Preliminary Study of Active Tourism Stages in Dornelor Basin, Romania

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Abstract: - Active tourism, under its multiple forms (hiking, rafting, nordic walking, horse riding and so on) is attracting more practitioners from around the world and it succeeds in imposing itself in a greater number of traditional tourist destinations. Since the Romanian territory faces the same international trend, this study has been focused on Dornelor basin, a well known area thanks to its diversity of active tourism but also for its development during the last twenty years. First, this paper aims at making an inventory and a localization of all forms of active tourism practiced within the Dornelor basin, trying at the same time to understand the logic of their implementation in that territory. Another plan of the research is to follow their evolution in time and space and to propose new, efficient and sustainable strategies, capable of promoting Dornelor County as the main Romanian active tourist destination. The results have confirmed that active tourism practices are dominant in Dornelor basin and that the territory is suitable for new development strategies, capable of bringing the novelty in the area and contributing to local economic development.

Key-Words: - Dornelor basin, active tourism, hiking, nordic walking, rafting, mountaineering

1 Introduction
Although recent studies state that Romanian tourism has relied its offer on natural resources and that time has come to re-think the tourist offer in order to promote Romanian cultural sites, nature itself presents still many possibilities for a remodelling of touristic offer. Our attention has been focused on Dornelor basin, an area which has a central point of attraction, Vatra Dornei, an internationally known spa resort.

Being situated inside the North-East Romanian Development Region, this territory has a great potential of development due to the fact that the region is the only one in the country which has the right to access non-reimbursable (up to 70%) European structural funds. Bringing into discussion an apparently unattractive approach for the Romanian scientific community, this paper represents a first point of future quantitative and qualitative analysis of active tourism.

2 Active tourism
A new travelling philosophy that combines adventure, ecotourism and cultural aspects of a discovery tour was taking shape in the post-1990s. This belief expressed by active tourism aimed at combining recreation, education and bring benefits to the tourist as well as the visited land (Fig.1). Active tourism has many aspects in common with ecotourism and nature tourism and it also integrates some activities of action and adventure tourism. Additionally it also includes some aspects of cultural tours and academic and scientific expeditions.

The forms of active tourism represent a recent but a very important preoccupation for the specialists from various domains such as geography, economy, territorial planning, even medicine. The multidisciplinarity of this field of research permitted a progressive improvement of the methodology.

Fig.1 - The active tourism and its importance in tourist travels (source: Active Tourism Organization)[1]
taken from different scientific domains and the terminology is being clearer, especially for the concepts of hiking and water sports.

There are numerous studies published worldwide but very few cover explicitly the concept and the practices of active tourism. Their majority include forms of active tourism in themes regarding alternative tourism or sustainable tourism, which are more complex and generous concepts in terms of possibilities of approach. The positive aspects of active tourism are not neglected by any of the scientific papers whether it concerns the social impact as the group cohesion [2] or the environmental and economic perspective [3]. Most of the times, active tourism is being rightfully associated with rural areas and their sustainable development [4], [5] but the name of active tourism is hardly continuing to find its place in scientific literature.

The active tourism is integrated in adventure tourism [6] which can be practiced in a lighter and/or extreme form, notions specific mostly for the American tourism literature. However, the pure adventure tourism rather involves activities of high personal risks and dangers and the production and delivery of adrenalin [7]. The New Zealand authors state that the active tourism and the adventure tourism represent complementary forms which mark in the same time distinct stages of a continuous evolution of the desire for discovery of the human being. These two concepts remind us of the tourist’s aspiration of adventuring which has been replaced over time when the tourist phenomenon developed with the exploration of paths by means of maps and guides. A supplementary distinction between active tourism and adventure tourism has been outlined: the active tourism is being defined through the activity practiced while adventure tourism is rather associated with a destination [7].

