

**MARKETING RESEARCH REGARDING TOURISM BUSINESS READINESS FOR  
ECO-LABEL ACHIEVEMENT (CASE STUDY: NATURA 2000 CRIȘUL REPEDE  
GORGE-PĂDUREA CRAIULUI PASS SITE, ROMANIA)**

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**Abstract**

*Sustainable development is an approach that aims to preserve the environment and the culture of communities hosting tourists and at the same time to meet the needs of tourists and to maintain the growth of tourism industry. These objectives are more and more related to eco-labelling, which provides the certification based on a series of benchmarks developed and verified by a third party.*

*The labelling of an organization as an ecotourism organization requires the compliance with certain criteria as those required by the European Ecotourism Labelling Standard.*

*Natura 2000 Crișul Repede Gorge– Pădurea Craiului Pass site will have to prove that it is in compliance with the prerequisites to become an ecotourism destination.*

*The objectives of this paper are:*

- *to identify the prerequisites that a destination must comply with in order to be labelled an ecotourism destination, focusing on the prerequisites related to the existence and behaviour of tourist reception structures;*
- *to identify the extent to which tour operators are open and willing to support the labelling of the destination where they operate as being ecotourism.*

*Work methodology is based on the interview as an investigation method and semi-structured survey as working instrument. The hypotheses drawn up were partially confirmed, by the increased availability of the operators to meet, under certain conditions, the eco-labelling criteria.*

**Key words:** *ecotourism, sustainable, eco-labelling, marketing research, tourism business, destination, Romania*

**JEL classification:** *Q56, M14, D12, L83*

**I. INTRODUCTION**

*Ecotourism and eco-labelling schemes*

The term "ecotourism" was introduced by Romeril (1985) or according to other opinions by Ceballos (1980). It has experienced a rapid retrieval and use in various combinations (Lee, Lawton and Weaver, 2012). Currently it is accepted that ecotourism has three characteristics (Blamey, 2001): the attractions are based on nature, with non-destructive use of the environment, ecosystems, flora, fauna and landforms; the motivations of ecotourists are cultured in a process of lifelong learning through information centres, mediations, guides etc. and ecotourism alone can claim a sustainable development. The objectives of sustainable development are increasingly linked eco-labels conferring the quantification based on a series of benchmarks developed and verified by a third party (Buckley, 2002). There is a huge list of definitions of ecotourism. Sirakaya, Sasidharan and Sönmez (1999) provide a list of these definitions, without claiming to be exhaustive, despite the 25 positions listed chronologically. We could even think that the perception of this concept is dynamic, as the market of ecotourism consumers is less homogeneous, in constant turmoil and segregation. We mention some names who offered definitions in time (Sirakaya, Sasidharan and Sönmez, 1999; Ercan et. Al., 1999): Ceballos-Lascrain (1987), Butler (1989), Fennel and Eagles (1989), Hunt (1992) Miller (1993) Buckley (1994) and Kinnaid and O'Brien (1996). The most common themes are those linking ecotourism to the attitude towards the environment and responsible journey.

The link between ecotourism and sustainable development is obvious (Yusof et al, 2014). There are voices that say that "not all sustainable tourism is ecotourism" (Clarke, 2002), in fact no form of tourism can support true sustainable development. They also say that, while the purest form of ecotourism should support sustainable development, it is not necessary that sustainable development alone define ecotourism. Ecotourism is based on the sustainable conservation of unspent resources in a manner involving non-invasive exploitation of natural resources through a controlled use and management of cultural and environmental resources. (Sirakaya, Sasidharan and Sönmez, 1999)

In the context of tourism, sustainable development is the approach that aims to preserve the environment and culture of communities hosting tourists and at the same time to meet the needs of tourists and maintain the growth of industry (Dinan and Sargeant, 2005). These objectives are more and more related to eco-labelling, which provides the certification based on a series of benchmarks developed and verified by a third party (Buckley, 2002). Hence the question that sustainable development is an additional dimension to the quality of tourist services, a key factor in attracting tourists, be it tourism packages or destinations (Garcia-Falcon and Medina-Munoz, 1999). The demand for nature-based tourism is growing rapidly worldwide (Fennel, 2008). Sustainable tourism attracts more and more attention in the tourism industry (Butler, 1991) and eco-labelling is an important way to ensure the transparency and consumer confidence in environmental conditions (Thøgersen, Haugaard, Olsen, 2010).

