

RURAL TOURISM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN HUNGARY

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Introduction

Rural tourism is a segment of the total tourist industry which is particularly important in Hungary, in a country with no spectacular natural attractions, without seaside, high mountains, rainforest or herds of exotic animals. However, its attractive cultural landscapes with small villages, thermal springs, rivers and lakes, combined with the traditional hospitality, are able to offer pleasant experiences to the kind of tourist who is looking for relaxation and recreation in a calm setting.

On one hand, rural tourism development can play an important role in the diversification of the Hungarian tourist supply and in the creation of a more complex and colourful country image. On the other hand, rural tourism is not only the end, but the means to stimulate economic growth, to increase the viability of underdeveloped regions, and to improve the living standards of local populations.

If rural tourism is to fulfil all these roles, it has to be developed in a way that ensures the long-term sustainability of the resources and that of the development progress itself. But what is a sustainable way of development in rural tourism? How can sustainability be monitored and promoted in rural destinations? This paper attempts to answer these questions by presenting the current situation of Hungarian rural tourism through indicators that are considered to be relevant for this type of tourism.



Sustainable Tourism Development

The concept of sustainable development was introduced by the World Commission on Environment and Development in the Brundtland Report in 1987, defining sustainable development as *"development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"*.

Tourism is one of the foremost economic activities around the world, having transported more than 617 million people internationally and generated 448 billion USD in receipts in 1997 (WTO, 1998). It is a major economic force, having generated in 1996 an estimated 3,153.3 billion USD in gross output, creating employment for app. 255 million people, producing app. 10.7 per cent of world gross domestic product, investing app. 766 billion USD in new facilities and equipment annually, and contributing more than app. 653.3 billion USD to global tax revenue (WTTC, 1996).

The volume and significance of tourism clearly shows that it is not enough to develop new forms of "alternative" tourism in order to minimise the negative and maximise the positive impacts of tourism development. The whole sector must be developed and managed in a way that it does not damage the natural and socio-cultural environment and this is the responsibility of the world-wide tourism industry.

Though the Brundtland report made no special reference to tourism, since its publication, the role of tourism in the process of continuously misusing the Earth's resources has been analysed and the concept of sustainable tourism appeared.

Sustainable tourism has several - often seriously debated - definitions. According to the definition of the Federation of Nature and National Parks, sustainable tourism is *"all forms of tourism development, management and activity that maintain the environmental, social and economic integrity and well-being of natural, built and cultural resources in perpetuity"* (FNNP, 1993). A publication by the Tourism Concern and the World Wide Fund for Nature defines sustainable tourism as tourism which *"operates within natural capacities for the regeneration and future productivity of natural resources; recognises the contribution that people and communities, customs and lifestyles, make to the tourism experience; accepts that these people must have an equitable share in the economic benefits of tourism; and is guided by the wishes of local people and communities in the host areas"* (Tourism Concern & WWF, 1992).

Though the existing definitions usually differ in their focus or level of elaborateness, the main message of the Brundtland Report seems to be more and more accepted by the tourism industry all over the world. However, the notion of sustainability is a very complex one and it has many ramifications (Mowforth & Munt, 1998).

Ecological sustainability, which means that tourism development does not cause irreversible changes in a given destination's ecosystem, is the most commonly accepted dimension, since there is an obvious need all over the world to protect natural resources from the negative impacts of tourism activities. The general growth of environment-awareness has significantly contributed to this trend. Social sustainability refers to the ability of a community to absorb tourism (both the industry and the tourists themselves) without the creation of social disharmony. Cultural sustainability in the context of tourism assumes that a given community is able to retain or adapt their own distinctive cultural traits against the pressure of both the so-called "tourist culture" and the "residual culture" of the visitors (Jafari, 1987). Economic sustainability refers to a level of economic gain from tourism that is sufficient to provide an appropriate income for the local community (compared to the inconvenience caused by the activities of the tourism sector) and to cover all the costs of any special measure taken to satisfy the tourists (thus a precondition of economic sustainability is the attractiveness of an area and the perceived high quality of its tourist supply: without being in a competitive position in the world market, no destination can be economically sustainable).