3 Active tourism phenomenon in Dornelor basin

Dornelor basin is a relatively small and common intramontainous depression but which benefits from a generally well conserved traditional nature and lifestyle. These aspects make it one of the most attractive and visited areas from north-country, especially for the possibilities it offers to active tourism (Fig.2), to rest and relaxation, to winter sports. The tourism development in this area represents more of a necessity for sustaining local economy which is being based on an elementary capitalization of local resources through zootechnics, food industry and forestry.

![Fig.2 - Active tourism forms in Dornelor basin (source: remaking after ANCPI)[8]](image)

3.1 The beginning of active tourism

Back in 1935, a strong tourist movement had emerged in Vatra Dornei, focused on developing different forms of what we call today, active tourism. The planning of sports grounds and the presentation of some of the tourist paths from Giulmâlau – Rarau Mountains, Suhard and Calimani Mountains and a panel of addresses of local mountain guides in a published tourist guide of Vatra Dornei in 1936 were the main expressions of this new travel philosophy.

In the spring of 2007, the National Authority for Tourism approved 17 paths in these mountains. The network of tourist mountain paths in Dornelor basin is of approximately 280 km and it is periodically equipped and patrolled by members of Vatra Dornei
Mountain Rescue team. To the sports diversity practiced in Dornelor basin, in 1999 new elements of adventure and extreme sports were added: river rafting, paragliding, mountain bike, tyrolean traverse, rock climbing.

The first river rafting activities were recorded in the spring of 1999 on Bistrita river and since then, a sector of approximately 35 km has remained blocked. Ousorul Peak (1,634 metres), near the city of Vatra Dornei is considered to be the best place on Romania’s paragliding map because of the laminar currents existing there. This mountain peak was also the host of a national paragliding competition in 2001, only two years after the birth of this sport in this area. Later on, an important form of active tourism made its presence in the area in 2006 when 150 km of mountain biking paths were set.

Another significant event in the dynamics of active tourism was the opening in 2009 of Active Tourism Park, an initiative sustained also by Stefan cel Mare University of Suceava. This park offers the possibility of 45 km of nordic walking, located within the range of the resort, and presenting all the European characteristics of this form of activity.

The Calimani Mountains, situated in the south of the region have a long tradition of hiking activity, reaching back to the first decades of the 20th century. The hiking paths are well maintained, and one of the traditional hiking paths links Vatra Dornei to Rodnei Mountains, through Runc peak, Suhardu Mare peak, Omu peak (link to Rotunda pass).

3.2 The dynamics of active tourism forms
The most practiced sports and tourist activities in the world are represented here in Dornelor basin. Rock climbing and mountaineering, generally, have become more popular amongst young people. These activities involve backpacking, physical fitness programmes and cross-country skiing [9]. Walking, hiking and mountain climbing are tourist practices present also on the rest of Romanian territory, especially because of the possibility of climbing every Carpathian peak.

As a risk recreation [10], mountaineering involves activities more or less difficult. The complexity of practices are conditioned ultimately by each direct and exact option of the tourists, in close relation with their age, physical strength, health, training and level of knowledge in that domain. Dornelor basin (Fig.3) has climbing paths on Alpina Dorna 1 rock, rock climbing and bouldering tracks between 20 and 80 metres on Rusca Rock, and on Pietrele Doamnei – Rarau Mountains only for mountain climbing. The diverse tourist offer of guided activities include two paths of tyrolean traverses that cross Dorna River, both of them being though means of recreation and not links between two random points of a mountaineering path.
Locations such as in Postavaru Mountains - Poiana Brasov, Piatra Craiului, Codlea (in Brasov County), and Dornelor basin are the favourite areas for paragliding. The most difficult and challenging flight, recommended only for those with minimum two or three years of experience is the one from Postavaru Mountains – Poiana Brasov, which has a descent of 650 metres. But the presence of one of the strongest currents in the country inside Dornelor basin makes this territory an attractive destination for tourists willing to practice paragliding. Ousorul Peak offers a difference of 820 metres between launching and landing points, permitting a lift of 360 degrees.