The labelling schemes, the environmental certificates, the awards, the environment quality insurance and the evaluation systems are currently used in the tourism industry in developed countries to protect the natural environment (Sasidharana, Sirakayab and Kerstetter, 2002). The certification of tourism as an idea, was the result of Agenda 21, endorsed by 182 countries during the United Nations Earth Summit in 1992. On this occasion, the need for economic actors to comply with environmental policies and regulations to meet global environmental problems was raised. There are many eco-labels designed at European level, in an effort to find the best combination of sustainable development criteria and the objectives related to the costs for economic operators and state and the need for increased demand. The first eco-labelling scheme sponsored by the government was Blue Angel, launched in 1977 in Germany (Reisch, 2001). Since then the idea has spread and there is a large number of labelling schemes.

During 2000/2001, the World Tourism Organization through the ECOTRANS committee did a study on voluntary initiatives for sustainable tourism. Europe has the most "green" certificates in the world. (The VISIT Initiative, 2014) In 2003 4,000 housing units had the eco-label, which was still less than 1% of the European market. In 2004 there were more than 50 environmental certificates and labels in Europe, covering all types of tourism providers: accommodation, beaches, protected areas, restaurants, crafts, golf courses, packages. More than 40 schemes only certify the accommodation services. Some of the major eco-labelling schemes in tourism existing in 1998 are: Blue Flag, Green Leaf, Green Key, Green Suitcase, Ecotour, Ecotel, Green Globe and others (UNEP, 1998, pp.8-9 in Sasidharana, Sirakayab and Deborah, 2002). One can see that NGOs are prevalent, as agencies providing eco-labels and the predominant sector of beneficiaries is that of accommodation. The number of eco-labels in all areas has greatly increased, in the year 2012 existing more than 17,000 categories of eco-labelled products: carpets, paints, dry cleaning products, textiles, television, accommodation (2.06%), etc. (European Commission, 2014) . Tourism products had a share of approx. 2.09% of eco-labelled products. The distribution per country in Europe of eco-labelled products in 2012 (European Commission, 2014) is an interesting one, because there is a country that has over 50% of all products (Italy), followed by France with 22%. The first seven countries that have eco-labelled products in the market cover more than 90% and are, without exception economically developed countries.

### *Benefits and problems of eco-labelling*

From a business perspective, the reason to request an eco-label will always be related to economic efficiency, although it requires a longer period of achievement. All the benefits of eco-labelling are subject, eventually, to its ability to bring profit to the holder (see Table. 1) In Table. 1 are shown the benefits of eco-labelling for the tourism industry, tourism businesses and tourists. From the perspective of tourism businesses, we note that of the six benefits listed, three are related to how it will communicate this purchase (investment?) to the target audience. The marketing of the business activity will have to focus on eco-label, as a means of differentiation from the competition and as a way to show social responsibility. Moreover, some consider that eco-labelling is now just a marketing strategy, designed to favour large companies (Sasidharana, Sirakayab and Kerstetter, 2002).

Despite the benefits for the tourists and the fact that hotels have started to incorporate green policies into their management practices, and even despite the belief that those staying at the hotel are looking for such policies, however, there is a lack of research on this topic (Millar and Baloglu 2011). Studies have shown that European consumers are aware of the impact of tourism on the environment, they expect high environmental

quality in their holiday destinations. Traveling public expects, clearly, that the hotel industry pay attention to environmental issues and work sustainably (Gustin and Weaver, 1996). Not surprisingly, after National Leisure Travel Monitor (Millar and Baloglu, 2011), 85% of leisure travelers consider themselves aware of environmental issues. In another study, mentioned again by Millar and Baloglu (2011), conducted in 2009 by North America Hotel Guest Satisfaction, 66% of tourists staying at the hotel said they were aware of the conservation efforts of hotels, compared to 57% in 2008. Moreover, 72% said they had participated in conservation programs of hotels.

