on the “grassroots” involvement of the stakeholders, and their collaboration.



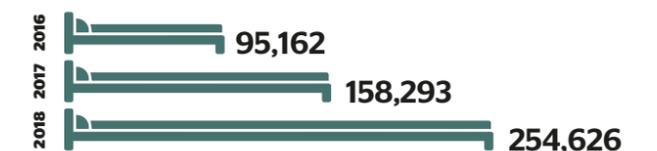
NUMBER OF GUESTHOUSES



NUMBER OF TOURISTS



OVERNIGHT STAYS IN THE DESTINATION



RESULTS ON SEVERAL TIERS

- Infrastructure.** A major result of the program is that it created a collaborative infrastructure and local development.

 - In all the seven destinations, a local partnership was created which brought together the management, entrepreneurs, local organizations and local authorities, with the aim of developing a first local strategy together.
 - Physical tourist infrastructure was created in all destinations, ranging from marking paths, signalling objectives, creating or rehabilitating tourist landmarks. As an example, almost 1,800 kilometers of new routes emerged in the seven destinations.
 - For the first time in Romania, a functional and professional mechanism for monitoring the

ecotourism activities was created, which collects data from guesthouses and tourists alike. It is an essential strategic tool to steer the future development of destinations, for professional marketing and a wise positioning of each destination.

- The seven destinations function as a network, representing the ecotourism offer of Romania at international and national fairs.

- Local partnership.** Another essential result is to legitimate the idea of destination management unit as a credible partner for local actors. Although it was not among the objectives of the program, the concept of local partnership created a framework for practicing local democ-

racy. Just a few examples of local collaboration:

- Local entrepreneurs coordinate their efforts with the management unit, such as in the Transylvanian Hills, where the promotional materials are no longer printed separately, but at destination level.
- The local authority joins the initiatives of the management unit, as was the case with the Mara Cosău - Creasta Cocoşului area, where there is a concrete environmental strategy plan for the destination.
- The destination management becomes a consultant for the local authority for the marketing component of local development, as it happened in Băile Tuşnad.
- In the Țara Hațegului - Retezat destination, the collaboration between the management unit and the local authority led to the creation of a unified system of panels and indicators, as well as clear signalling rules.
- The local community is starting to be part of the establishment and promotion of nature, local attractions and heritage and, in the case of Băile Tuşnad, locals started businesses in Ecotourism, asked for advice to capitalize on a certain natural landscape or came with initiatives for local events.

3 Tourism in destinations. One of the objectives of the program was to develop the local ecotourism network and increase the length of stay, so tourists consume local products and services, and the money remains with the local entrepreneurs.

- The number of guesthouses almost doubled from 2016 to 2018, and the number of overnight stays increased by 168%.



554

LOCAL ENTREPRENEURS
BENEFITING FROM THE
DESTINATION

196

PRODUCTS AND
SERVICES PROMOTED
UNDER THE UMBRELLA
OF THE DESTINATION



67

STARTUPS CREATED FOR
ECOTOURISM-RELATED
ACTIVITIES

- Over the same period, the number of tourists in the seven destinations increased by almost 70% and the average stay is approaching three days, a desirable range for ecotourism.
- Destination development led to the creation of dozens of new local attractions, from horse riding to cultural tours.



1,754 KM

LENGTH OF ROUTES (HIKING,
CYCLING, THEMATIC) CREATED
DURING THE PROGRAM



4 Romania as an ecotourism destination. One of the objectives of the program was to combine the creation of ecotourism destinations with the promotion of Romania's huge potential as a destination in itself. This is an expensive effort, which needs concentrated resources, and which will be refined when the

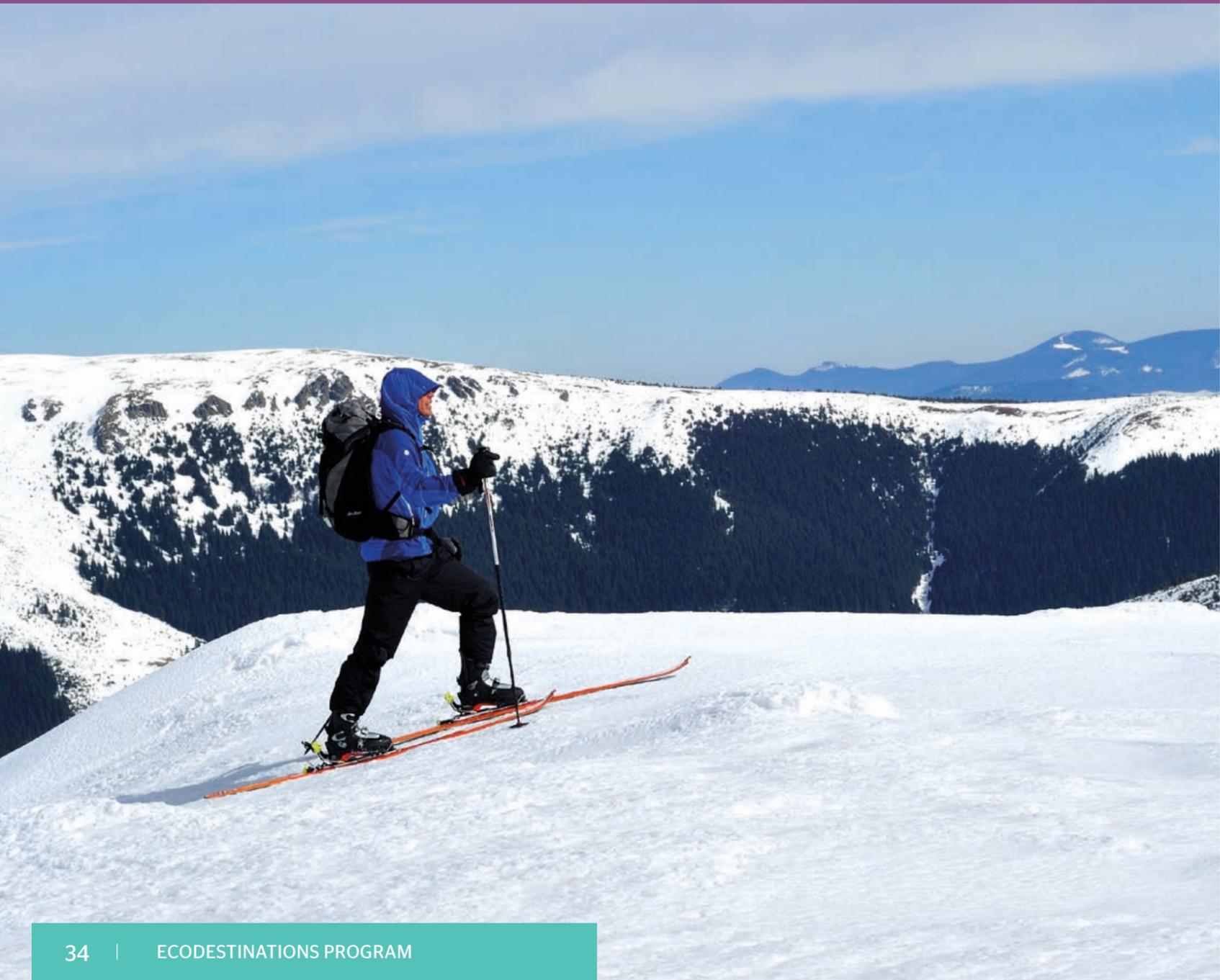
data on the profile of the destinations will allow for coherent strategies to be drafted. Here are some of the results:

- Romania and its destinations are represented, through the contribution of the Ecotourism Association, in major international events in Europe, in Austria, United Kingdom, the Netherlands or Scandinavian countries.
- Domestically, destination managers take part in such events as Bookfest or the Bicycle Salon. The concept of ecodestination thus reaches the general public for the first time.
- The **eco-romania.ro** platform and destination websites are tools that gather the ecotourism offers under the same roof. Destinations such as Hateg-Retezat, Transylvanian Highlands or Mara Cosău - Creasta Cocoşului have created dedicated applications for tourists.

5 Public policy and representation. The idea of ecotourism destinations depends largely on a focused, private and public effort in order to create the necessary conditions.

- The Association of Ecotourism in Romania has become the core that aggregates and represents the tourism industry interested in this topic and promotes the concept of destination management unit as an entity which is open for partnerships.
- Four of the seven destinations are already legally certified as ecotourism destinations and the process continues.
- At European level, AER is part of the process of creating an ecotourism network; one of the pillars of this network is the ecotourism destination.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND BEST PRACTICES



COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND LOCAL LEADERSHIP

The ecodestinations program is a pioneering initiative both in terms of its objectives - building a network of ecodestinations to support the economic development of some areas - and of approach - the investment was focused on the creation of local management entities that are catalysts for change. These are the conclusions after the first five years of implementation.

To begin with, the Program will be continued in a new stage, with a greater focus on what constitutes the development of an ecodestination: local offer of services, tourist attractions and travel packages, destination marketing and strengthening its management.

A first essential conclusion of the initial stage is linked to the idea of flexibility. Although any development program starts from a concrete plan, each area and every local community has its own specifics. For example, Transylvanian Highlands covers a wide area, with 44 local

Monitoring of Tourism Activities

In the beginning of the Ecodestinations Program, there was no structured information about the tourist activity in each destination. As the Program progressed, a component of measurement tools was added, which provides guidance for future strategic developments related to the growth of each destination and ensures an objective progress measurement.

1. An annual qualitative research component. Every year, statistical information is collected from the tourists who visit each area, about their decision to choose the destination, their satisfaction, local attractions, length of stay, consumption of local products, etc.

2. A quantitative research component. Data about the number of tourists, overnight stays, occupancy for the guesthouses in each destination.

