1. Ecotourism in Romania

Romania’s tourism potential includes valuable natural protected areas, high biodiversity, natural landscapes, authentic rural traditions. Capitalizing on such resources, visible progress has been made over the past decade in the development of rural tourism and ecotourism.

The new National Strategy for Ecotourism Development 2016-2020 (2015) points out that eco-tourism remains a niche market: while the number of visitors to nature conservation areas, estimated at 3.4 million in 2014, continued to increase, only a fraction of them are eco-tourists.

The Romanian Ecotourism Association (AER) is a public-private partnership for nature conservation and sustainable tourism development (active since 2003). It promotes the concept of ecotourism; it provides ecotourism certification for destinations, guesthouses and tourist products (“Certified Eco-Romania” label); it offers training and technical support to eco-tour operators; it promotes Romania as an ecotourism destination abroad. The activity of AER started with a project in Piatra Craiului National Park in the Carpathians. The park conservers a limestone ridge, with spectacular karst landforms and landscapes and remarkable biodiversity including large carnivores.

2. Magura village

entirely located within the Piatra Craiului NP, has approx. 600 inhabitants in 125 households; the local economy is traditionally based on sheep herding, dairy products and forestry, but due to the limits imposed by local conservation standards, is increasingly relying on outside employment (seasonal migration abroad, mainly for unskilled work). Over the past decade tourism has become an alternative activity, with about 20 guesthouses offering mostly rural tourism services to Romanian visitors.

3. Case study

H. & K. are both outsiders (husband Saxon born in Romania, migrated to Germany, wife German; both school teachers, they returned in the early 1990s). H. has a Bioscience degree; he has been involved in conservation projects and is a founding member of AER. In 1999, the couple started the Carpathian Nature Tours (tour operator), providing eco-tours mainly to foreign guests. In 2004 they settled in Magura and opened the guesthouse; in 2005 both the guesthouse and C.N. Tours were eco-certified by AER. The business has been very successful, growing rapidly (2016: > 9000 overnights). 80-90% are foreign guests, most of them impressed by the local nature, the facilities and services; many become regular visitors. H. and K.’s innovative business model can be summarized as follows:

- **Vision** in choosing Magura as "base camp", capitalizing on unique resources and the niche market.
- **Integrated/synergistic nature of the business**:
  - combination of guesthouse + tour operator.
- **Eco-certification** as a vital marketing tool: guarantees genuine, quality ecotourism products.
- **Good knowledge of the market**, of the needs of western visitors (active, experiential tourism).
- **Close connections** with AER, environmental NGOs, national park authorities, the national network of eco-destination.
- **Diversity/originality of tours, programs**: flexible combinations/choices.
- **Qualified staff** (experienced guides: vegetation, wildlife specialists + interpretation in foreign languages).
- **Marketing** abroad: direct participation in tourism fairs etc.; contracts with tour operators abroad; use of the internet: CNTours website, Facebook, Trip Advisor etc.
- **Acting as role model**: demonstrating the value of local nature and rural traditions as potential source of income; raising local awareness.

4. Issues

In spite of the contribution to the local community, most locals are hostile towards H. and his business, considering it unfair competition. The business's contribution to local development remains controversial: the guesthouse creates jobs, uses local products (wood, food produce etc); pays local taxes; shares guests with local guesthouses during peak season etc., but the "trickle-down effect" remains very limited. While many challenges lay ahead both for the community and the business, H. is optimistic about the potential for improvement under the new local leadership inaugurated in 2016. He has no plans to expand the business, but intends to **diversify** the tourism offer and **improve the quality** of services.

Discover Eco-Romania 2016. AER 2016
Pensiunea Villa Hermani website: http://cntours.ro

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