The problem for hoteliers wishing to do the right thing in terms of sustainability and in terms of profit, is that the whole range of visitor preferences for the "green" attributes in the hotel rooms remains unclear. Not enough studies have been done on the "green" attributes at the hotel level. One study showed that the business travellers are willing to pay 10% more to stay in a "green" hotel (Clausing, 2008) but it is not known what the other travellers would do. Another study by Watkins (1994) showed that, frequently, travellers wish to stay in hotels with strategies for the environment, but they will not pay extra for these rooms. Similar results were obtained in more recent studies. (Lupu, Tănase and Tontoroiu, 2013). The question is whether they want to pay the same amount but for lower consumption or for a restricting form of consumption. Other interesting studies have shown that many tourists are not aware of the existence of eco-labels in the units where they stay (Fairweather and Maslin, 2005 in Millar and Baloglu, 2011; Hamel, 2002 in Millar and Baloglu, 2011). Even the understanding of the term ecotourism raises problems, although as a concept it sounds appealing. Many operators do not understand the true ecotourism policies and there is no excitement about the practices which would lean toward true ecotourism (Bandara, 2009).

**Table 1 Benefits of eco-labelling in tourism**

Benefactor	Benefits
Tourism industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Curbs tourism's negative environmental impacts by encouraging tourism enterprises to attain high environmental standards</li> <li>Exerts pressure on the tourism industry to improve environmental performance by adopting effective and tangible environmental management techniques</li> <li>Improves industry practices by fostering environmentally sensitive business operations</li> <li>Assists the tourism industry in developing standards for environmentally sensitive tourism services and products</li> <li>Conforms to the concept of environmentally compatible tourism alongside of natural resource management, environmental conservation and protection, and pollution control policies</li> <li>Strategic tool for officially approving and promoting the design, production, marketing and use of environmentally benign services and products having a reduced environmental impact</li> <li>Disseminates externally validated information on the environmental impacts of tourism products and services among tourism consumers</li> <li>Can be extended to certify the environmental soundness of tourist destinations and the natural resources at these destinations</li> </ul>
Tourism enterprises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicates the environmental credentials of companies</li> <li>Gives companies differential advantage over their competitors (gainful market position) as a result of fewer impacts on the environment than other similar enterprises</li> <li>Promotes the environmental achievements of companies via marketing campaigns (pamphlets, flyers, brochures, press releases, notice boards, and display of award logos and flags), both within and off-premises</li> <li>Serves as an incentive for companies to maintain and improve environmental performance standards, thereby reducing environmental impacts</li> <li>Assists companies in marketing their environmentally friendly services and/or products to high spending, environmentally conscious tourists</li> <li>Tourists develop positive attitudes toward the companies' products and/or services</li> </ul>
Tourists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Educates tourists in originating countries regarding the impacts of their tourism-related actions and decisions</li> <li>Furnishes tourists with 'better' information on the environmental impacts of tourism enterprises</li> <li>Prompts tourists to act in favor of environmentally sensitive tourism enterprises through their purchasing decisions</li> <li>Enables tourists to make informed choices while selecting tourism enterprises for their vacations</li> </ul>

Source: Sasidharana, Sirakayab and Kerstetter, 2002, p.172

Beyond the benefits already listed in Table. 1, eco-labelling is promoted as a strategic orientation recommended for the developing countries (as is the case of Romania), whose tourism is largely based on: nature (ecotourism), coastal tourism and cultural tourism (Lumsdon and Swift, 1998). In these countries the main attraction is the nature and the beautiful landscapes and still unaffected by mass tourism (see Romania's slogan *Explore the Carpathian Garden*). Often tourism in these countries is built around sensitive ecosystems (Butler, 1990) therefore, by labelling the environmental protection and conservation of their value are obtained, while encouraging tourism.

However, the labelling process presents many problems for tour operators, weighted unfairly between the large and small businesses in tourism, between developed and developing countries. The labelling organizations include the representatives of major hotel chains in developed countries, the criteria imposed by labelling being more accessible to the latter. "Considering the former, the adoption of tourism eco-labelling schemes in developing countries for the purpose of ensuring environmentally sound management and development of environmentally sensitive tourism would be fraught with impasses" (Wildavsky, 1996). Even if the costs of eco-labelling are not high compared to other ways of promotion aimed at achieving customer loyalty, eco-labelling seems to remain an attribute of large companies that have "a healthy environment policy" (Lupu, Tănase and Tontoroiu, 2013). Hazards exist from the consumers' perspective, who, beyond tariff increases, lose their trust in eco-labelling requirements, may become suspicious of them, in the absence of existence in developing countries of some neutral regulatory agencies (Font and Buckley, 2001). Also, in developed countries, tourism operators are determined and supported by legal regulations to align to these standards. In less developed countries, the levers supporting the adoption of different standards do not work as well. There are some voices saying that the promotion of eco-labelling is backed up by the marketing strategy of large companies, to surpass the competition made by small businesses: "rather than contributing to environmentally sensitive tourism development and protection of natural resources of developing countries from the detrimental environmental impacts of tourism, eco-labels are likely to function as nothing more than marketing gimmicks for large-scale enterprises of the growing tourism industry" (Sasidharana, Sirakayab and Kerstetter, 2002) On the other hand, in the European developed countries there is a concern to encourage the SMEs towards sustainable development (Popescu et. al, 2013). The accumulation of disadvantages is acquired by the SMEs in developing countries, as is the case of Romania, which wish an orientation towards sustainable development.