The different aspects of sustainability do not compete, but must be seen as equally important. High level of economic profitability must not be considered as a tool to cover over the damage done to social or natural resources, but the relative fragile nature of these latter must not create a planning environment where economic considerations are not being taken (properly). Sustainable tourism development has to be economically viable and naturally and culturally sensitive at the same time.

As we could see, inappropriate tourism development results in increasing stress on destinations and consequently in negative changes in the destinations' physical, economic and socio-cultural characteristics. In order to avoid or minimise unfavourable impacts, decision-makers must be aware of all the factors that play a

role in the development process. In the measurement of the progress that an individual destination is making towards sustainable tourism development, sustainability indicators are commonly accepted as one set of useful tools.



Indicators of Sustainability

"Indicators measure information with which decision-makers may reduce the chances of unknowingly taking poor decisions" (WTO, 1996). In other words, indicators are a set of useful measures of those factors that are important to the decision-makers (the relative significance of these factors depend on their relevance to the development objectives of a given destination, and on their importance to tourists). *"Indicators are both a tool for management today and an investment in the future, since they reduce the risk of inadvertent damage to the resource base on which the [tourist] industry depends"* (WTO, 1996).

Based on different guidelines and recommendations (Tourism Concern & WWF, 1992; McCool & Watson, 1994; Murphy, 1994; Howie, 1996; Swarbrooke, 1996; WTO, 1996; Mowforth & Munt, 1998), the indicators suggested for the purpose of this study are the following (Table 1):

Table 1 - Indicators of Sustainability in Rural Tourism

Indicator	Measure
1. Stress	- Number of visitors/tourists (per annum/season)
2. Social stress	- Ratio of visitor/tourist numbers to local population (per annum/season)
3. Attractiveness	- List of natural and cultural resources - Rate of attractiveness of natural and cultural resources
4. Planning process	- Existence of local/regional plan for development
5. Tourism planning process	- Existence of local/regional plan for tourism development
6. Area protection	- Category of protection - Percentage of protected area compared to the whole territory of the destination
7. Local involvement	- Ratio of the number of locally owned tourist businesses to the total number of tourist businesses
8. Local control	- Existence of formal measures (public hearing, community meeting, local referendum) to ensure local control over development planning and implementation
9. Employment	- Number of jobs created in tourism (full-time equivalent) - Ratio of local employee number to the number of guest workers

10. Tourism contribution to the local economy	- Proportion of total tax income generated by tourism only
11. Economic diversity	- Share of different economic activities in the total tax income
12. Energy consumption	- Ratio of renewable energy sources to non-renewable energy sources (consumption)
13. Waste management	- Percentage of households with proper sewage system - Percentage of waste receiving treatment
14. Education and training	- Percentage of local people involved in tourism with professional training and education - Distribution of tourism employees by education - Percentage of tourism employees (and local people) participating in on-the-job training in a given time period
15. Local satisfaction	- Overall perception of tourism's impacts in local community
16. Tourist satisfaction	- Overall satisfaction of tourists concerning the quality and the value/price ratio of the complex tourist product - Percentage/change of repeat visits compared to first-time visits



The Concept of Rural Tourism

Rural tourism is an old and a new phenomenon at the same time. Interest in countryside recreation started to grow already in the 19. century as a reaction to the stress of the increasing urbanisation and industrialisation. The rural scene was admired by poets and artists. The new railway companies transported more and more tourists to the countryside. However, the rural tourism of our era is different: the number of tourists involved has increased significantly and tourism has developed in all types of countryside instead of being limited to areas of exceptional scenic beauty.

Though it seems to be simple to define rural tourism as *"tourism that takes place in the countryside"*, this definition does not include the complexity of the activity and the different forms and meanings developed in different countries. According to a broader definition, *"rural tourism includes a range of activities, services and amenities provided by farmers and rural people to attract tourists to their area in order to generate extra income for their businesses"* (Gannon, 1988, in te Kloetze, 1994). If this broader concept is accepted, rural tourism covers not only farm tourism or agritourism (which is generally what rural tourism means for most people), but also special interest nature holidays, touring in rural areas and residential tourism, and the services include - besides accommodation - events, festivities, outdoor recreation, production and sale of handicrafts and agricultural products, etc.

