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Conference Paper · June 2014

DOI: 10.5593/sgem2014B52

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NATIONAL APPROACHES TO GEOTOURISM AND GEOPARKS IN ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT

The paper is aimed to highlight the way geoparks and geotourism are understood and planned in the Romanian national policy and practice. Given the complex purpose of geoparks, the study focuses on the way geotourist experiences are built by the local managers of Hateg Country Dinosaurs Geopark in relation with the concepts of tourist authenticity and sense of place.

Keywords: geotourism, geoparks, destination management, tourism policy.

INTRODUCTION

An increasing segmentation of the tourism market has manifested since the mid-twentieth century, together with an increasing competition between destinations and the development of new and sustainable alternatives to mass tourism. Better informed, more selective and environmentally conscious, postmodern tourists search for personalized, meaningful and authentic tourist experiences. These trends have supported the fast development and popularity of alternative (experiential) tourist products focused on quality experiences and heritage conservation, such as ecotourism, geotourism, heritage tourism or voluntary tourism. Sustainable tourism and particularly ecotourism became also the focus of Romanian tourism policy for more than a decade. Seen as a larger version of ecotourism, geotourism was introduced only in 2004, when the first two national geoparks were officially designated: Hateg Country Dinosaurs Geopark (HCDG) and Mehedinti Plateau Geopark. This paper aims to enrich the existing literature on sustainable tourism and ecotourism in Romania by highlighting the way geotourism is understood and planned in the national policy and practice. The paper focuses on the case of Hateg Country Dinosaurs Geopark, a national tourist destination included in the UNESCO and European Geoparks Networks since 2005.

It is known that tourism has progressively shifted from a service economy to an experience-based one, where goods and services are valued and enhanced by the experiences they provide [4]. By definition, geotourism is supposed to provide authentic and meaningful experiences, enhancing the local characters of a destination and extracting visitors from their everyday life. Authenticity is often used by destinations as a marketing tool to create reputation and distinctiveness [1] and to shape tourist expectations and experiences. Therefore, this paper analyses the geotourist experiences produced by the managers of HCDG in relation with the concept of tourist authenticity.

2. LITTEATURE REVIEW

Given the increasing focus of global policy on heritage conservation and sustainable (tourism) development, geotourism and geoparks became a popular topic among both scientists and policy-makers. Major international organizations have been involved in the promotion of geotourism, the development of global geoparks networks (such as

UNESCO's Global network started in 1999 or the European Geoparks network, in 2000) and the elaboration of geotourism charters or other supporting documents (e.g. the National Geographic's or the European Geoparks Charters). These are all meant to sustain the main purpose of geoparks in achieving sustainable models of heritage conservation, capitalization and development [15]. Thus, most of the researches on geoparks focus on various practices of tourist interpretation and geosite management [2], [3]. In Romania, various components of the national earth heritage were analyzed in sectoral studies focused on: geology, relief, vegetation, fauna etc. The territory of HDG became the subject of systematic geological researches since the discovery of dinosaur nestles in the 70's. After the official geopark designation (in 2004), these were followed by complex integrated studies that underlied the elaboration of local and regional management plans [9], [10].

It is known that geotourism has a central place in the management plans of geoparks and in their overall aim to achieve sustainable socio-economic development [15]. There are two main scientific approaches in the definition and research of geotourism. The first one defines geotourism as a sustainable form of *experiencing* the earth's geological and geomorphological features or processes [2] and, in this case, geoparks enable knowledge-focused tourist experiences that foster environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation, learning and conservation [3]. According to the National Geographic's [12] approach, geotourism must enhance the geographical features that differentiate places, including both cultural and natural heritage: environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage and the residents' well-being. The National Geographic's Charter stipulates that geotourism must be: sustainable (fostering economic viability, community enhancement and geoconservation), educative (enhancing heritage awareness and research) and locally beneficial. From a tourist perspective, it should also generate visitor satisfaction [3] and promote the excellence of tourism products (delivering new and exciting experiences) and operations (commercially successful and environmentally sound). Specific market segments are targeted by the geotourist experiences [3] using specialized infrastructures, activities and interpretation (e.g. geolodges or georesorts, geotrails, visitor centers, scenic flights).