#### *Labelling the ecotourism destination*

Traditionally, a tourist destination is defined according to geographic or topographic criteria. A definition of this concept shows that a destination is "any kind of territory which brands itself as a tourism brand and is perceived as such by the general public". (The VISIT Initiative, 2014) In most countries, tourism is dominated by the private sector operating within the legislative and planning framework set by the public sector (Shkira, 2013) as is the case of Romania. In Romania there is no legal and economic context of the establishment of destination management organizations, which greatly hampers any initiative for a place. Neither the term destination finds an equivalent in practice in Romania, despite the strong use in the theory. A quality management organization would have the necessary levers for orientation towards the sustainability of a tourist destinations (Klimek, 2013).

The ecotourism destination is a tourist destination which, in addition, complies with the following principles: it projects a responsible marketing image; at the destination business with sustainable management are predominant; at the destination level there is real support for local communities; at the destination level the tourists and the locals are made aware of and informed on its natural character; at the destination level concrete measures of nature conservation are implemented. For the local economy, the benefits of green destinations are: increase awareness and stimulate the flow of tourists; encourage local economy, local producers; conservation and sustainable use of local resources; development of local community; job creation etc.

From the tourists' perspective, the benefits of eco-tourism destinations arise from the relationship between the quality of a destination and its eco size, a component of sustainable development of the place. The classification of a destination as an ecotourism destination requires meeting certain criteria. These criteria are based on the recommendation of the World Tourism Organization to use the European Ecotourism Labelling Standards – EETLS developed by ECO-DESTINET network under the project funded by the European Commission Lifelong Learning Programme, Leonardo da Vinci .

The European Ecotourism Labelling Standards proposes a set of preconditions that a destination must meet to become an ecotourism destination. These preconditions are divided into categories pertaining to: attractiveness, accessibility, minimum level of tourist services, minimum level of public services, demonstration of sustainable management, maximizing social and economic benefits for local communities through the tourism activity and minimizing the negative effects generated by the development of the destination, maximizing benefits to cultural heritage and minimizing the negative impacts and maximizing the environmental benefits and minimizing the negative impacts.

The preconditions on the minimum level of tourism services are related to the tourism service providers in the area and consider:

- an amount of at least 50% of tourist reception with accommodation functions should be small units (maximum 15 rooms / accommodation);

- to have a plan that will cause that in maximum three years, a rate of at least 50% of tourist reception with accommodation functions, implement a system of good practices in ecotourism (e.g. the European Eco-label, Eco-system Romania etc.);
- to have mostly nature-based tourism services - at least 2/3 of the total of programs of the destination;
- to have structures of tourist reception with catering functions, preferably with menus based on local produce and whenever possible the products be obtained in organic farming system.

The other preconditions depend largely on the efforts of local administrative authorities and the custodian of the destination. The service providers in the area work with private capital and cannot be imposed a certain conduct or certain investment efforts. They can only be made aware of the importance of sustainable development and of the benefits of green destinations.

The European Eco-label for tourist accommodation services implemented by *Commission Decision. 287/2003 / EC establishing criteria for the award of the EU Eco-label for tourist accommodation services* is awarded to products that comply with certain environmental criteria established at European level. These criteria are the result of scientific studies on aspects of the entire life cycle of products and have a shelf life of 3-5 years, being reviewed regularly in line with technical progress.