The term "rural tourism" has different meanings in different countries. In Finland, for example, it usually means renting out cottages to visitors or providing catering services in the countryside. In Hungary, a special term of "village tourism" exists, indicating that only activities and services provided in villages are included in this kind of tourism (as we will see later, village tourism typically covers low-priced accommodation, involvement in agricultural or other local activities is not common). In Slovenia, the most important form of rural tourism is tourism on family farms, where guests stay either with the farmer family or in a guest house, but visiting farms

to have a meal and explore the farmyard is also popular (Verbole, 1995). In the Netherlands, the rural tourist product means especially camping on the farm, with most farm services being linked to route-bound activities as cycling, walking or horse-riding (Peters et al, 1994). In Greece, the main provision of rural tourism product is bed and breakfast with accommodation in traditionally furnished rooms and with traditional breakfasts often based on home-made products. Complementary activities - currently still on a limited scale - include restaurants and refreshment facilities or the organisation of cultural and recreational activities (Turner, 1993).

Rural tourism is one of the main priorities of tourism development in many European countries, including Hungary. The market for rural holidays is growing at the same time as the future of many rural regions is uncertain, due to changes in agricultural practice (including the effects of the Common Agricultural Policy in the EU) or the increasing attractiveness of urban living standards. Rural tourism seems to be an appropriate tool to revitalise the declining rural areas and to ensure their sustainable future by job retention or even job creation, increased job diversity, service retention, farm support, broadened cultural provision, landscape and nature conservation or the maintenance of rural arts and crafts as tourist attractions. Rural tourism often provides an incentive (and part of the necessary funding) for infrastructural development, which then contributes to the growth of other economic activities in rural areas. A specific benefit of rural tourism development can be the increasing number of opportunities for social interaction for local people who often live relatively isolated lives in agricultural communities (Swarbrooke, 1996).



Rural Tourism and Sustainability

Rural tourism is often considered to be intrinsically sustainable, for it attracts small number of visitors, there is no need for extensive infrastructural development, tourists are usually genuinely interested in the local culture and traditions. One of the main attraction of rural holidays is the personal interaction with local residents, so hosts and guests are able to share ideas and knowledge, and consequently tourism can fulfil its role as the "industry of peace", as a tool of mutual understanding.

Nevertheless, if rural tourism development is analysed on a deeper level, certain doubts arise concerning intrinsic sustainability. The most significant issue to be investigated is the economic profitability of rural tourist services, since the demand is often seasonal, the occupancy rates are low and the investment required for creating or improving facilities for tourists is often high. In most rural tourist destinations it is quite unlikely that tourism can be viable as a sole source of income. Rural tourism can usually be only one of the income-generating alternatives in a region, so its role in sustainable development is highly influenced by the performances of other economic sectors (especially agriculture).

Concerning environmental sustainability, experiences suggest that considerable investment needs to be undertaken in the environmental management of vulnerable natural assets in order to make rural tourism in any sense sustainable. Tourists are usually most attracted by the industrially least developed regions, which are particularly sensitive to human interference. In addition, managed agricultural landscapes do not always meet the expectations of tourists based on the images of "traditional rural" landscapes represented in the tourist literature and in promotional materials.

Tourism development also influences the socio-cultural characteristics of rural destinations, both in positive and negative way (Keane & Quinn, 1990; Peters et al, 1994). As positive impacts, the following can be mentioned: rural tourism usually encourages better use of the available resources (like land, labour, capital, natural and cultural attractions), brings about socio-economic change, contributes to heritage protection and the conservation of the rural environment, provides more social contact for local people and increases their

chance to learn about other cultures. As negative impacts, tourism in rural areas changes or damages the rural landscape and the natural and cultural values of a given region, rearranges social stratification (this can also be interpreted as a positive change in certain cases), puts additional pressure on the local community, changes their rhythm of life, threatens their privacy or results in the inauthentic presentation of local customs and traditions, adapted to the tourists' wishes.