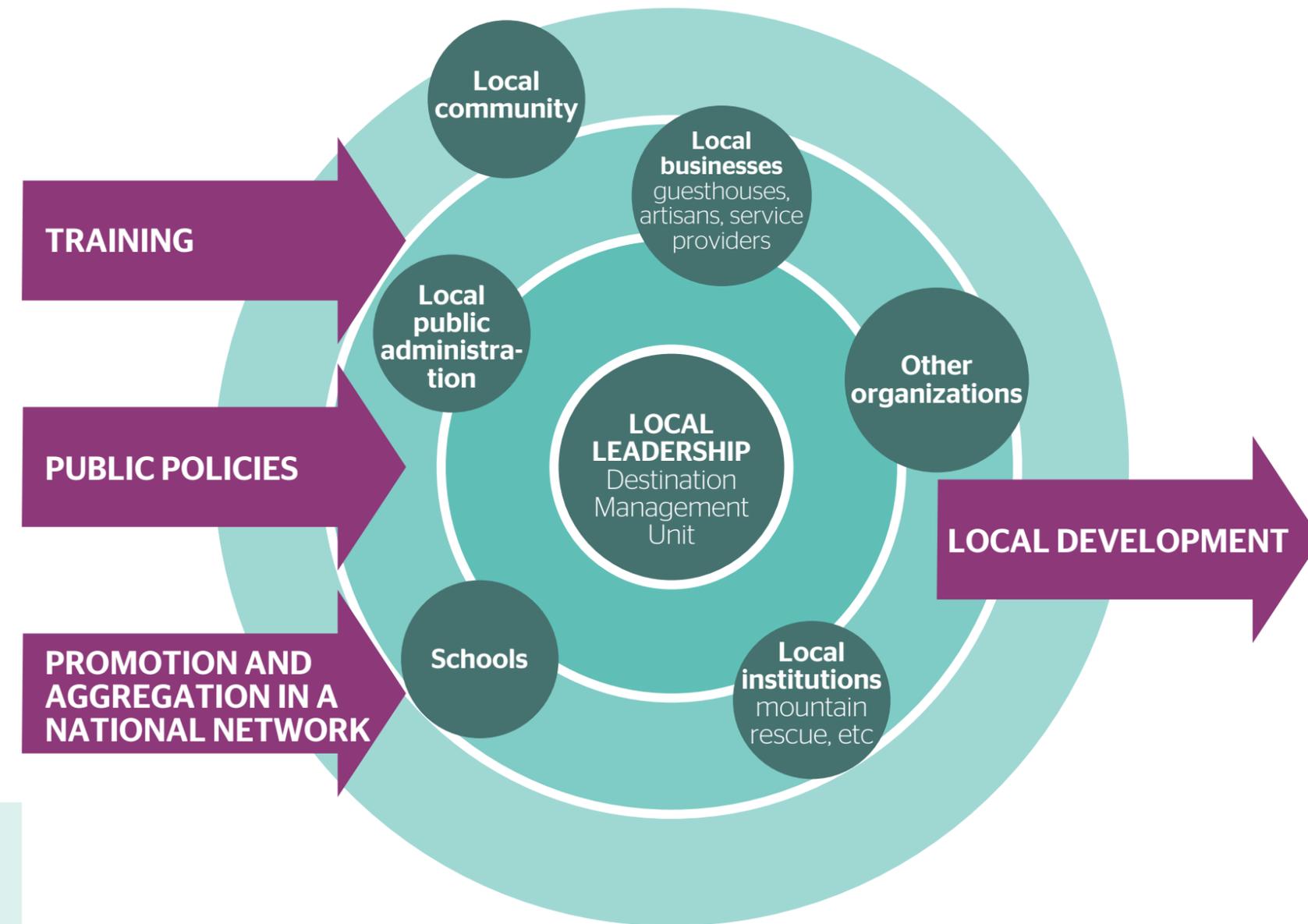
3. A network development component. Destination managers follow the number of guesthouses, local artisans, local events, etc.

administrative units, while Mara Cosău - Creasta Cocosului covers only four administrative units. Some areas, such as the Hațeg - Retezat, cover urban areas, others are mostly rural. The funders skill in managing such programs resides in their capacity to guide and steer, rather than dictate or enforce the local action, so the destination management understands and makes good use of the particularities and local resources.

The donors and "sponsors" of such interventions will be faced with the reality that financial plans and anticipated results may change during the implementation of the program. For example, at the end of the first five years of the Ecodestinations Program, there is a local infrastructure that becomes the basis for destination development, but the initially desired outcome, i.e. to have functional destinations which produce economic results for the respective areas, is only incipient.

Essentially, community development needs local leaders and champions to be sustainable in the long run. It also depends on the setting up of a system to become an autonomous mechanism, after the withdrawal of the initial funders.

IMPORTANT ELEMENTS FOR A LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM



“Local development is possible if resources are invested to produce the best possible outcome for the community. A long-term vision is necessary, strategic thinking and lots of flexibility.”

Andrei Blumer, Association of Ecotourism in Romania, President



LOCAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

To deliver results, community intervention programs are a long-term endeavor. Often, they presume a change of mentality in local leaders - from the focus on projects, to strategic and long-term thinking, from orientation on a particular segment, to highlighting community interests, from focusing on external resources to discovering and using local resources, etc.

Thus, the main mission of a community development program becomes working with local leaders, so that they, in their turn, may stir the local community.

It is essential for change to start with the consolidation of a local partnership that includes representatives of all the stakeholders. This builds trust, a critical ingredient that programs cannot overlook in their operation.

The experience of the Ecodestinations Program shows that there are important components for the funders and "sponsors" of local development.

1 Closeness. Regardless of the initial plans, some of them will not come to fruition for very objective reasons. It is important for program management and local leaders to have formal and informal

communication and consultation channels - so that the program strategy can evolve with the real-life challenges. In the Ecodestinations Program, biannual reporting and frequent visits in destinations were important. In such interventions, it's imperative.

2 Unified principles, personalized approach.

Due to the specificity of each area, the programs must have common functional principles (reporting, what is measured and when, objectives, rules for making the grant, performance criteria, etc.). But it is equally important to have flexibility depending on the local challenges (additional funding for specific needs, personalized assistance, etc.).

3 Limits, freedom and ambitious objectives.

The Ecodestinations Program has many of the characteristics of an entrepreneurial setting. It worked with very limited budgets and for a short period of time, which prompted the managers of the destinations to find innovative solutions to get closer to a very ambitious objective, i.e. that of a functional ecodestination. The program steered thinking towards difficult questions and realism in using resources.

4 Additional tools. The main funder - or the funding consortium - will discover in time that new resources are needed. Whether we are talking about marketing training, public policy documents or tourist monitoring tools, destination managers need an arsenal of collateral resources to support the process. It is important that this "pool" of resources is aggregated at the level of the program, depending on the real experience.

5 Measurement. In general, credible and consistent local data are rarely available. Programs often start with a series of experiences and information which is half empirical, half statistical. The progress measurement system is, however, essential. These systems must, most of the time, develop as the program unfolds.

6 Network. Periodical meetings of destination managers are a precious tool for learning and transferring best practices. Similarly, network membership brings real value when it comes to national and international representation. This network component is important in community development programs.

Bear hide in Băile Tușnad





Green Impact Club in Breb, Eco Maramures

IDEAS FOR LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

The Ecodestinations Program had local economic development as an ultimate goal. Creating travel destinations is a tool for achieving this purpose. Any organization involved in extensive rural development projects may choose different tools, such as education programs or local entrepreneurship. Experience of the program to date can be distilled in several local development ideas and good practices.

- 1 Flexibility and accuracy.** Accuracy refers to basic rules, such as the size of the funding grant - 160,000 USD for each destination, for example - or reporting criteria. Flexibility refers to the willingness to adapt the program to real life, as it unfolds.
- 2 Timeframe.** Community change takes time. An ecotourism destination is built in ten years or more. Therefore, it is important that funders have the flexibility to adjust their meas-

urements and expectations, to detect progress and to think in terms of long-term interventions from the beginning.

3 Leverage. Because any community or area has a multitude of specific problems, there is a need to develop resolution mechanisms. This often leads to a huge consumption of dispersed resources to reach too many objectives. The Ecodestinations Program decided to intervene where success can generate additional resources. In total, another 1.8 million USD were generated through REPF.. Moreover, a functional destination management creates a business model that secures its long-term existence.

4 Mechanisms. In community interventions, the focal point is to create mechanisms, rather than products, services or legal entities. The purpose of the Ecodestinations Program is to create a mechanism to mobilize valuable local resources and to put them to work under the management unit's umbrella.

5 Consortia. Local development is a complex process, and the skillset of a single funder may be limited, regardless of the available budget. The management consortium is more often than not a necessary condition to bring needed resources into the community.

6 Local leaders. Regardless of the quality of the programs, local leaders are the ones who will make things happen at community level. In the Ecodestinations Program, 20% of the time was dedicated to finding the right leaders to be appointed as future destination managers. When the leader left, the program did not go forward.

Uncertainty, Risk and Local Development

The Ecodestinations Program relied on a strategic investment that can produce local economic development. As with any innovation, this, too, implies a considerable degree of risk.

- 1. Economic risk.** Initial conditions - a momentum for global tourism, especially for responsible tourism - can change along the way if the local or global economy pass through difficult conditions. This may stop or delay destination development.
- 2. Legislative risk.** During the Program, national legislation has changed. Part of the destination managers lost the management of protected areas, which complicated local relationships. The protected areas represent one of the most important resources in destination development. Also, the legislation on destination management was changed and is currently under debate. This is why the public policy component of a local development program is very important.
- 3. Investment risk.** There is no guarantee that the result of the program will be estimated at the beginning. Because it is not a punctual intervention but a complex one, it depends on a lot of elements which are changing continuously. Therefore, progress assessment is more important than the mere measurement of reality versus the initial plan.



"We have always followed the idea of being of use to the community and partners in the destination. Maybe we didn't always know how, but this was our intention. I think this is what a destination means: we created a common identity and rules for this space, we made it into an opportunity for coming together, where everybody brings their specific elements."

Mihai Dragomir, manager of the destination

TRANSYLVANIAN HIGHLANDS SLOW TOURISM AS LOCAL IDENTITY

The Transylvanian Highlands destination covers a vast territory in all respects. From Sighișoara in the north to Făgăraș in the south, and from Rupea in the east, to the vicinity of Sibiu in the west, the Highlands are defined by fortified churches, famous villages such as Viscri or Saschiz, endless nature trails, and reserves. Today, it's natural to say, "Transylvanian Highlands". Five years ago, the concept did not exist.

It isn't an easy feat to bring such a vast area under the same umbrella: 44 communes, strong, traditional organizations like ADEPT or Mihai Eminescu Trust - tourist objectives themselves -, the network of fortified churches and already existing local brands. Mihai Dragomir, manager of the ecotourism destination, recalls that, initially, his vision was that they would have "an office where there will be representatives of each entity in the destination

and everybody will work to reach a common goal". That is not what happened.

Indeed, the Transylvanian Highlands destination exists today and is recognized both in Romania and abroad. The area is visited by twice as many tourists as three years ago, there are five times more guesthouses in the ecotourism network and half of those who come here are foreigners, many on the first visit to Romania. All this can be



Photo: Mihai Moiceanu

considered part of success, even if the initial vision failed: the management team never worked in the office but made enormous effort to create relationships and connections among the important stakeholders in the destination.