The European eco-label for tourist accommodation services aims to achieve four objectives:

- reducing water consumption (e.g. water flow from the shower to be a maximum of 12 litres / minute, waste water treatment);
- reducing the amount of waste generated (not to use disposable products);
- promote the use of renewable resources and less environmentally harmful substances (22% of the electricity used to come from renewable sources, not to use fuel oil as a hard energy path with a sulphur content > 0.2% and coal);
- promote communication and education in the field of environmental protection.

In Romania ecological tourism is an area "almost unknown in travel agencies" (Albu and Chițu, 2012). According to the study done by the Ecotourism Association (AER) in 2012, 12 accommodation structures had the "Eco-Romania" label and other nine were under certification. Saturn Hotel was the first eco-labelled hotel in Romania. Another eco-labelling system operating in Romania is "Eco Ghinda" (Eco-Acorn n.tr.), implemented by Green association. In terms of eco-labelling tourist destinations in Romania a short list was compiled of five destinations with eco-labelling potential among them being Crișul Repede Gorge- Pădurea Craiului. Of these, two were certified in October 2014: Zărnești town of Brașov county and Mara-Coslău-Creasta Cocoșului region of Maramureș county and the area under study has already received preliminary notices.

## II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The destination chosen for the case study is Natura 2000 ROSCI0062 Crișul Repede Gorge - Pădurea Craiului site, because it has high chances to be certified as ecotourism destination. For we cannot speak of a destination management organization, the decision to certify the destination is made by a nonprofit organization, the Centre for Developed Areas and Sustainable Development Bihor, which has the difficult task to convince the individual stakeholders to support eco-labelling. In the study conducted are targeted tourism accommodation units operating in the area. The Natura 2000 ROSCI0062 Crișul Repede Gorge - Pădurea Craiului Pass site covers an area of 38,813 ha and is located in the North West of Romania. It covers almost 99% of Bihor county and 1% of Cluj county.

The Natura 2000 ROSCI0062 Crișul Repede Gorge - Pădurea Craiului Pass site is a protected area, declared in order to protect the landscape and ecological and cultural diversity. The site is administrative related fully or adjacent municipalities Aușeu, Aștileu, Bulz Bratca, Căbești, Curățele, Dobrești, Lugașude Jos, Măgești, Pomezueu, Remetea, Roșia, Șuncuiuș Țețchea, Vadu Crișului, Vârciorog and towns of Aleșd and Beiuș. The site includes private land use, state land, protected natural areas of national and local interest.

Among the area's tourist attractions include:

- the longest cave in Romania: the Wind Cave (47 km length);
- the longest underground course of Romania: Ponorul Tinoasa – the Ciur Izbuca Cave – the Ponor Ciur Cave - Izbuca Toplița de Roșia;
- lakes and rivers for recreation and fishing;
- one of the largest tourist cave networks arranged in Romania (including caves: Vadu Crișului, Unguru Mare, Meziad);
- spectacular gorges and ravines, crossed by roads or railways (Albioarei Keys, Vadu Crișului - Borod) or only accessible to travellers (Cuților Keys, Șteazelor Valley, Videi Keys, etc.);
- trails for hiking, biking and riding, some arranged as thematic routes (flora, fauna, karst) (The Centre for Protected Areas and Sustainable Development, 2014)

In the present study we aimed to verify the extent to which tour operators from The Natura 2000 ROSCI0062 Crișul Repede Gorge - Pădurea Craiului Pass site are open, able and willing to support the declaration of the area as an ecotourist destination by adopting measures for receiving the EU Eco-label as reception units.

The following aspects were investigated:

- the type of tourist facilities existing in the area;
- the age of the units in the area, the experience and the training of economic operators;
- the offer of tourist facilities in the area, the use of local organic production;
- the type of activities carried out by units, the contact with the nature;
- the awareness of the existence and role in the area of the Centre for Protected Areas and Sustainable Development Bihor;
- the attitude of the operators investigated to the principles of eco-labelling;
- the readiness to comply with the eco-labelling requirements and
- the assessment of time need to meet the eco-labelling requirements.

