

DEVELOPMENT OF ECOTOURISM IN THE REGION OF GJIROKASTRA, ONE MORE OPPORTUNITY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Ecotourism is considered as one of the forms of tourism, which provides a sustainable development in long-term periods. To be successful, ecotourism should promote sustainable development by means of the support of activities that create the possibility for the local residents and tour operators to increase their incomes and improve living standards. Ecotourism must do more than simply creating a number of activities just to attract the tourists, offering to the tourists a chance to interact with nature in such a way as to protect flora and fauna parts, allowing future generations enjoy these natural resources. Through this work will be given reasons that support the development of ecotourism in the region of Gjirokastra, and combined with cultural tourism will bring a greater economic, environmental and social impact. To successfully realize this work are used statistics from different institutions, interviews with entrepreneurs in the tourism sector in the region of Gjirokastra in order to identify the problems and opportunities in this region, also are used published materials related to ecotourism and its development in different regions.

Keywords: Cultural tourism, ecotourism, sustainable development, natural resources.

Introduction

Region of Gjirokastra, and especially the city of Gjirokastra is distinctively relying on cultural tourism. This is because of the features the city has: the characteristic houses, the magnificent castle, the paved streets with cobblestones, as well as by its geographical location. Cultural tourism is really strong nucleus for the development of the region, but it can not bring

maximum benefits without the support and development of other factors; many of them are very difficult to generate. One of the most important factors among them is the demolition of the characteristic houses of Gjirokastra day by day, for many reasons such as: financial difficulties of the owners of the houses, the high cost of reconstruction and very bad condition of some of these houses because they are left for long periods without maintenance. Also, the cobbled streets are extremely damaged due to the interference of the human hands and the frequent movement of vehicles. But the focus of long terms development only through cultural tourism is not the only solution. This is because the region of Gjirokastra has such a geographic position that stimulates the development of ecotourism. Through this work it is required to be considered as an opportunity for sustainable development of this region even the application of ecotourism, which combined with cultural tourism will provide more incomes, employment increase, improvement of living standards, conservation and protection of the environment.

Ecotourism is a branch of tourism, which has found support in many countries, both developed and developing countries. Ecotourism aims the development of the tourism in harmony with the environment, aiming to preserve and protect flora and fauna of that country (Gorica, 2003). In order to be successful, ecotourism needs to stimulate a sustainable development, allowing the local residents and the providers of tourist services to enjoy increased living standards (Koja&Gorica, 2007). Ecotourism must do more than simply create a series of activities to attract visitors, offering them the opportunity to interact with nature in such a way as to protect the flora and fauna of a country, and allowing local residents and future visitors to continue enjoying these qualities.

One of the aims of this paper is to identify the real advantages and opportunities of the region of Gjirokastra to develop ecotourism, providing additional incomes, increase living standards and protection of flora and fauna of this region in close cooperation with cultural tourism.

Material and methods.

This work's main objective will be conceptually and methodologically addressing ecotourism as a particular form of tourism sector for sustainable development, and in particular to the region of Gjirokastra targeting a combination of cultural tourism. As specific objectives of this paper can be separated;

- Recognition of ecotourism and the opportunities to develop it in the region of Gjirokastra
- Identification of costs and benefits of ecotourism

- Identification of opportunities for effective interaction between ecotourism and cultural tourism in the region of Gjirokastra.

To successfully realize this work are used statistics from different institutions, interviews with entrepreneurs in the tourism sector and published materials in connection with ecotourism, its application and benefits deriving from it.

Literature review.

Tourism is estimated by many countries of the world as an opportunity to revive the weak economy, as a relief to economic development. For this reason we can say that even Albania, a country with a fragile economy, should aim and rely strongly on tourism. In recent years interest in the tourism sector has grown significantly and a part of this interest has focused on cultural tourism because there is a strong base that stimulates this kind of tourism. One of the areas in Albania where cultural tourism is developed and is to receive its benefits is the region of Gjirokastra. But Gjirokastra region due to geographic location, terrain, its ecosystem can provide a different kind of tourism, which supports the natural environment, flora and fauna, ie ecotourism.