Rural Tourism Development in Hungary

Rural tourism in Hungary started to develop already in the last century, and this kind of tourism became popular very soon. Before the Second World War, holidays taken in rural areas accounted for 35-45% of all holidays (Kovács, 1993). However, the rural tourism of that period entirely disappeared after 1945 and the reorganisation of the market faces significant obstacles: the lack of an institutional framework, the bad financial situation and the relative underdevelopment of those regions which possess the most attractive resources for tourism development, the little interest on behalf of professional tourist organisations (since rural tourism development promises only low profitability) and the lack of business and hospitality skills and the ageing of the local residents.

The development of rural tourism has been included (and often emphasised) in regional development plans since the 1960's, without too much success (Kőszegfalvi, 1991). Tourism development has been concentrated in a few areas of the country (mainly located at natural waters, around thermal springs and in the mountains) and traditional rural tourism was somehow "lost" in the meantime.

It has to be added that the majority of the Hungarian population living in urban areas still has relatives in the countryside, so VFR is an existing form of rural tourism, but as the motivations are different (to visit relatives, not to become familiar with farming communities' lifestyle or to learn about local crafts and customs), on their behalf a demand for an organised supply of rural tourist products is basically non-existent. So these tourists do not contribute significantly to the economic development of the visited areas, but the fact that they do pay visits to certain rural destinations limit their demand for any further holidays of this kind. In other words, their need for staying in a rural environment is mostly satisfied by their relatives without any expenses (except travel costs), so very often they are not willing to spend any additional amount of money on similar holidays in other rural areas of the country.

An other important factor to consider is that the majority of middle-class Hungarian families (i.e. the segment typically most interested in rural tourism) have their own small holiday homes somewhere in the countryside where they can spend weekends and (part of) their summer holidays. The main motivation for spending leisure time in these holiday homes is relaxation and, for most owners, very small-scale agricultural production (growing fruits and vegetables for their own consumption). Of course, this kind of residential tourism contributes to the development of infrastructure in the given areas, and also to the retention of certain services (especially retailing). On the other hand, the ownership of non-locals restricts (both physically and financially) the opportunities of local people to buy real estate, and the holiday home owners have different infrastructural and social needs than the local residents (e.g. they are not likely to support the local school, because their children go to school in their permanent residence).

New attempts to revitalise the traditional type of tourism started mainly in the 1980's, especially in the least developed areas of the country. Some small areas can present significant success, but in general the progress so far has not met the expectations. Besides the earlier presented obstacles, the domestic image of rural holidays (cheap, aimed for the least affluent, relatively boring) does not help either to attract Hungarian

visitors to rural areas. In order to change this image, the Hungarian Tourism Corp. started a campaign in 1997 to promote domestic (including rural) holidays.

One of the consequences of all the above described tendencies is that most destinations developing (or planning to develop) rural tourism expect to receive mainly foreign visitors, as opposed to the general European trends. In Western Europe rural tourism is one of the growing segments of tourism, more and more Western Europeans seek to enjoy holiday experiences in the countryside (Swarbrooke, 1996). Since Eastern Europe in general is more rural than Western Europe (both considering the level of urbanisation and industrialisation, and the socio-cultural characteristics of the societies), so it is most likely to attract a growing number of visitors from the West, if the rural tourist product is appropriately developed and promoted. In Hungary at the moment, foreign tourists are mostly interested in two types of rural tourism: first, in accommodation in the vicinity of popular tourist destinations (being motivated by the much lower prices), second, in folklore programmes and horse-shows in the "puszta" (traditionally in the Great Plain in the Eastern part of the country, but nowadays horse-shows are organised also around Lake Balaton, the second most popular tourist destination of Hungary, in order to spare tourists the trouble of taking a long trip to the original "puszta"). The development of all the other types of rural tourism (including active nature holidays or participation in farm activities) is still in an early stage.