The research method used was that of investigation and information gathering tool was the interview based on a semi-structured questionnaire. The marketing research is a qualitative research, the sample being carefully selected for representativeness. The interview was conducted at 25 units, useful data are from 22 units, 44% of the total study population, respectively. Currently, there are approximately 50 reception units operating on this site, some with accommodation functions and spaces for preparing and serving meals. The interviewees in the promotion units held leadership positions in those units, usually the administrator and they have the following social-demographic characteristics: mostly aged 25-55 years, female gender (70%), have university degrees and have conducted a course in tourism activity. The survey was conducted in May 2013, the interview being conducted face to face by operators with higher education in the tourism and hospitality industry. The interview duration was 30 min - 45 min. The questionnaire applied contains 32 items, divided into three sections: data on the unit, data related to the interviewee and data on the purpose of the study.

The research hypotheses are:

H1 There is a high readiness among tourism operators to meet the eco-labelling criteria, at the level of intent

H2 Women, compared to men, have a greater readiness to meet the eco-labelling criteria

H3 People with higher education have a greater readiness to meet the eco-labelling criteria

H4 There is a link between the readiness towards eco-labelling and the efforts involved:

H4a There is a lower readiness to "Saving Water"

H4b There is a greater readiness to "Reducing the amount of waste generated"

H4c There is a greater readiness to "Promote the use of renewable resources and less environmentally harmful substances", "promote" having a less measurable character

H4d There is a greater readiness to "promote communication and education in environmental protection 3.5

H5 There is a link between the general readiness towards eco-labelling and the investments involved, namely an indirect link, as investment efforts increase investment the readiness decreases.

H6 The time horizon necessary to obtain the eco-label is less than three years, for most operators investigated.

### III. RESULTS

Of the 22 reception units surveyed, mostly (55%) are offering exclusively accommodation, followed by establishments offering accommodation and public catering services (22%).

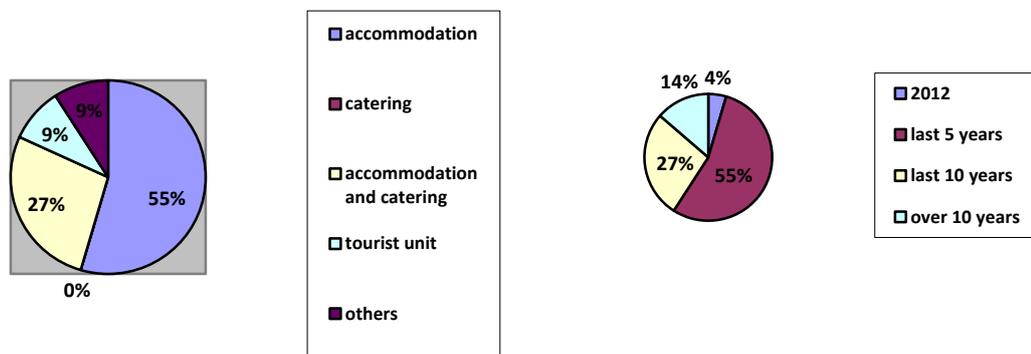


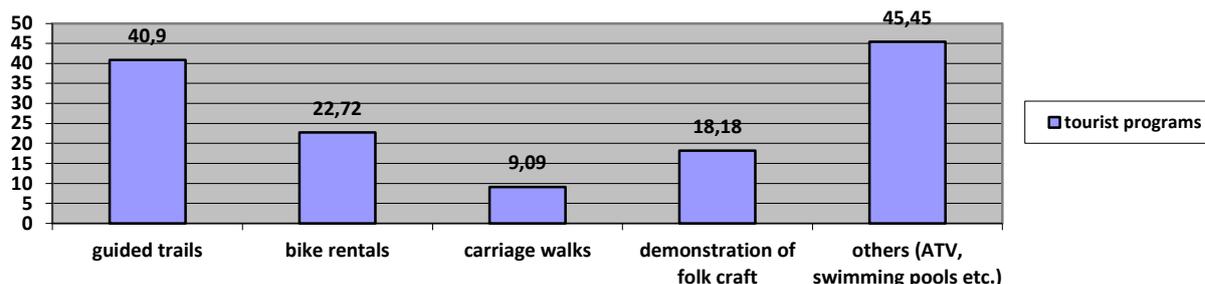
Figure 1 a. Structure of tourist units and b. The year when the unit was founded

We observe the dominance of accommodation units, followed by accommodation and catering units. Most units have an average capacity of 5 to 10 rooms and 20 to 30 places. From the variety of tourist programs possible, the largest share is held by guided trails, followed by rental bike trails. Only 1/3 of the units also offers catering and most of these offer less than 1/3 of the menu based on local produce. This is an issue related to eco-labelling and will be improved in the future. Most units in the region were established in the period 2007-2012, a rate of about 20% was established in the last 10 years or over 10 years, which means they are relatively new units. The offer for tourist programs of the accommodation units is quite limited and less diversified but it is related to nature and local customs, an eco-labelling requirement.