In geotourism, the enhancement of the geographical characters of places is meant to shape an in-depth experience of the local heritage, through understanding and appreciation. This links the geotourist experience to another central concept in tourism: the sense of place. This one is defined as a person's subjective experience in a particular setting, under the impact of the physical and social features of the environment and of the person's cultural baggage [1]. Local combinations of features give places a special feel or personality - the spirit of place [1], which can impact subjective experiences as well as collective representations. A specific purpose of heritage conservation in geoparks is to foster experiences of authenticity very valued by nowadays tourists searching for a counterpart to their everyday life. Many studies focusing on this topic distinguish between inherent (objective) and constructed (subjective) authenticity. Thus, authenticity is often perceived as an inherent quality of objects and places, originated in a pre-modern time and space and not altered by tourist manufacturing [5], [7]. At the same time, authenticity is also a sociocultural construction, an external feature attributed to places by credible authorities and influencing consumption behaviour [6], [7]. The tourist industry often creates non-object related experiences of authenticity [6], by commodifying and adapting destinations to meet their visitors' expectations. Thus,

besides the inherent authenticity of original objects (artifacts), there are other types of authentic subjective experiences (e.g. existential authenticity) built within staged tourist environments based on the visitors' perceptions and feelings [4], [6], [7].

METHODOLOGY

First, national planning documents and tourism strategies were reviewed in order to identify the way geoparks and geotourism are understood and planned in Romania. Then the study focuses on the way geotourism experiences are planned at national and local level in relation with specific local features and the concept of tourist authenticity [4], [7]. In this aim, the paper underlines the type of local heritage associated to geotourism as well as the services and infrastructure set up to meet the geo-visitors' expectations and to achieve the geoparks role in conservation and sustainable development. The analysis of the social construction of geo-tourist experiences was detailed for the Hateg Country Dinosaurs Geopark.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mehedinti Plateau and HCDG are the only two Romanian geoparks officially designated by the ministry of tourism in 2004. Other similar initiatives to obtain the designation are still in a more or less advanced project phase: e.g. Anina Geopark remained a local project since 2007, while a Buzau Geopark already has a development strategy proposal [13]. The Romanian authorities' understanding and planning of geoparks is mainly based on the National Geographic's definition on geotourism. Thus, in the Romanian National Spatial Plan geoparks are defined as territories with special geological interest and with valuable ecological, archeological, historical and cultural elements, where geodiversity, biodiversity and cultural identity are preserved and sustainably capitalized. Geotourist experiences must emphasize the geographical characters of a place, based on the capitalization of complex natural and cultural resources, which, according to the *Romanian Tourism Masterplan 2007-2026* [8] are vegetation and fauna, heritage, views, traditional architecture, crafts, arts, dancing and gastronomy. This explains the overall aims assigned to the Romanian geoparks, such as: heritage conservation, sustaining local identity and sustainable development. In order to achieve these goals, several local projects with international funding have been implemented in the two geoparks: e.g. a 1.8 million euros project for biodiversity conservation in Mehedinti Plateau Geopark (2013-2016) or a 2.083.337 euro project for sustainable development, bio and geodiversity conservation implemented in HCDG since 2009.