Approaching the Destination

"Over the years I've understood," Mihai says, "that having a destination doesn't mean that we solve problems. Our role is to create an opportunity for the network partners to come together. We give them a chance to meet."

Destination management for the Transylvanian Highlands is a facilitator for the local community. In the beginning, the idea was to have an office and coordinate the destination from there, to assemble packages and programs and have partners work shoulder to shoulder, but reality showed that the most difficult endeavor is to change the mentality of a community. Unlike any other destination, some organizations have their visions, brands and powerful programs in the Transylvanian Highlands. Mihai Eminescu Trust has been working in the area for a long time, ADEPT has been part of the local communities for years, and the Evangelical Church has its ideas about the fortified churches.

The owners of flourishing guesthouses had their vision of what each of them had to do, especially as part of the reservations are made long in advance and are facilitated by global platforms such as booking.com.

Mihai Dragomir began by placing himself at the community's disposal. The organization he founded, Mioritics, used to be a landmark in the area through their programs (bike tours, brunches,

events) but transferred its activity to the Transylvanian Highlands and was dismantled.

Then, the destination management created "network hubs" that link partners together; for example, the Gazette of Transylvanian Hills, a local publication that promotes local people and projects in the local communities.

They built the physical infrastructure for the necessary packages and activities in an area characterized by slow tourism and cultural experiences: more than 600 kilometers of trekking routes and bicycle touring trails. The ecotourism network has almost 60 guesthouses and ten local artisans, providers of specific ecotourism services, such as horse-riding centers or specialized guides.

Looking back, Mihai is well aware of the gap between what he imagined would happen initially and the reality in the field. They realized soon enough that the price to pay for breaking the ground of a destination is to say "yes" to many things, even if this means "taking 2,000 steps in 1,000 different directions."

And it was not a rational decision, necessarily - "we have been sucked by the whirlpool without much thinking" - but the result of the first four years of construction is a clear and distinctive identity of the Transylvanian Highlands and a foundation of relationships with important entities in the destination. "Without this work, we wouldn't have a future." The destination management integrated essential local products, such as printing destination maps and other tourist information products. Previously, each entity produced its materials, without a common line or identity.

Nowadays, if one of the partners has a need,



Moșna Village, Transylvanian Highlands

they ask the destination management, as a representative of the "Highlands": tours for foreign delegations, requests for gastronomic or cultural events, Mihai Dragomir receives them all. Without looking for such an opportunity, he understood that putting together services from and for the destination is one interesting development direction.

Some time ago, one of the guesthouses wanted to sell homemade beer. As transport was too expensive, the destination management took over and discussed with all the guesthouses to measure the demand and make it worthwhile to the brewer and brokered a contract for the destination.

In the beginning, guesthouse owners were skepti-

cal about the usefulness of an "umbrella", but they ended up requiring that the formerly yearly meetings of the network become quarterly meetings. "It's interesting to see that people who are competitors, theoretically, advise, refer tourists and help one another" Mihai says.

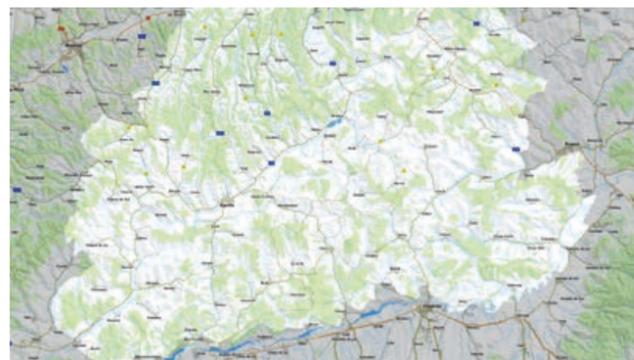
One of the objectives of the ecotourism program, to make the local community part of the building process, is happening as we speak. The network partners say today "these are Highlands' routes" and agree to contribute in labor and money to maintain them. If a city hall or local organization has an event to organize, the destination management joins in to bring added value to the whole area.

NUMBER OF TOURISTS



- In recent years, the infrastructure of the destination has increased by more than 600 kilometers of trekking trails and bicycle touring routes and number of accommodation units has risen from 14 to 72.
- An almost equal share of Romanian and foreign tourists visit the destination and the total number of tourists doubled in the last three years.
- More and more people from other areas of the country choose to become residents of the Transylvanian Highlands to open guesthouses or other local services and attractions, such as food workshops or horse-riding centers. The Highlands are becoming an attractive destination for the "Slow & Restart" concept, as an area for vacationing or as a residence for downshifters or people who want to move out of cities permanently.

Geographic Area



Horse Riding and Bicycle Touring in the Transylvanian Highlands

Positioning of the Destination

The Transylvanian Highlands destination is popular with families, for slow tourism and cultural, culinary or natural experiences. It does not have the features of an adventure destination. In recent years, one of its most important successes was that it increased the percentage of active tourism, a repositioning as per the initial perception that the destination is mainly cultural.

At the international fairs where it is represented, the Transylvanian Highlands destination is well-known, and not just in Romania. Approximately half of the tourists who get here are foreigners. The time spent in the hills has grown considerably, from one-day tourism to several-day stays. Although a relatively expensive destination, it is one of the ecodestinations with the highest number of annual tourists.

Sustainability

For Mihai Dragomir, the future of the destination means a clear thing: focus. The mission to create a common space for local partners and to put himself out for the community moves to a different level, once the destination management has received its necessary legitimacy. One of the roles that proved important is that of service and goods provider for the local network: the destination management produces maps and brochures about the Highlands, prints where the owners of guesthouses and other local attractions can insert logos or ads. Another direction is to become a provider of solutions for local public authorities, especially in terms of the events organized in the destination. "We are exploring an entrepreneurial path, where we show concrete solutions for the city halls, according to

Lessons Learned and Best Practices

1. A destination can't function unless there is a relationship based on trust and collaboration with local partners, and a common identity. It's a lasting process which also depends on the destination management's wish to be of service to the community. This approach often means an enormous energy consumption for the management team.
2. What position the management unit has in the destination is not a matter that can be decided from the beginning. It's a process of trying and experimenting, of working with partners that create the positioning. Often, unexpected opportunities arise - the need to aggregate products and services for the destination - that induce the positioning.
3. A direct relationship is essential. "You can't build a destination from the office or on Skype. You need to talk to people, show empathy, and understand your problems. It's an exercise in trust."

the Highlands concept and identity. We can, thus, bring added value to the authority, and the area," Mihai explains. A third direction is the one related to putting together and selling of tourist packages.

Transylvanian Highlands Destination

<http://site.colinele-transilvaniei.ro>



“What we have done quite well is to reach financial sustainability for the destination management. We have a mix of income sources that allows us some independence.”

Paul Iacobaș, Destination Manager

PĂDUREA CRAIULUI

THE PLACE FOR THRILLSEEKERS

Well "hidden" in the Apuseni Mountains, somewhat east of Oradea, this is almost undiscovered territory, full of surprises for whoever gets here for the first time. One of the most spectacular cave systems in Romania is located in the Pădurea Craiului Mountains, and the adventure trails attract people from all over the world.

The Pădurea Craiului ecotourism destination is different from almost any other: an ex-mining area with a population living in scattered villages where, more often than not, mobile phones do not have a signal. Tourists come here especially for the two spectacular and unique caves: the Crystal Cave at Farcu, and Meziad, with the longest organized visitable route in the country's cave network. The guesthouses are scarce - not more than six in the Ecotourism Network - which makes it complicated to get accommodation.

But the tourist infrastructure is perhaps among the best developed for an ecodestination: apart from the two caves which are accessible to anyone, the network of ten speleological caves, not laid out for regular tourists but attractive for speleological tourism with guides and special equipment - is unique not just in Romania, but also in Eastern Europe. They are joined by the highest number of off-road paths in the country, almost 400 climbing, bicycle touring and mountain jogging routes.



Climbing Route in Pădurea Craiului

Paul Iacobaș is the manager of the destination. He has been working in Pădurea Craiului for a long time, and his duty as a custodian of a protected area included cave layout and protecting the area of dangerous local initiatives, such as the reopening of mines. He has a complicated mission because, beyond cave infrastructure and paths, the area has few services and accommodation for tourists and it's complicated for the local community to see or understand the potential benefits of ecotourism.

Approaching the Destination

"I think that, in a certain sense, we were a bit naïve," says Paul. He expected that the local authorities and community would provide more support for building the destination that it happened. "I was also a destination manager, so I was in a position to control and sometimes fine the local authority, for projects that did not comply with the rules of a protected area. There was this perception that we were the ones blocking development."

Geographic Area



The growth of an ecodestination is a long-term process, in which the community invests today to receive results over some years' time. In a community where there aren't many sources of income, and the infrastructure of guesthouses and tourism services is underdeveloped, the effort is even greater.

Tourists come to the area from neighboring Oradea, Băile Felix – for short visits to the organized caves or other activities. There are many other things to do and see – "I heard tourists saying they did not have enough time for all 60 objectives on their list" – but they don't stay longer because the tourist services are not up to par. Paul Iacobaș focused his attention and limited resources on the things he could influence: cave management and opening other opportunities for various activities in the destination. Pădurea Craiului is perhaps one of the most developed destinations in România, from this point of view. The network of 10 speleological caves is a best practice model today, beyond the fact that it is a unique tourist attraction in this part of the world. There are dedicated guides, a simple system to obtain visitation approvals, and three different levels of difficulty. Although there aren't more than several hundred tourists who come for such adventures, many of them are foreigners on their first visit to Pădurea Craiului. The off-road trails – via ferrata and a more complicated route, on the mountain – and the climbing routes attract people who are eager for intense outdoor activities.