Over half of those surveyed had heard of the Centre for Protected Areas and Sustainable Development Bihor and believe that it deals with monitoring and protecting the environment. Only 18% know that the Centre for Protected Areas and Sustainable Development Bihor is the custodian of the site. Less than half of the respondents were familiar with the centre's efforts to transform the area into an ecotourist destination. Among the potential benefits that an ecotourist destination might bring, the most frequently mentioned were:

- stimulation of the flow of tourists,
- development of local community
- encouraging local economy, local producers and
- increasing awareness of the destination.

The research of the principle readiness of those interviewed to strive for the compliance with the European Eco-label requirements, revealed a high proportion of openness and readiness with a maximum score of 3.27 out of 4.00. The in depth analysis of responses to each criterion has given interesting results. The criterion involving the influencing of their activity, the reduction of water consumption has received the fewest adhesions, 2.59 out of 4.00. The criterion that does not directly influence the activity of the respondent, the promotion of communication and education in environmental protection has brought together more adhesions, 3.5 out of 4.00, expressing distrust in consumer reaction.



**Figure 2 Tourist programs provided by the units surveyed**

Source: original, based on research

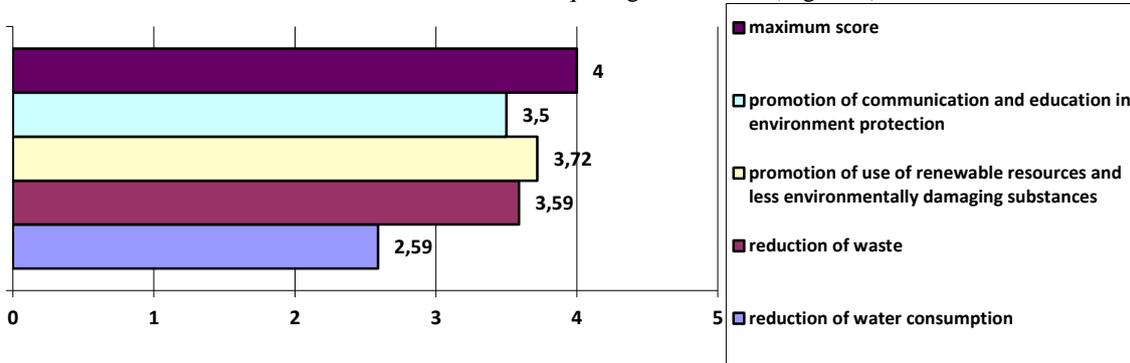
The next stage of the interview involved the shift from a discussion of principle to the precise detailing of the conditions related to energy, water and waste. Although, still at the theoretical level, the questioning about the readiness to purchase certain facilities to meet the requirements or limit the use of a particular type of fuel or energy source has attracted certain precious comments. These comments show the unwillingness to make expenditures from its own resources, the unwillingness to impose on the tourists a certain type of consumption. The responses were overwhelmingly positive but were supplemented by conditioning the receipt of state funds, EU funds or the tourists' readiness to comply with the requirements.

Following the free discussions, except for the questions in the questionnaire, in 13.63% of cases, those interviewed expressed their concern that tourists will be those who will reject or be unsatisfied with the measures taken. The complaints will not be related to increased prices (this situation was not taken into account) but will be bothered by the restrictions on consumption. They noted here: the reduction of water consumption and avoidance of using disposable dishes.

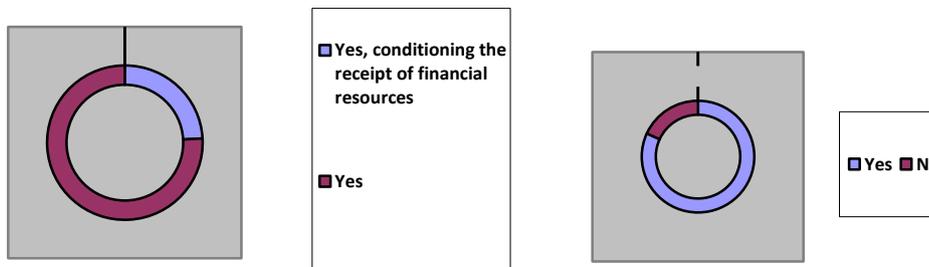
The most important issue that has arisen from the discussion is that it is not known what tourists think about these measures and whether they are going to be well received or not (31.81%). Another problem identified as a result of the discussion was that it is very difficult if not impossible, at this time, to increase the consumption of local produce in the menus offered at the restaurant due to the lack of a sufficiently diversified legal market (mentioned in 13.63% of discussions).