Unfortunately, the "cheap" domestic image and the low international demand are also expressed in the prices of the rural tourist services, and, consequently, in the contribution of rural tourism to the local economies. Compared to the volume of the labour invested, the profitability of rural tourism is very low in Hungary, despite the exclusivity and uniqueness of certain products (Kovács, 1993). So for those who have the necessary capital to invest in a larger-scale product, there is no real incentive to be involved in this economic activity, and the communities do not realise the profit that they expect (and that would enable them to further develop and diversify their supply in order to modify the existing "low-price - low quality" image).

Considering the further development of rural tourism in Hungary, a controversial issue is that whose interests should be prioritised. At first glance, it seems to be obvious that one of the preconditions of sustainable tourism development is the long-term consideration of local residents' interests. From this point of view, the process of modernisation, urbanisation and agricultural change should be supported also by tourists, since local residents have all the right to acquire the same level of infrastructural development and comfort as people living in urban areas. But if this argument is accepted and rural areas develop the similar way as cities, this kind of development means changes in the overall landscape, the settlements' visual image and in the way of life of local residents, and these changes are not always welcome by tourists. In Hungary we can experience that tourists are looking for the traditional village atmosphere which means for them small thatched houses with white walls, geraniums in the windows, sweep-pole well, domestic animals, etc., so they prefer the conservation of the traditional village life even against local communities' wishes for development.



Sustainability in Hungarian Rural Tourism

As we could see earlier, sustainability is a complex notion, being determined by economic, ecological and socio-cultural factors. The indicators presented in this paper might act as useful measures of those factors that together contribute to sustainable rural tourism development. In order to draw a picture of the present nature of Hungarian rural tourism, the analysis of the development process and the characteristics of the sector might be useful. There are, however, several limitations in an analysis of this kind, mainly because of the lack of accurate data. The following conclusions are mostly drawn from estimates and experiences, not from statistics, because they are simply not available. These conclusions are consequently rather subjective, though they represent the opinion of several experts and rural tourist entrepreneurs, besides that of the

authors.

Analysing all the indicators, we have a relatively complex picture. The interpretation of different measures may also differ, since some indicators are of very subjective character (like local satisfaction - a person who has direct economic benefit from tourism is most likely to accept a higher number of tourists without any annoyance than someone who has to suffer all the negative consequences of tourism without benefiting) and a given quantitative value of an indicator can be evaluated in different ways by different persons. How to decide for example what percentage of an area should be protected in order to ensure the highest degree of sustainability? If only ecological sustainability is to be achieved, then preferably the total area should be protected. But if social sustainability is considered as well, then local residents should have the opportunity to continue traditional recreational activities, e.g. fishing or angling, or the settlement should have the space to grow if the population grows, which are not always compatible with the ecological principles of protection (Ungár, 1998).

Stress - measured as the number of visitors/tourists in a given destination - is not threatening the sustainable future of Hungarian rural tourism at the moment. If we consider only those destinations which meet the definition of rural tourism presented earlier in this paper (Gannon, 1988, in te Kloetze, 1994) and do not include the well-developed holiday resorts which are actually located in the countryside, but cannot be considered as rural areas due to their high level of urbanisation, then the number of visitors/tourists is much lower than what local communities would find as appropriate. In Hungary, there are app. 2000 beds registered in rural tourism and the average occupancy rate is less than 10% (Gál, 1998). Seasonality is characteristic to the demand, but without causing any additional stress yet (in the future, if the number of tourists significantly increases, the temporal coincidence of the tourist season and the main agricultural jobs might lead to tension, but this is far from being an issue yet). Consequently, social stress is non-existent, which could be considered as a positive factor, but since it is derived from the very low level of demand (and not from the balanced distribution of visitors in space and time), it cannot be considered as a favourable indicators of sustainability.