Ecotourism is an alternative form of tourism, very lucrative and large positive effects, which groups several different types of activities according to their link with the principle source used, which is the natural environment (Eagles&Higgins, 1998). Ecotourism is a sustainable form of tourism based on the nature, which focuses primarily on learning about nature. According to Femmel (1999) ecotourism is a form of sustainable tourism because it must consider;

- the establishment and creation of this product on nature tourism
- ecological sustainability
- educational and interpretive elements

Another definition calls ecotourism a non consumable form, educational and quite romantic in non visited areas and characterized by a stunning beauty (Page&Dowling , 2002). In this way, ecotourism helps in achieving sustainable tourism because it embraces and executes with precision all the most important guidelines for sustainable tourism

Another aspect of ecotourism is the involvement of the local community. This involvement provides additional incomes to the community, employment increase, living improvement and enhances the quality of tourists' experience (Lindberg, 1996). Local community can be involved in ecotourism activities by providing additional services, tourist facilities, new and attractive products for the tourist. But the report where the profitability of this kind of activity exceeds the costs should always be reserved (Wearing&Neil, 1999).

Analysis of development of ecotourism in the region of Gjirokastra

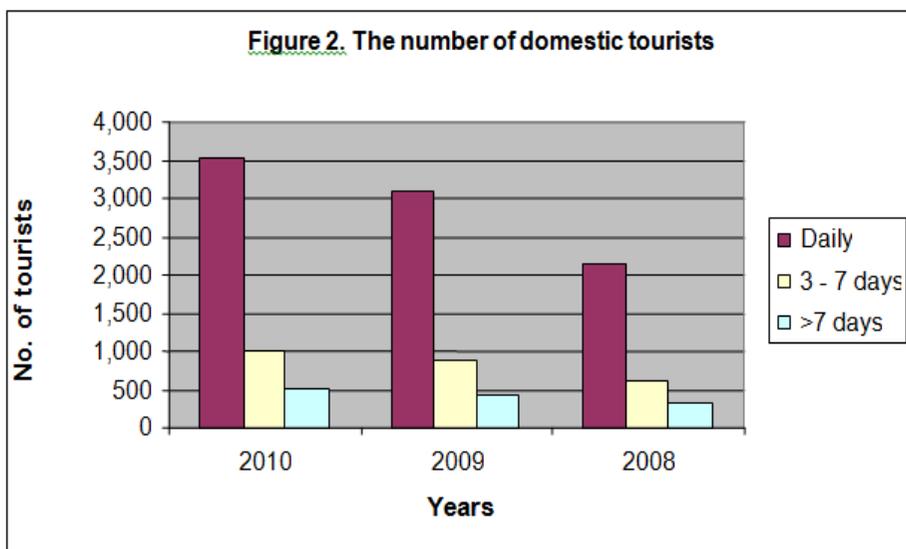
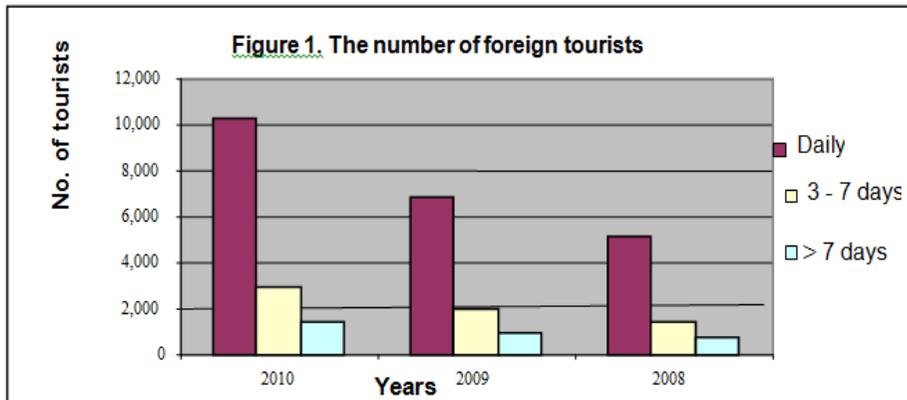
Region of Gjirokastra represents a special interest in tourism due to cultural, historical and architectural values. Tourism development is one of the priorities of the region not only for the present but also for the future, being closely related to infrastructure, urbanization, development of industry and agriculture. Higher values of historical, architectural, cultural and natural landscapes provide amazing scenery of the region and constitute the essential basis of attendance by various local and foreign visitors. Maintenance of these tourist values of the region, generally, and of the characteristic part of the town of Gjirokastra, particularly, should be the main concern of the state institutions, NGOs and above all civil liability of all residents to be aware of and sensitive to these values. Until now the tourist potential in the region is not very efficient. A tourist town like Gjirokastra, serves not only as a regional center, but also as an inter-regional trade. Tourist spots like the Lugina e Bëncës, Uji i Ftohtë, Gryka e Këlcyrës, Viroi, Sotira etc. are areas in which we can develop and offer tourist services such as hotels, restaurants, hunting, agritourism, etc. Tourism is always considered as the most important sector of the region's future development.