In the Romanian Tourism Masterplan [8], geotourism is part of the new special forms of tourism that should be developed in order to gain new market segments. Until now, tourist experiences in both Romanian geoparks are mainly associated with scientific and cultural activities. Nature-based services are more diversified in Mehedinti Plateau, where visitors can enjoy climbing, cycling, speleology or mountain trekking and, in the future, skiing, mountain bike, wildlife observation and equestrian tourism. For the future development, the Masterplan proposes three main geotourism products in Romania. First, culture-based experiences are recommended for versed and educated travellers attracted by nature and culture. In their case, the tourist offer is centred on Romanian traditions (e.g. festivals, crafts and gastronomy, cultural events) and includes qualitative visitor services (tourist interpretation, rustic accommodation, cycling trails, rent a car etc.). The second product is mainly capitalizing rural attractions and

destinations that both geotourism and rural tourism share, based on their common focus on local identity and authenticity. The third product proposal is a larger version of an ecotourist experience mainly centred on natural heritage. But while ecotourism and rural tourism represent key topics in the national tourism planning and promotion, geoparks are still poorly acknowledged in Romania beyond a specialized (academic) environment. The geoparks were not included in any of Romania's international tourism promotion campaigns, even if natural (mountain) landscapes and rural traditions were used in all of them as key symbols of national authenticity.

The planning and management of the Romanian geoparks is framed by a National Spatial Plan which defines their purpose, limits, status and scientific value. All these are further developed in local management plans, such as the Zonal Spatial Plan elaborated for HCDG in 2004 [9]. Centered on the conservation and promotion of local identity, this plan was aimed to foster a qualitative and personalized tourist experience of the local destination features. The solutions proposed were to increase the quality of the tourist accommodation and to promote local traditions and rural identity through a diversified tourist offer including: ecotourism, rural tourism (emphasizing the identity of each village), cultural tourism (capitalizing historic and archeological sites), adventure and recreational tourism. Traditions revival is one of the three development priorities of the zonal plan [9], besides education and sustainable management, and it impacts on most of the services (visitor centres) and promotion strategies planned for HCDG (e.g. creation of local brands and a calendar of local events). The management plan of HCDG has been implemented and further developed by the geopark administration (the University of Bucharest) through a cluster of local projects, all aimed to achieve the geopark role in sustainable heritage conservation through tourism and ecological (scientific) education [11]. More than 40 small projects, most of them focused on infrastructure improvement and only four on tourist promotion and traditions conservation, have been implemented in partnership with local stakeholders. Given the higher national popularity of ecotourism, HCDG has applied in 2013 for the national certification as ecotourism destination. Another management plan including the territory of HCDG was elaborated by a Local Action Group [10]. This plan underlines the authenticity of the anthropic heritage and the well preserved traditional lifestyle, crafts and agriculture as major local strengths. Thereby, the vision proposed for the future development is centered on tourism, with an emphasis on natural heritage (ecotourism, scientific tourism or hiking) and traditions (cultural tourism and agritourism).

According to the definitions of geotourism and geoparks, the tourist experience provided in the case of HCDG is meant to capitalize key destination features. The geopark occupies a 102.392 hectares area located in central Romania, surrounded by the Carpathian Mountains and including the town of Hațeg (13000 inhabitants) and 10 rural communes (about 39000 residents). Valuable earth heritage is preserved in HCDG [11], [13]: the famous Cretaceous fossils of "dwarf dinosaurs" (about 20 nests with eggs and hatchlings) and a pterosaur; other non-dinosaur fossil fauna (about 65 vertebrate taxa); Cretaceous volcanic rocks-tuffs, lavas and bombs, as well as several protected areas (botanical, geomorphological and paleontological reserves; an aurochs reserve and several Nature 2000 sites). Major cultural heritage sites are also concentrated within the geopark limits: the ruins of Sarmizegetusa Ulpia Traiana, the ancient capital of Dacia province; several medieval churches (Densus and Streisângeorgiu) or castles and tower ruins (Colț, Mălăiești, Răchitova and Crivadia), princely courts (Sălașu de Sus),

ethnographic museums (Pesteană, Hateg) and traditional villages. Furthermore, other national tourist destinations neighboring HCDG enhance its tourist significance: a national park (Retezat), a natural park (Gradistea Muncelului) and several other UNESCO heritage sites (Dacian fortresses).