Hiking is undoubtedly the most widely spread form of active tourism. It has by far the most practitioners and it represents a start for other practices of active tourism. The concept of hiking is still under discussion and its definitions are still different and confuse. Yet, Emmanuelle Sarlanga proposed a hiking route typology [11] which was based on the existence of three required elements for the realization of a hiking route: the route itself as a main tourist product, the access way (a roadway or railway, necessary for the arrival of tourists at their destination) and the stages (depending on route’s length, they can be upgraded facilities for picnic, beautiful view points or even shelters, chalets, villages with hotel facilities).

The first approved hiking paths appeared in the Dornelor basin in the second half of 20th century (’60s – ’70s), this type of activity having a long tradition in this area. Today, we can consider hiking in Dornelor basin as being the most widely spread form of active tourism, covering all territorial units with routes of different length or level of difficulty. The local paths can last for 3 to 10 hours in average, summing 280 km marked tracks, from which 150 km can be used for hiking or mountain biking. The numbers exceed any other form of active tourism practiced in the area.

Although extremely present, this practice still presents opportunities for the study area. In Dornelor basin, the hiking routes can help draining the tourists from Vatra Dornei, the main attraction, to the wards around that do not present a big enough interest for the tourist from Romanian big cities. This type of sustainable tourism development can be seen in Western Europe - Haute Gironde, Loire Valley and Seine Valley, being the most suitable examples (generally, in micro-regions based solely on one attraction).

By taking into account all these elements we just referred to, one of the activities we need to mention is nordic walking which summed in 2007 approximately 8 million practitioners [12]. The effects of this activity on health were highlighted in various international studies. Apparently, nordic walking uses about 90 % of muscles and it allows to burn up to 46 % more calories than usual walking due to the use of poles [13]. It has also a positive impact for overweight persons [14] or Parkinson patients [15]. These characteristics of health maintenance make nordic walking an activity practised by a wide range of persons, from children to the elder, including those with health problems.

In Dornelor basin this activity is recent, the first proposals appearing in 2007/2008, and the first paths beginning to be functional since 2009 [16]. However, as a global trend, this sport knows here a sustained evolution, attracting more and more practitioners. The main reasons are the positive effects on health and the low costs involved. According to Vatra Dornei Tourism Promotion and Mountain Rescue Service the total length of nordic walking paths around Vatra Dornei is about 45 km arranged on six routes numbered R1 to R6, with lengths between 2 and 12.1 km, with level difference from 39 m to 464 m. Given the current growth trends of this sport, both along Western European countries and Eastern European Countries (including Romania), we can foresee a multiplication of nordic walking paths in the next years in Vatra Dornei. Hiking trails already designed can be used for nordic walking, but will consider compliance with grades of difficulty. Nordic walking is a much more demanding activity than hiking, so it can be practiced on large scale only on routes with small and medium difficulty grades, according to annex no.2 of the Government Decision 77/2003 (journey time is between 3-8 hours with sustained physical effort, possible in some sectors) [17].

An important activity in Dornelor basin is horse riding, activity which takes place in Calimani National Park and in its surrounding area. The various grades of difficulty of horse riding attract a large category of tourists, tourist packages being available both for children/beginners and experienced riders.

The research shows that horse riding tourism has a rather commercial status in this area, dominated by children camps of Junior range type, by trips of maximum 6 days and by loop routes. Yet, horse riding is oriented towards a greater number of
tourists, with low prices compared to those registered in western countries. The tourists are generally inexperienced and willing to take only short routes.

Still, the potential of Dornelor basin and the little experience of tourist operators allow the presence and even the evolution of this type of tourism towards an adventure activity, with longer, more expensive and guided trips (up to 2 or 3 weeks) for experienced tourists.

Another activity with a recent history in the area is mountain biking which takes several forms here. The products are based on competitions and mountain biking trails lasting one day or more. Dorna basin hosts one of the most important national competitions of this type of sport and travel agencies offer many recreational opportunities for mountain biking trails. Crossing such a route may take up to three days. There are proposals for all four levels of difficulty, when physical activity is combined with the discovery of landscapes or cultural heritage sites inside the area.