Gjirokastra region has had a growing number of tourists each year, which means that Gjirokastra is known as a cultural tourism destination type. So the main objective has been achieved, it is recognized abroad as a tourist destination, but now the problem that arises is the realization of maximum benefit from this destination, which is not going well. One of the negative factors in this regard is the fact that most of the tourist flow is composed of daily tourists; this is also reflected on the table 1:

Table 1. Tourist flow

Year	Total No of tourists	No. of non-domestic tourists			No of domestic tourists		
		Daily	3 - 7 days	> 7 days	Daily	3 - 7 days	>7 days
2010	19,787	10,325	2,950	1,475	3,525	995	517
2009	14,250	6,895	1,970	985	3,080	880	440
2008	10,348	5,109	1,460	729	2,135	610	305
Total	44,385	22,329	6,380	3,189	8,740	2,485	1,262

Data taken from the Office of Administration and Coordination Museum City - Gjirokastër



As it can be seen from the table 1, about 70% of tourists are daily visitors, this means that the tourist, especially foreign tourist, comes as a visitor a few hours, visits the museum of the city and goes to other destinations, while not fully consuming the tourism product offered by Gjirokastra, but only a part of it.

So, in the region of Gjirokastra considering that cultural tourism attracts only daily visitors and the majority of them do not stay more than 24 hours, aiming to find various forms of activities which are being combined with cultural tourism to bring about an improvement in economic development the region, increased income, employment, the preservation and protection of natural and cultural environments. How can this be accomplished? One way is to develop ecotourism in the region of Gjirokastra and the combination of its activities with cultural tourism. The development

of ecotourism is strongly supported due to geographic location, rich flora and fauna of this region. In the territory of Gjirokastra predominate the mountains and valleys and the most characteristic morphological feature is the combination of mountain ranges with valleys. From west to east there is the formation; Range Stugarë-Mali i Gjerë-Field of Kurvelesh, Drini Valley, Range Shëndëlli-Lunxhëri-Bureto, Pogon-Zagori-Valley Mezhgoran, Range Trebeshinë-Dhëmbel-Nemërçkë, Vjosa Valley, Range Melesinë-Postelan. Mountain ranges and valleys generally have the Southeast-Northwest direction and the highest point is found on Nemërçka Mount.

Gjirokastra region offers many beautiful places with stunning beauty, yet not visited by the tourists and especially foreign tourists, who constitute a powerful resource for the development of a sustainable and successful ecotourism. In order to achieve this combination it requires clear and achievable strategies, it is also required the collaboration between the central government and the local one and the participation of the local community and its awareness regarding the benefits of this kind of tourism.

4.1. Çajupi Field : An opportunity for mountain and white tourism.

One of the most attractive places, with a rich flora and fauna in the region of Gjirokastra is Çajupi field, which lies on Mount Lunxheria in northwest-southeast direction, with a total length of 2.5 km and 1.6 km width, at an altitude of 970 meters above sea level, and an area about 3.5 km² (Rogo, 2000). In this geographical area are species such as wild rabbit, fox, wolf, mountain partridge, slippers, which are a source of vigorous development of hunting. Field Çajupi characterized by a suitable climate for the development of mountain tourism. Average annual temperature 7.8 degrees Celsius, and according to the seasons and months it is presented in the tables below:

Table 2. Avarage Annual Temperature (Celsius Degrees)

ÇAJUPI	S E A S O N S			
	WINTER	SPRING	SUMMER	AUTUMN
	1.2	5.8	15.9	8.4

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Table 3. Avarage Annual Temperature (Celsius Degrees)

ÇAJUPI	M O N T H S												Mes.
	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII	
	1.0	1.1	1.3	5.4	10.9	18.7	16.3	16.8	12.8	8.2	4.3	1.7	7.8