In order to support conservation and environmental education, tourist behavior within HCDG is oriented by a *local code* [11] and tourist experiences have been progressively diversified. There are twenty major tourist attractions set up to receive visitors and another ten (geological and cultural sites) will be added in 2014 in the aim of increasing tourists' spending and the duration of their stays [11]. Several tourist trails suited for hiking or cycling emphasize both cultural and natural heritage: "Dinosaurs Valley" (recently ranked in the top 7 best themed trails by the Romanian Ecotourism Association in 2013); the "Volcanos Route"; "Sălașu de Sus – nature and medieval history"; "Fortresses and stone churches"; two other trails to the Hateg fortress should be added in 2014. Tourist interpretation in HCDG is mainly passive and represented by tourist boards along the main trails (six for "Dinosaurs valley", five for "Salasu de Sus" trail and four in project for the Hateg fortress) and two visitor centres: the „Țara Hațegului-Retezat” Centre for Sustainable Development, opened in Hateg in 2010, is mainly aimed for academic research and education, while the Dwarf Dinosaurs House from Sanpetru (2013) is a small museum displaying dinosaur fossils and replicas. Future projects [11], [13] include other small facilities aimed to underline unique characters of various sites: an open-space dinosaurs museum and accommodation for students and researchers in General Berthelot; visitor facilities for Tustea and Poieni Sommet reserves; a house of carnivores plants in Pesteană; two small museums displaying life-size dinosaur replicas and products of children from local schools in Tustea and Sântămăria Orlea. The promotion of HCDG is made by local annual events, specialized websites (of geoparks networks or academic), media releases and a book on local gastronomy (2006). Despite the visitors' interest, HCDG is poorly represented on major international travel websites: e.g. it has only two posts on Tripadvisor.com (requesting information about the dinosaur fossils in Sanpetru museum) and none on LonelyPlanet.com. According to national evaluations [9] and the visitors' reviews on international websites (e.g. five units reviewed on TripAdvisor.com and six on Booking.com), the quality of accommodation services in HCDG still needs improvement. Tourist capacity is about 800 tourist places concentrated in 2 and 3 stars/flowers guest houses (57 %), lodges (29 %), one motel and one hotel [10].

All the tourist services, facilities and promotion of HCDG are intended to framework specific tourist experiences and behavior in relation with the managers and visitors' perceptions of what tourist authenticity is. Thus, various aspects of the geopark, from local heritage to management quality, are designated as authentic by local managers and public bodies [9]. Media discourses and the HCDG website use authenticity as a catchword meant to gain credibility, to enhance a "worthwhile" destination image and to manufacture a specialized clientele for the tourist experiences provided. Most of these experiences are based on the concept of objective authenticity (the authenticity of originals – [7]), as an inherent feature of objects, events and places residing in other times and places [5], unaltered by modernity. Therefore, authentic tourist experiences in HCDG are mostly built and promoted as a counterpart of modern everyday life and visitors can find it in the natural landscapes and original artifacts. Thus, tourists can experience the "natural authenticity" [4] of natural landscapes and geosites, well-

preserved and protected within HCDG and displayed to the tourist gaze along the themed trails (e.g. “Dinosaurs Valley” or the Volcanos Trail). The same authenticity of the originals is associated with historically accurate objects exhibited in small museums and visitor centers (e.g. the fossils of dinosaur eggs and nests displayed in Sanpetru and Hateg) or in archeological sites (Sarmizegetusa). But the authenticity of the traditional local lifestyle, crafts and customs preserved in the geopark villages is also a central part of this original authenticity sold to visitors and displayed along themed trails intended to enable the tourists’ temporary connection with a pre-modern past.