Most of the areas of Hungary, where rural tourism is part of the general local or regional development plans, possess various natural and cultural attractions. Among these, the most important ones are the clean natural environment, the thermal springs, the hospitality of the local people, the gastronomy, the rural lifestyle, and, to a certain extent, the preserved traditions and heritage. On the other hand, the old architectural styles that made our villages so distinctive are disappearing, the construction boom in the '60s and '70s resulted in relatively similar village appearances all over the country, less and less young people know and practice the old traditions, and the general modernisation has changed the rural lifestyle. As we could see earlier in this paper, the interest of tourists looking for authentic rural experiences very often conflict with the interest of locals looking for urban comfort. Certain attractions typical of rural tourism, like the opportunity for participation in farm activities or involvement in the hosts' everyday life, are missing in the majority of destinations (though, fortunately, these latter attractions are man-made, so can be developed in the future). Altogether, the overall attractiveness of the rural areas in Hungary is acceptable, the potential for rural tourism development seems to be existing, but there is a need for a marketing approach in the development of complex tourist products, and for further diversification and development of attractions based on the needs of different tourist segments.

Local and regional plans for general development exist in all rural tourist destinations, since they are required by the law. Tourism planning is far less common, especially in those areas where rural tourism is in an early stage of development. Among the reasons for not having tourism development plans, we can find the lack of educated and experienced planners or that of a common will on behalf of the local residents, the negative previous experiences concerning tourism development plans (more plans have been written than implemented, outsider experts have often created unaccomplishable plans) or simply the lack of financial resources. The existing plans very often focus on the economic aspects of the development process,

disregarding future ecological or socio-cultural consequences of the proposed actions. The necessity of a regional approach is being accepted relatively slowly: at the present low level of demand, destinations usually see each other as competitors, not as potential co-operation partners.

Protected areas of higher category have a better chance to attract visitors than others. At the moment, in the first half of 1998, Hungary has nine National Parks and countless local protected areas and further attempts are made in order to increase the territory of these areas by establishing new National Parks. The precious natural and cultural resources of these Parks (diverse flora and fauna, rare species, geological formations, typical domesticated animals, cultural landscapes, cultural heritage) serve as the basis of rural tourism development in the nearby villages (the scattered structure of the Hungarian National Park system - all but one park consist of several pieces of protected land - facilitates the involvement of these communities). In general, rural tourism benefits of the existence of National Parks (lower categories of protected areas play a less significant role in the success of tourism), and the current ratio of protection can be considered as appropriate from an overall aspect of sustainability (i.e. a balance between ecological, economic and social interests seems to be achieved).

Since rural tourism development is typically low-scale and locally managed in Hungary, the involvement rate of local people is high, though it depends on how the term "local people" is defined. Especially in the smallest, least developed villages, it is quite common that the people originally living in the area have moved to bigger villages or to towns, in order to get a job or provide better education for their children. Their houses have often been bought by people from cities who looked for relaxation in natural environment or who decided to save the dying old villages. Many small-scale rural tourist businesses are managed by these people, who, by origin, are not local, but, by their commitment and their efforts made to help a settlement or a region survive, must be evaluated as locals. Their involvement, objectives and intentions are very similar to those of the local people, so their contribution must be considered as beneficial for the sustainability of rural tourism development. The ownership of non-locals (in the above mentioned sense) in Hungarian rural tourism is not common, mainly because of the low potential profitability (it is more characteristic to the established tourist resorts like the ones around Lake Balaton).

Since the demand for rural tourism is relatively low in Hungary, the number of jobs created by this activity is not high at the moment, but the diversification of the attractions and services could induce a significant growth in this field in the near future. At the moment, rural tourism mainly provides additional income for rural families (as part-time activity particularly for the female population) and contributes to the development of pluriactivity (i.e. when a family or an individual carries out more than one type of job). The supplementary income generated by rural communities can help the development of the infrastructure or social services as well, and the perceived potential of economic development (by tourism as a catalyst) can make an area more attractive, thus more viable in the long term. Since rural tourism is a relatively new phenomenon in Hungary (not considering now the period before 1945), this is more of an expectation than a fact at the moment.