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In the southwestern area of Çajupi field spring 6 sources, which are known for the cold and clean water all year long. These sources are small, they flow 0.2 - 0.3 L/sec. The biggest source is Jankos and the famous source

of Brat, which is known for the magnificent water temperature 6 to 8 degrees Celsius. The development of mountain tourism in this geographical area is not simply an idea, but it is a real opportunity which should be further developed. This area has really potentials to develop mountain tourism, excursions, hiking to horseback, white tourism etc. This area is noted for its rich winery where wine and grape are distinguished, the vineyards with fruit trees, for their traditional cuisine with meat roasted on a spit, for dairy products like milk, yogurt, cheese, the warm hospitality and generous people of this area. Bearing in mind the distance near the town of Gjirokastrë, about 20 km, the development of ecotourism in Çajupi field is not just a dream, but it is an opportunity which should be embraced and become reality. To achieve this requires it needs a clear strategy of public institutions in close cooperation with private businesses.

One of the ideas on how to develop this area is to build a tourist village, which will serve for tourism during the year, providing a steady income and avoiding seasonality that characterizes different types of tourism. Also we can say that the task remains for private tourist agencies and public sector to promote the exceptional value, to enable the visitor who comes to the city of Gjirokastra not to stay a few hours and leave. But, it becomes possible to plan a proper guide, which provides a foreign visitor staying more than a day. This can be accomplished by providing the visitor a tourist trip in Çajupi field, and offering a variety of activities such as hunting, hiking to horseback, excursions, consumption of fresh organic products to the accommodation for one night. Also through the development of this form of tourism development and the possibility for expanding markets with organic products.

According to Staiff et al (2002), these opportunities occur in parallel with different problems, which must be recorded before it realizes the possible alternatives. These problems include the development of:

- Marketing organization with the resources and talent required to deliver valuable information and to positively influence consumer attitudes in respect of tracking the rural holiday experience
- Monitoring procedures and measures to encourage the development of the catering facilities and quality accommodation
- Connectivity between regional attractions on offer and the merger between food producers and tourism operators in order to advertise fresh products.
- Programs for the provision of risk and managing it effectively training programs for tourism and business.

To perform a more thorough study is necessary also to carry out SWOT analysis for development of ecotourism in this area, which is represented by the following table;

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Suitable environment for various forms of ecotourism, Many natural assets, cultural and archaeological The warm hospitality and traditional cuisine of the rural community, Community awareness about the importance of developing ecotourism.	There is a lack in providing sufficient information and orientation maps, A low level of education in rural areas, Difficulties in adapting the houses for tourism, Lack of basic tourist infrastructure.
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
Opportunity to guide development of cultural complex - green tourism, Increasing the number of visitors to rural areas, Providing additional income in areas where ecotourism can be developed.	Continuous damage of flora and fauna, Greatly increase of the environment pollution, The abandonment of rural areas by the local population to urban areas or abroad.

Conclusion

On this work it was found that the region of Gjirokastra probably has enough potential to develop various forms of ecotourism. Development of Gjirokastra region should not rely solely on the development of cultural tourism. Cultural tourism is really a strong nucleus for the development of the region, but it can not bring maximum benefits without the support and development of other factors, where a portion of which is very difficult to generate. Some of these factors are: the most important houses which are characteristic of Gjirokastra degrade from day to day, for many reasons such as financial difficulties of the owners of these houses, the high cost of reconstruction, their bad conditions because they are left for a long time without maintenance. Also, the cobbled streets are extremely damaged due to human interference, as well as more frequent movement of vehicles.

All these factors comprise an obstacle to rapid development of strong tourism and cultural. For these reasons, this work emphasizes that one of the possibilities to achieve sustainable development is the development of ecotourism in the region of Gjirokastra. The development of ecotourism in the region is favored by both geographical location and the rich flora and fauna, which are another rare asset of this region. For the successful development of ecotourism there should be developed effective strategies, requiring a close collaboration between public and private sector, and aiming at combining cultural tourism with eco-tourism to achieve maximum benefits to increase incomes, to reduce unemployment, improve the quality of life. On the other hand there are many elements that hinder the development of ecotourism. We can mention the low level of education in rural areas, difficulties in adapting the housing in the tourism function, continuous

damage of flora and fauna, greatly increase of the environmental pollution, lack of basic tourist infrastructure and many other factors.

Despite all these negative elements, the development of close cooperation with ecotourism and cultural tourism in Gjirokastra region should be strongly supported by public, private sector and the local community because through these forms of investment can be achieved a sustainable development of the region.

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