It's a place where people gather to celebrate the sporting performance, as was the case of the

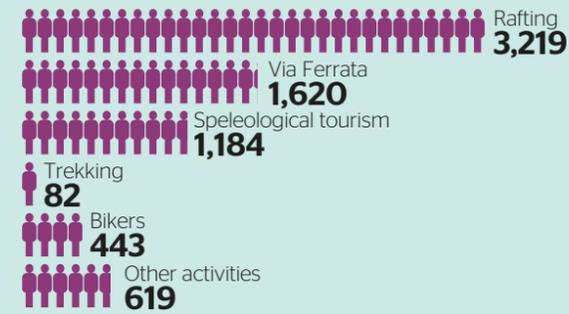
festivals dedicated to the opening of new climbing routes – Osoi Climbing Fest or Lazuri Climbing Fest, which brought together hundreds of climbers from Romania and abroad. "People came from Tyrol, who have heard of us via social media," says Paul. He focused on creating the right contexts in the destination, to bring together people who would fit: "strong events for good quality people." Apart from the festivals, he lists the biking marathons that fill the destination and the area on a 50 km radius, hard terrain running competitions which are part of the international calendar or events such as Pășune Fest, about which participants say, "It's like Woodstock here." Many of the tourists who spend more than a couple of hours in the destination set up their tents in the very well-organized camping areas. Paul Iacobaș and his team have been working for years with local partners to make it known locally that they have a responsibility towards nature and the whole area, by promoting local food, imposing waste management and environmentally friendly materials. "At brunches, we use bran plates and wooden cutlery".

The ecodestination development philosophy has rather been focused on and aggregated around the idea that they should capitalize to the best of their efforts on the areas where destination management has the strongest power to influence how things work. "We haven't looked to the local partner network to a great extent. We put our minds to doing what was in our power. The stage before us now is building the network, to bring more money and improve the state of the area."

Lessons Learned and Best Practices

1. To work hard and seriously, from the beginning, to secure the sustainability and financial efficiency of the management unit. Such relative financial independence is, for Paul Iacobaș, the key to having sound relationships with the partners in the area. "When we go to them, we're not going with requests, but with concrete ideas to move things forward".
2. The Pădurea Craiului destination began with high expectations about the involvement of local partners, with which he exchanged good intentions and a signed partnership agreement. The relationship was seriously put to the test when the destination management started suggesting projects with financial implications. "I learned that, when partnerships get to the use of financial resources, 90% of them are fragile, no matter how well they look on paper". It was an important lesson, one which Paul Iacobaș is taking to the next development stage.
3. One should not do too much at the same time. One or two large projects are probably enough for a small organization, with one or two people. As soon as you add other things, your focus on the most important issues decreases and you won't be able to move forward in any direction.

NUMBER OF TOURISTS AND TYPE OF OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES, BY TOURIST OPERATORS - 2018



- In the last four years, Pădurea Craiului has become one of the best-organized areas in Romania in terms of infrastructure for adventure tourism: 10 caves for speleological tourism, 4 via ferrata routes, 355 climbing trails, 275 km of cycle paths and a mountain jogging route.
- With 14 tour operators and 25 speleological tourism guides, the destination is among the most well-developed in terms of such services.
- However, Pădurea Craiului is a less-visited destination, with only a bit more than 4,000 tourists in the ecotourism guest-house network in 2018 (although the figure doubled from 2017). There are relatively few guesthouses (6 members of the ecotourism network, 31 in total) that fail to get an occupancy rate higher than 15%.
- The future success of the destination will depend on the development of tourist services and increasing the length of stay and the number of tourists.

Positioning of the Destination

Tourist monitoring revealed the fact that many of them are "one-day" visitors: they come to the destination, visit what is available, and leave. Mostly, they are residents of Oradea, Cluj, or tourists from Budapest and eastern Hungary, for whom the destination is very accessible because it's close.

If they come for more than a day, a third stay in the four very well-appointed campgrounds in Pădurea Craiului. The tourist profile shows a younger, more adventurous person, closer to nature and more open to unplanned experiences.

Fortunately, these are educated and careful tourists, who pay attention to nature and are accountable for their impact; unfortunately, the economic impact on the area is minimal, because they do not consume local services and products, leaving little money behind in the destination.

Paul Iacobaș also noticed another essential trait of the destination, which is good and bad at the same time: "Pădurea Craiului does not have a specific position today, very few people know about it". With the experience of the last few years, he finds it clearer now how to invest in communication, on what channels and towards what potential tourists, to continue the effort of economic growth in the area.

The Pădurea Craiului destination attracted the exact kind of people that Paul wanted as visitors. It has also attracted them in less common ways: Young people have moved here from other parts of the country. In Roșia, Șuncuiuș and Zece Hotare, in the very heart of the destination, people established small local businesses: a lavender farm, a soap and natural cosmetics



workshop, a trout farm or ceramic workshops. Viorel Lascu, one of the finest speleologists in Romania, is a resident of Roșia nowadays.

Sustainability

One of the things that the destination management does well, in Paul's opinion, is linked to the financial sustainability of the management unit, through a mix of funding sources. The two caves, Meziad and Farcu, represent one of the sources. They are under CAPDD administration, the organization that also provides destination management services. "We managed to keep our income higher than our expenses even when we invested in maintenance and refurbishment, or when we had a bad year," says Paul. A second element in the Mix is a small souvenir business where they feature the creations of

local artisans. They have two shops, at the entrance of each of the caves. It is a simple way to value local culture, to bring earnings to both local artisans and destination management. A third funding source is annual funding coming from the Bihor County Council specifically to support destination management. Paul believes, however, that the essential thing that has helped them to be financially balanced, is the organization's mentality: "to us, each project must be self-sustainable." The next challenge is to create a specialized company around the management unit, which will sell dedicated tourist packages and products for each market segment.

Pădurea Craiului Destination

www.padureacraiului.ro



"The effect of our work began to be noticed when the community felt a change. When tourists began to stay in the destination for more than one night, to visit attractions other than the Prislop Monastery and use local services, the guesthouse managers began to change their optics."

Anca Rusu, Destination Manager

ȚARA HAȚEGULUI - RETEZAT

JOURNEY AMONG DINOSAURS, RUINS OF AN ANCIENT CIVILIZATION AND WILD NATURE

70 million years ago, the territory where Romania lies today was covered by a sea - Tethys - and Țara Hațegului was an island that housed dwarf dinosaurs. Somewhat more recently, during the Antiquity, the area of Țara Hațegului - Retezat saw the building of two capitals: that of the Dacians in Sarmisegetuza, and the Roman one, at Ulpia Traiana. And nature was generous in this place which hosts the Retezat National Park, the Grădiștea Muncelului-Cioclovina Natural Park, an bison reserve and the Bottomless Lake, a swamp that reaches as deep as to communicate directly with the ocean.

The building of an ecotourism destination in such a territory rich in so diverse sights faced an interesting challenge at the beginning: most of the tourists arriving here came for something else, namely the Prislop Monastery. The monastery was the highlight and gave the identity of the place.

When destination manager Anca Rusu and her team began the work of turning it into a land fit for ecotourism, they had to create not just a network of partners and tourist attractions, but also

a narrative that would change the identity of the place in the minds of tourists.

Today, Țara Hațegului - Retezat is the first destination with a network of 12 approved bicycle touring routes, the Retezat National Park and the Grădiștea Muncelului-Cioclovina Natural Park attract dedicated tourists who enjoy outdoor activities, most of them from outside Romania, and the UNESCO International Geo Park in Țara Hațegului brings families with children who come mostly for educational programs.



Retezat Mountains Photo: László Potozky

CASE STUDIES

Approaching the Destination

"The local partnership was essential," says Anca. "We coordinate 35 partners representing very diverse local interests, from public administration, schools, guesthouses, and Salvamont. Working together with them has brought us legitimacy as a destination manager."

The first idea to gather the partners was to demonstrate that if they work together, everyone wins. Anca recalls that two-thirds of the Partnership members used to print individual maps of the place. The maps were not similar, and we showed them straight away that it was a waste of resources. Each of them went to fairs as they saw fit and did not measure the results. All this proof that we gathered opened the way to create a common destination identity as an effective promotional tool. This is where we started, from the idea of bringing them together for joint initiatives with benefits for everyone.

"It's important to prove that you're a professional," Anca says. In 2016, when the area received the certificate of ecotourism destination, the fact that it was the third in the country with this status meant a lot to the local community.

A lot of firsts happened here: in 2016-2017, Țara Hategului - Retezat was the host of the first tourism monitoring program in an ecotourism destination in Romania. The monitoring system is used today in all ecodestinations and measures the number of tourists, their profile, the reasons why they come to the destination, where they come from and many other data guiding the management strategy.

Working with data is, for Anca, one of the most



Dacia Felix Roman Festival, at Ulpia Traiana Photo: Stefan Martinescu

important features. She uses the information in the assessments to sit down with local partners and develop the destination by clear criteria. Research showed, for instance, that there is interest in bicycle touring. "There was no infrastructure". She was a bicycle touring pioneer, by the way of approving 310 kilometers of bicycle paths and creating a homologation system that can be used for any route in the country today. "We have traveled the routes together with our partners from mountain rescue and with cycling enthusiasts from the destination, and we created the first marks for guidance."

The strategy to put the destination on the map of cycling loving tourists went further: based on data from monitoring, Anca's team took promotional materials to the specialized stores in the tourists' cities of origin. Some of the guesthouses in Țara Hategului - Retezat have become bike-friendly. Nowadays, they work with the Romanian Cycling Federation to put one of the 12 bicycle trails on the map of large national and international mountain biking competitions. Destination management also relies on data and facts when coordinating with local partners. One of the characteristics of the partner network

is that it works a lot with specialized working groups that establish priorities and annual action plans, based on data from the monitoring. "That gets them very involved," says Anca. One of the reasons why the destination is on the right path to positioning itself as a place for active and educational tourism is the collaboration with the guesthouses. It took a long time and it required many discussions and a lot of patience to persuade the owners to provide data on the occupation of guesthouses - "we had to explain that they will benefit from the result, that they will better understand how they stand and what

NUMBER OF TOURISTS



- Țara Hategului – Retezat Destination was certified as an ecotourism destination in 2016. In 2017-2018, the first pilot project monitoring tourists in an ecotourism destination in Romania. In 2018, 12 bicycle touring and trekking routes were approved, a first for Romania.
- Over the past three years, the number of guesthouses has almost doubled in the destination, but the occupancy has risen three times, one of the most spectacular developments in the Ecodestinations Program.
- Collaborating with schools and creating an extensive network of volunteers is perhaps one of the most interesting projects in the destination. Both in the Retezat National Park and the UNESCO International GeoPark Țara Hategului, activities with children and high schools proved very effective in changing the mentality of the communities.

Geographic Area



to do." The results were also visible because the guesthouse owners began to receive different tourist profiles and have their rooms occupied over longer periods. They used the information in the assessments to discuss what they can improve, how they can provide tourists with information about the area, how they can organize events in their guesthouses.