Besides the objective constructions of tourist authenticity, HCDG also produces other types of authentic experiences which are in fact based on manufactured objects and staged events. Thus, tourist attractions and activities are planned by local managers in order to activate specific liminal feelings and embodied experiences, according to the visitors’ expectations of authenticity as the opposite of modern life. Temporary feelings of existential authenticity [7] are thus produced and these are both: intra-personal (embodied experiences and feelings where tourists manifest their authentic self) or interpersonal (a sense of togetherness created by spending time with the family or within tourist groups and opposed to the alienation of modern life). The intra-personal authenticity is activated by liminal places and activities that enable the visitors’ temporary extraction from their daily routine: themed trails (e.g. the “Dinosaurs Valley”, “Stone churches and fortresses”); dinosaurs replicas, photos or drawings exhibited in Sanpetru and Hateg visitor centres; or traditional events (“Sezatori”) organized every year within a vernacular rural landscape, where authentic feelings are built through visual and embodied experiences (such as dancing, eating local food, listening traditional music and legends). Even if staged, collective activities like these traditional gatherings or themed tourist hikes generate a temporary feeling of belonging (the interpersonal authenticity) as well as the tourists’ brief exit from their observers or outsiders roles. Live performances of local folk artists (traditional dances and music, demonstrations of traditional crafts, residents telling old legends) during these events have a multiple impact: first, they are aimed to conserve and emphasize local identity as well as the tourists’ appreciation of local heritage. Second, this temporary sensorial immersion of visitors in the traditional local life enhances their perceptions of (an existential) authenticity. These are further supported by an “exceptional authenticity” [4], associated with the things executed exceptionally well. Live performances add symbolic value to the souvenirs crafted in front of visitors, enhancing their perceptions of authenticity. Locally produced objects, including the tourist signs using drawings of local students (awarded in a Discovery sponsored contest) are aimed for a similar impact.

Several national heritage sites included in HCDG, such as the ruins of Sarmizegetusa or of medieval churches and fortresses can tap into the collective memories of national history. Thus, they enable authentic feelings of historical continuity and a connection to the past, which [4] called a “referential authenticity”. An even more powerful and meaningful influence upon Romanian visitors is exerted by the iconic destination of Sarmizegetusa. For those in search of their national roots and motivated by the nostalgia for a vanished past, the ruins of the Dacian capital enable specific feelings that corresponds to [4] concept of “influential authenticity”.

Based on the same assumption that tourists consume in fact symbols of authenticity, socially created and certified by credible authorities, an *authenticity of knowledge* is

often promoted in relation to the HCDG heritage [11], [13]. As authenticity is assumed to reside elsewhere [6] and usually in the Western world [1], international certifications and famous labels are used to create symbolic value and power. The geopark management largely reproduces western models certified by credible international (the UNESCO or European Geoparks networks) and national authorities (e.g. the University of Bucharest). The recent efforts to obtain the national certification as ecotourism destination is part of this multiple branding strategy that HCDG often uses in media releases to certify the quality of heritage and experiences provided and to enhance a positive destination image.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper brings new information on the way geotourism is understood and planned in Romania and the way geotourist experiences are produced. According to national and local plans, geoparks are meant to preserve and emphasize both natural and cultural heritage, with a special focus on rural traditions, which are often seen as key symbols of national authenticity. Given the increasing experience economy, authenticity is vital in tourism. Therefore, visitors' perceptions of authenticity influence the way HCDG is understood, perceived and appreciated. In this regard, objective and subjective tourist authenticity are socially built and/or enabled within HCDG, based on the capitalization of natural and cultural heritage: unique features of the destination and local communities are emphasized mainly through passive visual and knowledge experiences activated by local museums, visitor centers, geotrails and geosites. Only annual local events centered on cultural traditions and environmental education make sure that geotourism in HCDG is lived, performed and felt. That's when unique features of the destination and the sense of place are really enhanced and acknowledged through a temporary sensorial immersion of tourists in the life and customs of local communities.

By theoretically examining geotourism in the framework of authenticity, the paper opens new research paths towards a better understanding of the complex tourist component of geoparks and geotourism in Romania, helping to further improve their tourist planning. Future studies could focus on the tourists' expectations regarding authenticity within HCDG and their perceptions after the visit.

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