Going to water sports and activities, river rafting is an attractive product, successfully implemented in many mountain areas (gorges and valleys are most attractive) in almost all countries, but they concentrate in North America, New Zealand, the rivers in the Alps and Pyrenees. Usually, the river sectors are divided onto 6 classes based on grades of difficulty to practise rafting (1-very easy to 6-very hard).

Although Dornelor basin has a very old tradition in the field, rafting activities were introduced in the area only in 1999. Nowadays, there are 3 major operators offering river rafting services, especially on Bistrita river, downstream Vatra Dornei. Activity is performed on the four existing sectors, including two areas of difficulty from 2 to 2.5 grade (with lengths of 22, 10 km respectively, of which only 4.3 in the study area) and two sectors with 3 grade of difficulty in Crucea county (with lengths of 1.2, 1.3 km respectively). Almost 60% of practitioners come from Bucharest, most of them participating at various conferences or team building organized in the area. Moreover, these events are the only able to provide a sufficient number of people that allows the rent of equipment.

Even if we refer to hiking or rafting, mountain biking or nordic walking, active tourism takes different shapes in Dornelor basin, their majority being imported from other regions of the World. They all share their rapid growth during the last ten years which permitted them to attract a great number of tourists. The result has been positive for both investors and local community, showing a growth of popularity and income from related services.

![Fig.4 - Active tourism diversity in Dornelor basin](image)

### 4 Long-time opportunities for active tourism development in Dornelor basin

Despite the diversity that we have observed in the previous chapter and the sustained dynamic of this type of tourism in Dornelor basin, we can notice an uneven development of these activities. While some of them prove a certain maturity, other ones are still in an early stage of development and they are yet in the pursuit of a place in tourist offers.

After a careful analysis, we can propose several deployments, ways of development and improvement directions for the forms of active tourism that we have presented so far, based on their specific and also on natural conditions of the territory.

A better focus on river rafting activities shows a complex impact on the crossed territories, which require detailed studies. Buckley sees this as being part of the adventure tourism concept, that can be performed without prior training because there is a low injury risk [18] and he considers it the first suitable option for the development of upper sections of the rivers, but he rings the alarm on changing landscape problem [19].

The study area allows new river rafting sectors upstream Vatra Dornei on Bistrita Aurie river, but only in spring because of the swollen waters. Instead, a strategy of promoting more sustainable
and diversified services may be applied, allowing access to other categories of tourists such as people with disabilities. These measures have been already applied in the USA and Western Europe countries, where river rafting can be practised even by people in wheelchair.

Climbing and mountain biking have made a great impact and this could be a great asset for a better knowledge of the territory. Both sports propose nationally recognized competitions e.g. Rarau Climbing Open, respectively Dorna Xtrem.

We believe these proposals can materialize into real projects with low level of investment, to support tourism development in Dorna basin. In a field such as tourism, in which changes occur rapidly, diversification and adaptation of tourist offers can only constitute favourable premises for a territory like the one studied.

5 Conclusions

The Dornelor basin presents an important touristic potential, being only partially capitalised by the developed activities. The multitude of active tourism forms that can be found in the area (rafting, nordic walking, hiking, mountain climbing, paragliding, tyrolean traverse, etc.) justifies the large number of tourist coming from all over the country and even from abroad.

The appearance of these new forms of tourism is quite recent and the authorities are not able to keep up with their rapid development. Thereby, we can find discrepancies between the situation in the field, the promotion of the tourist area and the logistic frame.

The development of such forms of tourism is stimulated and sustained by the private sector, as the local authorities are not yet capable (financially, logistically, savoir-faire) to understand their importance due to their less visible economic impact. The discrepancies between the potential, capitalisation and promotion could be diminished in a relatively short period of time, by involving the interested factors.

Despite the rapid growth of active tourism practices, there are still many opportunities to develop and diversify the actual offer, the territory having the necessary natural advantages.

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