A key program in the destination is conducted in collaboration with the schools, where children and high school students participate in environmental protection and cleaning projects or volunteer in the UNESCO International GeoPark. "They go home and tell their families what they did, thus changing the behavior of their parents and grandparents. This a starting point for changing mentalities," says Anca. Slowly but surely, the local community takes part in the initiative to support the ecodestination: new guesthouses take into account local architecture, entrepreneurs in the area are concerned about local traditions and culture, and spontaneously create events for tourists, such as wagon rides for children or workshops to bread-making in the household.

Positioning of the Destination

It's a log way from what the area was - a place of pilgrimage for mass tourism at the Prislop Monastery - to an authentic ecodestination. But the phenomenon of mass tourism, although in great decline, was essential: "No one comes from 600 kilometers away to see dinosaurs they know nothing about. With so many tourists already in the area, we were able to attract them to new activities and ecotourism."

Active tourism in the Retezat Park and the Grădiștea Muncelului-Cioclovina Natural Park is already significant and composed largely of foreign tourists. Educational programs in the destination attract families with children, for specialized activities. And the Dacia Felix Roman Festival started in 2016, brought more than 5,000 people to Ulpia Traiana with each installment. Anca hopes to be able to resume it on a sustainable financing scheme. But perhaps one of the most interesting initiatives of the destination management is to invite personalities from the sports world to become ambassadors of the destination: Toni Cocone, one of the best paragliders in the world; Avel Ritișan, the Hunedoara resident who led the first Romanian expedition to the Himalayas; Avram Iancu, librarian in Petroșani and the first man to swim the Danube from its springs to the Black Sea.

Sustainability

The long-term funding of the destination management unit is probably the most sensitive point of discussion. An initial hypothesis, that the public administration will provide financial support to the management, proved untrue. Destination management is working on several variants that ensure constant and long-term income sources, such as a promotion fee at fairs and on the destination website for guesthouses included in the local partnership, or a dedicated travel agency to develop and sell tourist packages in the destination.

Țara Hategului - Retezat Destination

<https://turismretezat.ro>

Lessons Learned and Best Practices

1. Perhaps one of the most important lessons, which we find true about almost all destination managers, is related to the management of expectations. At first, Anca Rusu and her team expected significant support from the public authorities - financial as well as in terms of promotion. This didn't happen. The great achievement - and an important criterion - is that the same management team that started working in the destination in 2015 is still operating today
2. The building of a destination depends heavily on a network of suitable people, who are well seen in the community and manage to attract like-minded people and build relationships based on trust. Destination management must allow time and create meeting grounds so that these links can be created. "I never expected these relationships to require so much time," says Anca.
3. Community confidence in the destination manager is essential. They have some expectations: "To prove that you can do concrete things and to build this relationship not with words, but with what you accomplish for your destination." Transparency is another important criterion, for example, in the fact that monitoring data is available to local partners, and based on them, joint decisions are made.



"We emphasized a lot the idea of adjusting on the go and building on the needs of the moment. You must have a strategy and a plan, but also allow for fluidity and change to happen."

Edit Pop, Destination Manager

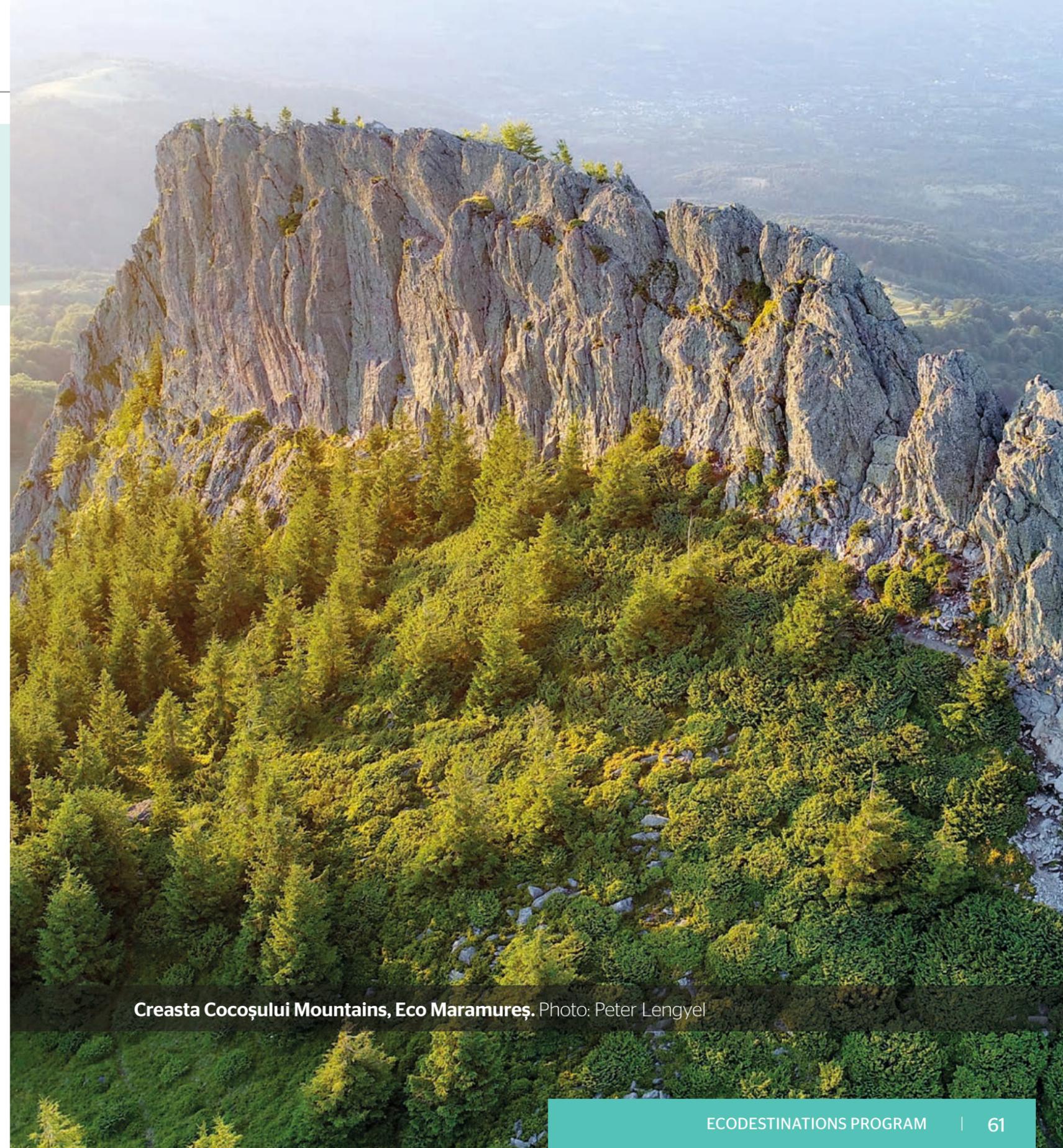
ECO MARAMUREȘ (MARA COSĂU - CRESTĂ COCOȘULUI)

THE GREEN HEART OF HISTORICAL MARAMUREȘ

A little further east of Baia Mare, an hour's drive away, is a land where history is still very vivid. At the foothills of the Gutâi Mountains, guarded by the tip of the Creasta Cocoșului mountain range, the Eco Maramureș destination is recognized as the "green heart" of historical Maramureș.

Here, people still live by simple traditions, as nature, habits, and history dictate. The people of Maramureș have built a wood civilization which pervades the landscape wherever you look: in the massive gates of carefully carved wood, still adorned with pagan signs of protection, in the sharp turrets of churches, in everyday objects and historical houses. Between the Mara and Cosău rivers, with the Creasta Cocoșului Mountains Reserve to the south, the destination comprises 112 villages grouped in 4 municipalities:

Ocna Șugatag, Budești, Desești, and Călinești. Edit Pop is the director of the Ecologic Association and destination manager. She's been working here for almost two decades. In 2006, Ecologic - the custodian of the protected area - launched the Road of Maramureș Legacy, a tourist route linking seven villages with seven protected areas and highlighting the cultural and natural heritage of the place. "We wanted to stimulate economic activity, to reduce the pressure for resource exploitation in the protected area," Edit explains.



Creasta Cocoșului Mountains, Eco Maramureș. Photo: Peter Lengyel

Six years later, Ecologic created one of the seven social enterprises funded by the Green Entrepreneurship program: Greenway Tour, a travel agency dedicated to the Mara Cosău - Creasta Cocosului region.

Next, the ecodestinations program was an opportunity to scale up the work and it brought together, in a unified context, the local community, nature, traditions, infrastructure, and tourism.

Approaching the Destination

"If I were to talk about an essential thing," says Edit, "then that is consistency." The foundation on which the destination is established today is made up of close, though sometimes tense, relationships with local partners, clarity in the long-term vision and many courageous conversations about what a destination means.

The role of a destination manager, as Edit Pop sees it, is to weave the infrastructure of rules and incentives to mobilize the local community. Eco Maramureș is a certified ecodestination with a well-organized Eco Romania certification system for guesthouses in the destination -11 of the 21 guesthouses in the local network are certified or in the process of renewing their certification. Together with local authorities, destination management created an environmental policy whose role was especially to bring together representatives of city halls to discuss reasonable environmental measures for an ecotourism destination. "Many times, local authorities, although they have good intentions, do not realize certain things. We thought that we can pay attention to things that are not yet on their radar, such as

water consumption or the cleanliness of the riverbeds." Environmental policy resulted in a several page document, assumed by local council decisions and many subsequent conversations so that it can be found in annual budgets. In Breb, perhaps one of the most beautiful villages in Romania, waste is collected selectively today.

At first, there were five guesthouses in Breb. Today, there are 20. Throughout the destination, the number of guesthouses has risen from 54 to 85 and the number of tourists has tripled. The power of example is one of the key tools when it comes to what is possible: in Breb, a couple of locals created a new concept that became inspiring for other villages in the destination. Breb 148 - Local Food & Garden is a restaurant organized in a one-hectare garden with fruit trees and a meadow, where the locals cook for tourists and whoever comes their way, and whose model will now be taken over in the village of Desești. Before working on what is seen from the outside - promotion of the destination - Edit Pop aggregated a network of partners and local stakeholders who ultimately compose the core of the destination. Essential rules and physical infrastructure have been added: over 150 kilometers of bicycle trails, markings, signs for the entire destination.