Consequently, the contribution of rural tourism to the local economy is relatively low in most rural destinations, at least in terms of registered financial income. This is partly due to the presence of grey economy (facilitated by the lack of a well-established institutional framework and the informal nature of the rural tourist services). There are no reliable statistics on the actual incomes from rural tourism, and the ratio of taxes generated by tourism to the total amount of taxes does not accurately reflect the share of the industry. (This fact also affects our knowledge of the economic diversity of an area - but even without proper statistics it can be stated that in the least developed villages rural tourism is often the only economic activity with a growth potential). Besides the financial results, rural tourism development generally improves the quality of life in the destinations (by providing broader personal contacts, by motivating people to take better care of their environment or indirectly,

by assuring preference to an area in national development projects).

Environmental factors, like energy sources or waste management, are usually rather neglected in rural tourism development. Even if attempts are made to provide proper sewage or waste treatment systems all over the country, these attempts are related to tourism only in the most frequented destinations with the most urgent environmental problems (like at Lake Balaton). The utilisation of renewable energy sources is generally not an issue (when it is, the reason is mostly increased environment-consciousness, not a perceived threat of a growing number of tourists exploiting the non-renewable energy sources). For most destinations, the main priority is to provide the tourists with all the comfort they need (e.g. bathrooms). Given the present low level of demand, it seems to be totally impossible that one day masses of tourists would threaten the ecological balance of any rural destination. On the other hand, the fact that rural tourism has started to develop quite recently in Hungary, provides an opportunity for the country to adopt other regions' experiences in order to avoid mistakes made elsewhere. The stricter environmental regulations of the European Union also affect the general economic development process in Hungary, which can be beneficial for the ecological balance of rural tourism as well.

In tourism development in general, training and education of the labour force is one of the necessary requirements of sustainability. Since in rural tourism many local residents without formal tourism education are involved, their education on the main issues of sustainability must form part of the overall development process. In Hungary, the failure of several rural tourism development projects could have been strongly related to the lack of market knowledge and marketing skills. Because in many cases even the basic knowledge of running a business is missing, there is typically no specific need for studying or implementing the principles of sustainable development. The issue of sustainability usually emerges only in those heavily frequented areas where the negative impacts of tourism can already be detected.

Though there are exceptions, local people in general are far from being satisfied by rural tourism development. The main factors behind this dissatisfaction are the gap between the expected and the realised profitability, the relatively slow growth of the sector, the related bureaucracy, the lack of significant support from the state. Other contributing factors were the lack of marketing and business skills of the local people, the lack of domestic demand and the overstatement of the local resources and attractions. Especially at the beginning of the development process, hopes were high, large numbers of tourists were expected to come and spend generously, but reality has not lived up to the expectations of the communities involved. Nowadays, a more cautious development phase is in stage, the co-operation between villages and regions improves, more thorough planning takes place, the people involved are eventually gathering the necessary knowledge, skills and experiences.

On the other hand, those tourists who actually take part in rural holidays in Hungary, are usually satisfied with the quality of their experiences. Both among Hungarians and foreigners, there is a relatively high proportion of repeat visitors. Their satisfaction indicates that the product itself is perceived as of good quality by that narrow segment of customers that is attracted by it. The only problem concerning sustainability is the low level of demand: no matter how satisfied customers are, if - at least in short run - their demand cannot ensure economic sustainability for the visited areas. (In the long run, word of mouth promotion may increase interest in rural recreation and the overall image of rural holidays may be changed as well.)



Conclusions

By the general analysis of the sustainability of rural tourism development in Hungary, an attempt was made to

present the complex nature of the activity. Though rural tourism has the potential to be one of the most effective tools of regional development, it has not grown up to the expectations so far, due to several interrelated reasons described earlier in the paper.

The next step in the research of this topic will be the detailed assessment of one or several rural tourist destinations in Hungary through the presented sustainability indicators. A study of this kind would serve various purposes: it would help to test the usefulness, the appropriateness and the applicability of these indicators in the analysis of the sustainability of rural tourism, and it would contribute to the understanding of what different interest groups (including local community members, tourists, ecologists or businessmen) perceive as sustainable rural tourism development. A better understanding of these perceptions would help the planning of a rural tourism that is able to satisfy the needs of most groups for now and in the future.



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