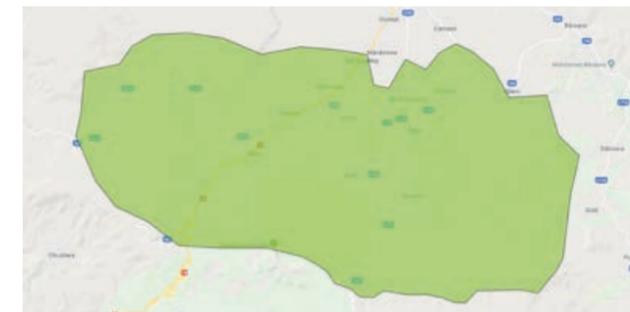
In this framework, initiatives are emerging that add value to the destination, such as the running competitions organized by Vertical Sport, a company specializing in running and climbing worldwide, or The North Quest camps and mountain bike trails. Local authorities also come with initiatives in line with an ecodestination: at Ocna Șugatag, traditionally a

resort with baths and spa treatment, they built bicycle tracks leading from the center to the nearby salt lakes and Pădurea Crăiască forest protected area.

Positioning of the Destination

Like any living thing, an ecotourism destination is changing and evolving. What can happen is not always predictable or easy to draft with a strategy. In the beginning, Eco Maramureș was supposed to be a landmark for young independent tourists, lovers of nature and simple things, people who are ready to explore. It turned out, says Edit today, that the destination has contradicted this plan. Indeed, today there are three times as many lovers of nature, hiking and simple adventures than four years ago (from 4% to 12%), but the great surprise came from a little more traditional tourists: families who come to the area for local traditions and culture and remain for everything they can do outdoors: bike trails and hiking. "The people who used to come have already changed their habits," says Edit. Monitoring the tourists who come to the destination - a hard project, which implies interviewing tourists

Geographic Area



Lessons Learned and Best Practices

1. A concrete and ambitious common objective brings together local partners and mobilizes them. The environmental policy of the destination, which managed to differentiate between an ordinary destination and an ecotourism destination. From the waste collection to the guesthouses' carbon footprint and criteria regarding local agriculture and products, the environmental policy has created a common understanding of the eco area.
2. The destination manager is a facilitator, but it's important to create and maintain an ambitious framework. Several guesthouses received rental bicycles for tourists from destination management, free of charge. It was, reflects Edit, a mistake because it instituted a habit of not paying for this service. Another example: there are guesthouses which hardly cooperate with the destination management for collecting data about tourists and who need to know that they can be excluded from the network if they do not follow the rules.
3. Contact with tourists is essential. The identity of a destination arises from the interweaving between nature and place, on the one hand, and experiences offered to incoming tourists on the other. Direct contact is required to understand which experiences are valuable.



Bicycle Touring Route, Eco Maramureș

and monthly collection of figures from the network guesthouses – shows that this category represents people who stay more in the destination and tend to spend more money. "It was a revelation. We've reorganized our promotion thinking," says Edit.

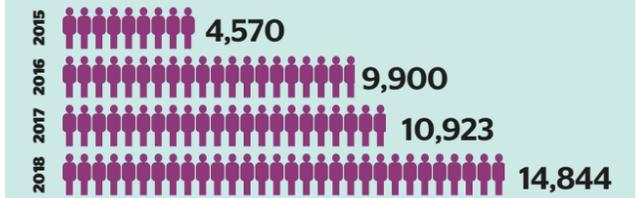
Sustainability

One of the great challenges of any ecodestination is to create a financial model that supports the long-term management of the area. Eco Maramureș is just taking the first steps on this road. Perhaps the starting point was to some extent missed: the construction work of the ecodestination began and continued within the limits of the management unit's resources, without contribution from the community and local partners. Now, notes Edit, it's harder to have such a conversation. But not impossible. The model that intends to build sustainability for destination management work is simple: a promotional fee paid by any of the guesthouses in the destination benefiting from representation and promotion in international or local fairs, in brochures, on the destination website. The advantage of this model is that it is very clear: the guesthouses pay for a specific service (promotion), which is transparent, necessary and understandable. "If I were to start over, I'd settle the rules differently. I would not begin my journey without financial support from the local partner network. It's a lot harder to make the rules later," says Edit.

Eco Maramureș Destination (Mara Cosău – Creasta Cocoșului)

www.ecomaramureș.com

NUMBER OF TOURISTS



Destination management leans on a local partnership consisting of almost 20 entities (local administration, local businesses, associations and managers of protected areas). The close working relationship with these partners is an essential point of destination development.

- From 2015 to 2018, the number of tourists in the Ecotourism network (21 of the 85 guesthouses in the destination) rose three times, to almost 15,000 tourists in 2018. Half of those who arrived here in 2018 were for the first time in historical Maramureș. A lot of them are foreign tourists who came to the area for the first time.
- The guesthouse occupancy has doubled and the financial resources that remain in the area have increased considerably.
- 30 new guesthouses were created in the destination and, in total, the destination added 26 new jobs to local communities.
- Destination infrastructure means 230 kilometers of marked and mapped hiking and bicycle paths.
- The destination has an environmental policy agreed between public authorities and destination management, aiming to differentiate it from an ordinary destination.



"We began from small things and then started to wonder how we could integrate them and expand them. I think it was important that we decided not to do things that we were not good at because that's what helped us bring around our partners."

Attila Pilbáth, Destination Manager

BĂILE TUȘNAD AND SURROUNDINGS

THE PLACE TO GO WHEN YOU WANT TO DISCOVER, TASTE AND TRY

There are still many who associate Băile Tușnad only with spa tourism. However, if they happen to get to the Băile Tușnad destination during an international dog sled competition, or when 40 paragliders from around the world compete to land on a set point, they are stunned.

Several years back, the number of tourists reaching the Băile Tușnad area for active tourism and adventure could be easily grasped, since it was close to zero. Today, a third of the tourists come for everything else but spa tourism. They come for bicycle routes, for nature, for sports competitions or the famous bear observatories in the area. The ecodestination covers the territory from St. Ana lake – the only volcanic lake fully preserved in this part of the world – to the Băile Tușnad resort,

the smallest town in Romania. To the north, it continues with the Lower Ciuc Basin a region which is famous for mineral waters and nature reserves. Attila Pilbáth, who manages the destination nowadays, has been working for two decades in the area. Through the GeoEcologica ACCENT organization, he was the custodian of the Piatra Șoimilor protected area and the Natura 2000 site of the Lower Ciuc Basin. For years, he was guided by the idea that his role was to build lasting projects that



Dog Sled Competition, Băile Tușnad. Photo: Mihai Moiceanu

would bring value to local communities, including a refurbishment of mineral springs, cleaning and returning to the community the old branch of the Olt river, installing photovoltaic panels to illuminate certain tourist attractions.

Approaching the Destination

"We aggregate and intertwine partners and ideas," says Attila. There is a network of local partners around the destination where everybody is represented: local authorities, environmental organizations, event organizers, local guesthouses and entrepreneurs. The most complicated mission was to sell the idea of destination to the local people and convince them that the area could be something else than this place where tourists come for a couple of days to enjoy the mineral baths. They started by creating the tourist infrastructure: theme trails in areas with great tourist potential, such as the Borsaros swamp or Pietra Șoimilor; marking of sights; marked and mapped bicycle trails and the refurbishment of mineral water springs in the destination. Then they encouraged the guesthouses to join the destination and promote it: each of them has an information stand with news about all the attractions and events, detailed maps and presentation materials for different tour packages. They involved schools in nature discovery and protection programs through the so-called Junior Rangers Clubs, and gently but steadily convinced the local authorities to integrate items related to the ecotourism destination in their plans and budgets. One essential trait of a destination manager is their ability to connect otherwise separated wires, Attila

found. It could be a relatively unimportant sign, but he considers it relevant to emphasize the idea of local collaboration: "We have this activity that is very appreciated by tourists, outdoor picnics, by the cart in summer and by sled in winter. It began from one man who lived in a village and practiced a sport which is somewhat similar to roman chariots racing. He had horses, he had carts, and I asked him if he wanted to take some tourists. Other in the village got inspired by him, and now they do the same thing. I got them connected with the guesthouses where tourists eat and created this package", Attila explains. Some things did not necessarily unfold according to the initial plan. A partial reason is that the destination management created very high expectations in the community before the idea of ecodestination was truly understood. They began by promoting the place, which led locals to expect a flood of tourists the next day, without putting in much work. On the one hand, this didn't happen. On the other, this is a project which needs time to brew and educated people. All tourists and all activities are not fit for ecotourism destinations. "It will probably take 20 years." Equally, other things happened which nobody planned initially: in 2017, Bence Mate, one of the world's best wildlife photographers, built a bear observatory near Băile Tușnad. "It's the kind of attraction that carries with it the whole destination," says Attila. Photographers and nature lovers from all over the world have discovered Romania and the Băile Tușnad destination due to this observatory. A second one was built in 2018, near the St. Ana Lake. Tourists come for the bears and stay to con-



Marathon, Băile Tușnad

sume local products and services. In the last four years, the average stay increased to almost two days, and the number of overnight stays almost doubled.

Positioning of the Destination

One of the strategic decisions of the destination management was to contribute to almost any local event linked to nature, local traditions or adventure, either as a partner or by promotion. Triathlons and sled dog competitions, cultural events and local festivals, they all have a role in to repositioning Băile Tușnad and the surrounding area and bringing it to the attention of nature and active experience-seeking tourists. The tourist infrastructure was enriched by 60

Lessons Learned and Best Practices

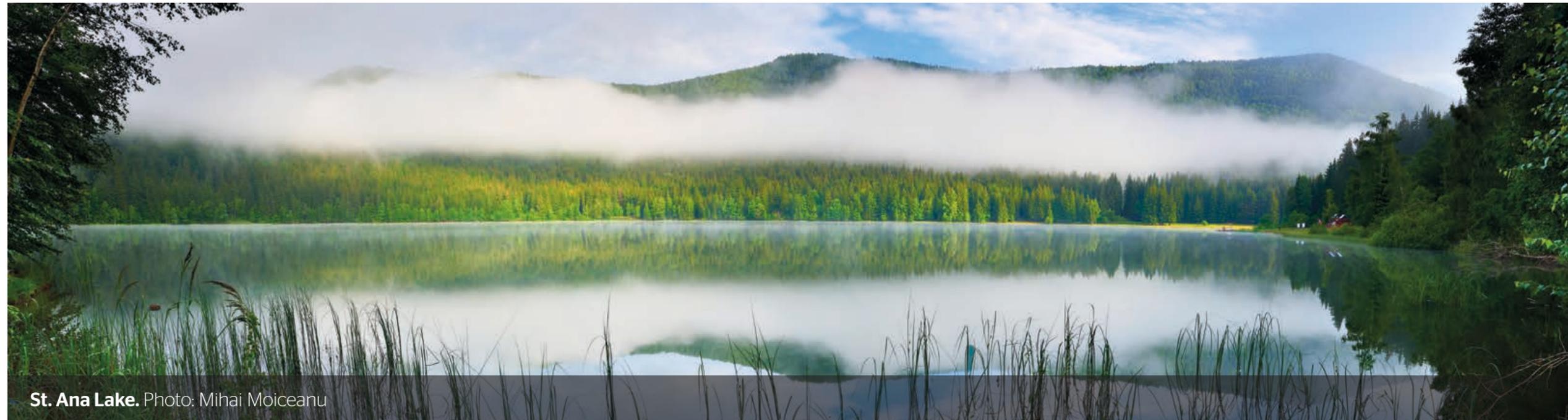
1. Cooperation with local partners is essential. And this cooperation is based on a relationship which is built over time and a lot of communication. "If you don't talk to people about the weather or their families, you don't have a relationship," says Attila. The involvement of the authorities, guesthouse owners and important local stakeholders only comes to life after very much communication. It's not about what's positive, it's about things that don't work.
2. The destination manager needs to "see" otherwise disconnected threads and link them. For example, to think in terms of experiences and suitable attractions for the type of tourist they have in the destination while knowing what the destination has to offer and how to connect things to create this experience. To know the plans and needs of local authorities and connect them to necessary projects in the destination.

NUMBER OF OVERNIGHT STAYS



- In the last two years, the number of guesthouses in the network has risen from 14 to 21 and, although the number of tourists is relatively constant, the occupancy and number of the overnight stays increased by approximately 70%, bringing more revenue in the community.
- Active tourism has grown from almost zero to 30% of the tourists arriving in the destination, which positions the area better for an eco-destination profile.
- Băile Tuşnad is set on the map of international sports competitions (paraglide, triathlon, marathon) and unique natural attractions (bear watching in their natural habitat), which increased the number of foreign tourists.

Geographic Area



St. Ana Lake. Photo: Mihai Moiceanu

kilometers of new routes in natural settings, and the tourist offer includes at least 20 packages and tourist experiences suitable for an ecodestination, from horseback riding to rafting, and from mineral springs to trekking, skiing and photo tours. Although the number of tourists has been relatively constant in recent years, their profile has changed. They spend more time in the destination and the 21 guesthouses in the local ecotourism network increased their occupancy by more than 30%. Since the destination has a multitude of opportunities (hot mineral springs, nature reserves, a volcanic lake, a diverse flora, fauna and relief, gastronomy), one of the greatest challenges is that of creating a coherent identity. One in which all the attractions are joined under an umbrella, instead of competing. The destination management gathered them under the slogan of "Discover, taste, try".

Sustainability

Similar to the other destinations in the program, Băile Tuşnad is on the way to finding a suitable model for the long-term financial management of the area. One of the solutions that Attila Pilbáth is experimenting with is to charge a commission for tourist packages accessed through the destination – there is a call center whose phone number is present on all promotional materials and the destination website. As long as the tour packages are assembled and improved by destination management, this kind of income source is sustainable in the long term. To the same end of trying various approaches, the destination management tested the idea of a vending machine with personalized local products, placed in the Wellness Tusnad in Băile Tuşnad. It is not a major financial source, but it is part of the philosophy that was destination growth has relied

on, i.e. "we start small and wonder how we can integrate these elements and then expand." For larger organizations, in need of personalized programs and guided tours in the destination, Attila's organization acts as an aggregator. For example, for the Babes Bolyai University, who wanted an integrated program in the destination. It's a process marked by trial and error. "If I were to start over," says Attila, "I would probably be a bit more conservative. I imagined that a destination manager coordinates and comes up with ideas and I realized that I had to do everything from constant discussions with partners to managing the inline presence, to taking part in fairs, creating packages and educating the community. This is a long-term process."

Băile Tuşnad and Surroundings Destination

<https://www.eco-turism.ro>



"I think it's very important to be patient and to show respect for people's perspectives and opinions. Our packages are made up of everything we've learned that tourists want. When you talk with them, they tell you «Oh, how I would love to do X or Y...»"

Maricica Cazimirciuc, Destination Manager

ȚARA DORNELOR

WILD NATURE MEETS THE LEGENDS AND TRADITIONS OF A LOST WORLD

700 years ago, while on a hunt, Dragoș Vodă, founder of Moldavia, accidentally killed a young girl named Dorina. Full of remorse, he buried her on the banks of the nearby river. The river received the girl's name, and the valley that it crosses and gives life to became Țara Dornelor (The Dorna Country).

In the heart of Bukovina, the Țara Dornelor ecotourism destination is a realm full of stories and traditions of old times, from Dragoș Voda, until the 100-years period spent as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A wide depression, surrounded by mountains, the destination consists of Vatra Dornei and nine communes that still retain a very rich ethnic and cultural mix.

Ciocănești commune, where the houses are painted in traditional motifs taken from the folk costumes of the area or from the painted Easter eggs, is among the 10 most colorful European tourist destinations.

Mineral waters and natural landscapes, with three nature reserves and the Călimani National Park, make the Țara Dornelor area an equally



Mountain Rhododendron in the Călimani Mountains

suitable destination for cultural, health or active tourism. In 2018, it became the fifth certified ecotourism destination in Romania.

Maricica Cazimirciuc, the destination manager, is not from Dorna originally, but she has been living here for over two decades. She has a 13-year tourism experience and took over the destination management in the fall of 2017.

Approaching the Destination

"I would say that the most important thing is to listen to people," says Maricica. Not only the local people but also tourists arriving in the destination. She thinks that's how you get to understand how to work with them, how to involve them and how to create packages and tourist services that meet their desires and needs. In two years, between 2017 and 2018, the number of tourists in the destination rose four times, and the number of guesthouses almost doubled. It is the only ecodestination in Romania where the average stay is approaching four nights. In Bukovina, people are still united around their communities. This has greatly helped the destination management cooperate with local partners. The local people are involved in all sorts of tourist activities. "Everything we have done so far regarding local traditions, we could not have done otherwise," says Maricica. She then gives the example of a wood carving master with a local exhibition and dedicated classes for pupils. Or the museum curator in Ciocănești, who charms everyone who reaches the two museums of the commune with local stories and egg painting demonstrations.

Here, the people still have looms at home, and in workshops - as is the one in Botoș - folk blouses are still woven and sewn using ancient models. So it is that, if you become a tourist in Țara Dornelor, you will learn about the family legends of the families of yore, about craft and tradition from people who still keep them alive. Unlike other places in Romania, where preserving the local spirit is a continuous challenge, the local administration in the destination has taken over the idea that traditional architecture must be preserved and respected in urban planning. Obviously, the tourist infrastructure played an essential part in the creation of the destination: over the last four years, 150 kilometers of mountain cycle paths and over 420 kilometers of hiking trails were created or improved in Țara Dornelor, and six more viewing points were added. But one of the key things in Maricica Cazimirciuc's strategy is to work with schools and students in the area. It is, in her opinion, the best way to change the mentality of a place. Local entrepreneurs, guesthouse owners, have already started to shape their thinking and "it's complicated to explain how the responsible tourist differs from those who come to barbecue in the forest and listen to music". She has discussed, in the last two years, with all the owners in the destination to explain why the quality of the service is essential and why they cannot rent their rooms at any price. To take care of the client, she learned having worked in the industry for 13 years, is the most important and complicated thing at the same time.



Artisan Workshops

At the destination level, there are successful projects implemented by children with the support of local administrations, such as the development of 17 new mineral water springs, each with a different taste, or the project called Panac's Poke, where they sell their products as souvenirs. "They are eager to discover and learn local crafts and traditions. They go to their parents and talk about respecting nature and gathering garbage. Through them, I think we could promote the destination and together with them we will implement some of our development strategies."

Lessons Learned and Best Practices

1. Creating an ecodestination is a long-term project. It takes patience and respect for the people, whether they are partners or tourists. "You have to sit among them and listen," says Maricica, "to understand what moves them and what needs they have."
2. Not everyone will be involved and eager to change their point of view. But it is important for efforts to be directed to build with those who show enthusiasm and openness. For Țara Dornelor, it is the case of artisans, entrepreneurs, and local professionals, or Green Impact Clubs together with which they develop programs.

NUMBER OF OVERNIGHT STAYS



- The number of tourists in the destination has risen from almost 500 in 2016 to almost 9,000 in 2018. The figure in 2016 is not based on very accurate measurement, but it is outstanding that between 2017 and 2018 the number of tourists rose four times.
- Today, the destination is mostly visited by Romanian tourists from the area of Moldavia, Bucharest or Constanta, because it is very little known in the rest of Romania or outside the country. With the exception of tourist packages destined for horseback riding, foreign tourists are rare in the area. The next step is to increase the notoriety of the destination.
- An important challenge for destination management is to work with local partners who own pensions to reorient the services and offers from mass tourism, with relatively low prices, to ecotourism.

Geographic Area



Positioning of the Destination

Almost 9,000 tourists arrived in the 22 guest-houses in the ecotourism network in 2018, four times more than two years ago. Tارا Dornelor is a destination where most groups come - either groups of families with children over 6-7 years of age or groups of friends.

Two things attract them to the destination, mostly: mineral water treatment and the possibility of practicing outdoor sports: bicycle touring, rafting, horseback riding, hiking.

One of the most successful packages which bring a large part of the foreign tourists to the destination is, incidentally, horseback riding. With all its unique tradition and beauty, Tارا Dornelor is still visited mainly by tourists from Moldavia, Bucharest or Constanta. One of the important challenges for destination management will be to put Tارا Dornelor on the radar of tourists from Transylvania and foreign tourists.

Sustainability

Tارا Dornelor does not yet have a solution to long-term management sustainability. But there's a plan.

"Whenever tourists look us up for recommendations, we compose a schedule according to the budget and what they want," Maricica says. After 13 years in the tourism industry, she has learned that the most important thing is to listen to the client and create an experience. This is how the destination came to have tourist packages with horseback riding and lunch on the mountain, niche photography packages for rounding of the rooster and deer mating rituals. Or pro-



Outdoor Picnic

grams for picking mushrooms and berries and cooking *zacuscă* and jams. All the programs developed by the destination management have a guide because they are part of the experience: "Not only to see but to understand the place, the stories, and the legends".

"I spent a lot of time chatting with tourists and listening every time they said," Oh ... How I would

like to do X or Y... ". That's how the packages were born." The financial sustainability model for destination management is based on the creation of an agency (there is none in the destination today) to put together and sell such tourist packages.

Tارا Dornelor Destination

<https://taradornelor.ro>



"The most important thing is how you choose people to rely on and destination promoters. The variables of such an approach can change often and need perseverance. You have to keep trying and testing, believing in the endeavor and liking what you do."

Geanina Fedeleş, president of the Ținutul Zimbrului Association

ȚINUTUL ZIMBRULUI (BISON COUNTY)

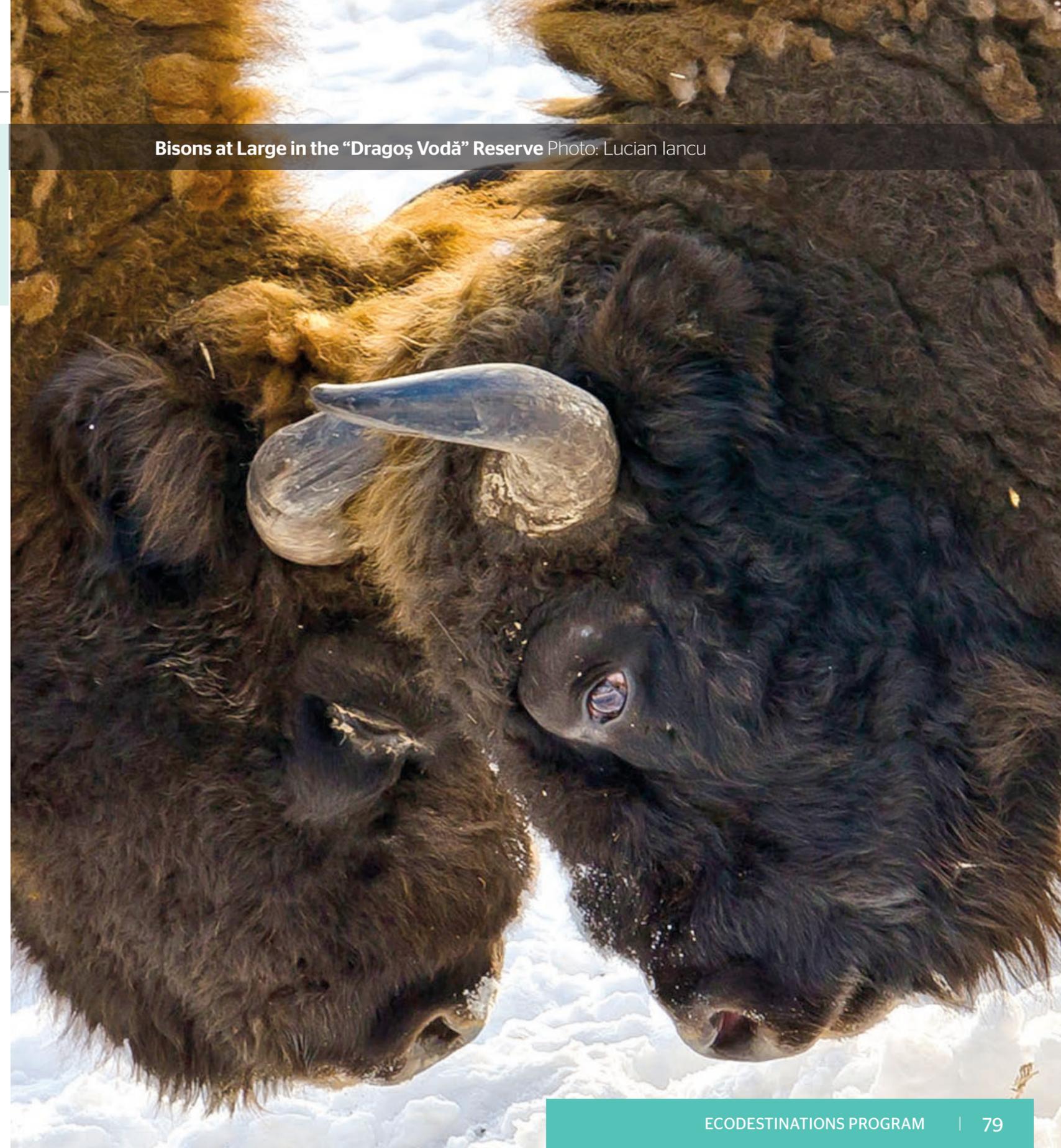
THE PLACE WHERE LEGENDS AND BISONS ROAM FREE

The local people say that the hunt that led to the founding of Moldavia, in mid 14th century, took place in the forests where bison lived, the area known today as Ținutul Zimbrului. Dragoș Vodă, says the legend, crossed the Carpathians from Transylvania in pursuit of an bison. He dismounted when he reached the Moldova river and settled not far, in Baia, where he built a fortress.

The Ținutul Zimbrului destination, including the city of Târgu Neamț and the forests and nature reserves west of the city, covers one of the largest reserves of bison living free in Europe. The Neamț Fortress is one of the residences of Ștefan cel Mare (Stephen the Great), and famous monasteries

such as Agapia or Sihăstria are located in the destination. Also here, a recently inaugurated cultural route connects the memorial houses of large names in Romanian literature: Ion Creangă, Mihail Sadoveanu, Veronica Micle or Alexandru vlahuță. For anyone who remembers the poems of Mihai

Bisons at Large in the "Dragoș Vodă" Reserve Photo: Lucian Iancu





Guardians of Neamț Fortress Photo: Lucian Iancu

Eminescu, it is an interesting surprise to learn that the Copper Forest and Silver Woods are located here, to the south of the Ținutul Zimbrului destination. Both are protected areas, with durmast and 100-year old birch trees. Geanina Fedeleș manages the destination as president of the Ținutul Zimbrului Association. Although, she says, she wrongly anticipated what the establishment of an ecodestination means -"I thought it would take us four years, today I know it will take us ten"- Fedeleș thinks that there are at least two major elements that have put the destination on the map: certification as an ecodestination in 2016 and the fact that it was included in the Top 100 sustainable destinations globally. Some of the results are self-evident in the larger number of tourists, Romanians, and foreigners, who come to the destination to be outdoors and practice active tourism.

Approaching the Destination

Unlike other destinations, there was a very important starting advantage in Ținutul Zimbrului: A local association of several dozen guesthouses that became one of the main partners in building the destination. Geanina, who had participated in the establishment and development of the association, considered that working with the guesthouses was a given. But it wasn't like that. "What I thought was going to be a strong point was a weak spot. We relied on human and logistical resources, but the association has done almost nothing in these four years." One of the reasons for the delayed development was that destination management had to start the work of building relationships with the guesthouses and bringing them into the ecotourism network one by one. In the process of building the destination, the strategy was to be present, as a management unit, in all important events, either organized by the com-

munity or for touristic purposes. With presentations, partnership proposals, promotional materials. It was an effort to establish a voice and legitimacy in the community. "We promoted, explained and communicated the concept of destination," says Geanina, an ingredient without which the support of the partners could not come by. The Ținutul Zimbrului destination is a partner in the events organized by the city of Târgu Neamț - such as "City Days" or "Medieval Festival"- and by the Vânători Neamț Park. It is also a partner in staging various educational performances, such as the "Guardians of Neamț Fortress".

Real experience contradicted expectations in other domains, such as tourist packages: the destination has almost everything you could want in terms of ecotourism, from local legends to unique landscapes and traditions. Destination management identified the essential ingredients for tourist packages (service providers, artisans, experiences): "we presented and promoted them in guesthouses, but they didn't sell." Communication outside the partner network is an essential ingredient, found Geanina. The gues-

Geographic Area



Lessons Learned and Best Practices

1. "The variables of such a move can change very often," says Geanina. Unlike other projects, which have a starting point, an ending and a clear route, the building of an ecotourism destination is not a straight or well-known road, and many things change or get invalidated along the way.

That is why the project team is essential "they should be reliable, dynamic and perseverant people" she says. Experience has taught her that it takes people who are open to test and try various ways and not give up. Management of such an approach can decide the fate of a destination, because a destination is, in the end, "a story told by people who believe in it".

2. The network of partners that join the management unit is very important. And it is the job of management to strengthen this network of mayors, guesthouses, artisans and other local organizations able to assume and develop the concept of ecodestination. Before working on promotion, packages or other issues, a solid partner network is key.



Neamț Fortress Photo: Lucian Iancu

thouses need an "incentive" to talk about the destination and its sights: they must see more tourists coming.

Destination management is now focusing on a necessary ingredient: better tools for destination communication, a new site and working with guesthouses to be more visible. Today, some of them have joined international booking platforms, for example, although they did not embrace the idea at first. "I had great expectations when I started," says Geanina. "It took a long time, but I think, in the end, we identified all the ingredients needed for building the destination. From now on, we're going to focus on putting them to work."

Positioning of the Destination

Being ranked among the Top 100 sustainable destinations and the slogan of the destination - "We live the legend"- are elements that helped a lot to create a clear spot on the map for Ținutul Zimbrului, says Geanina. The Neamț Fortress, the bison reserve and the legend of Dragoș Vodă's founding of the country combine into a unique and specific story. The main positioning must be, above all, in the mind and speech of the local partners. The signs are good: "We see the guesthouse owners as they begin to recommend the park, reserve, and packages for active tourism, which didn't use to happen before."

The destination is still mostly visited by families with children from the area of Moldavia and the seniors who come here for the monasteries in the area. But, as the assessments show, the profile of the tourists begins to diversify: foreign tourists are already coming to the destination, especially European couples in search of active tourism.

NUMBER OF TOURISTS



- In the last four years, 130 new jobs have been created in Ținutul Zimbrului, and 16 new guesthouses have appeared in the destination.
- An interesting mix between the idea of cultural or religious tourism and active tourism led to the creation of two thematic trails, one linking the memorial houses in the destination and a network of hiking trails linking 17 sketes and monasteries in the destination.
- From 2017, Ținutul Zimbrului has constantly been ranked in the global top of the most interesting sustainable destinations, Top 100 Sustainable Destinations.

Sustainability

The model developed by the destination relies on financing the management unit from adjacent projects. For example, nature conservation projects, or projects aimed at protected areas financed from various dedicated sources, such as those set aside by REPF and MOL Romania. Tourism infrastructure development projects - street and signage panels for the destination -financed by local administrations. The third "route" is that of European projects.

Ținutul Zimbrului Destination

<http://www.tinutulzimbrului.ro/>