When asked "Do you agree that 22% of the electricity you use to come from renewable sources (wind, solar, hydropower or biomass)?" the responses were positive in 100% cases but for 31.81% the response was conditioned by the receipt of funds from "the state" or from EU funds (Figure 4 a).

When asked about the readiness of those surveyed that 22% of the energy used for room heating to come from renewable sources, which requires investments, the responses were more emphatic, with 18.18% negative responses, the acceptance being conditioned by the obtaining of financial resources (Figure 4 b ). Absolute negative responses in a rate of 13.64% were given when investigating the readiness to use a particular type of boiler heat and certain facilities for sauna, all requiring investment (Figure 5).

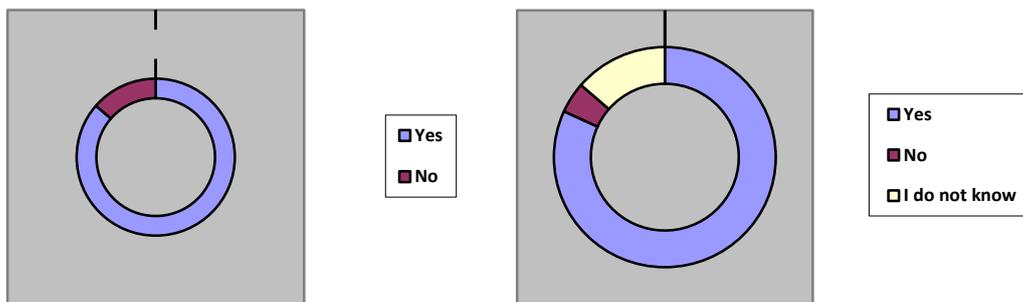


**Figure 3 Readiness to fulfil the certification criteria**  
Source: original, based on research



**Figure 4 a. Respondents' readiness as 22% of the electricity they use to come from renewable sources and b. Readiness of respondents that 22% of the energy used for room heating to come from renewable sources**

Source: original, based on research



**Figure 5 a. Readiness to use a heat boiler with a useful efficiency of at least 90% useful and all sauna plants are equipped with timers and b. Readiness that the water flow from the shower to be a maximum of 12 litres / minute and a useful bin for certain waste generated in the toilet**

Source: original, based on research

An interesting situation is where the size of the investment is not known (Figure 5.b) or their impact, which makes that over 13% of responses be uncertain.

*Hypotheses check*

H1: Confirmed. The study of the principle readiness of those interviewed to strive for the fulfilment of the European Eco-label has revealed a high degree of openness and readiness. The analysis of positioning on a 4

point Likert scale has revealed a score of responses of 3.27 out of maximum 4.00. The hypothesis is verified, provided that the assessment "high availability" is relative, not setting an associated range of values.

H2: Confirmed. The analysis of responses to questions regarding the overall readiness to meet the eco-labelling requirements correlated with the frequency table with the gender of the respondent has led to the conclusion regarding the existence of a connection. It can be argued that women, more than men, are inclined to make efforts to comply with the requirements of the European Eco-label.

H3: Confirmed. The analysis of responses to questions regarding the overall readiness to meet the eco-labelling requirements correlated with the frequency table of the recent studies completed by the respondent has led to the conclusion regarding the existence of a connection. It can be argued that people with higher education, more than others are inclined to strive to meet the requirements of the European Eco-label.

H4: Confirmed-Invalidated. The study of this connection was done using Pearson coefficient.

H4a: We appreciate that among the respondents there is a big connection between the readiness of eco-labelling and readiness to face the requirement to reduce water consumption. It received a score of Pearson coefficient of 0.856, reflecting a strong connection. This result confirms the general hypothesis that there is a link between the readiness towards eco-labelling and the efforts involved, but refutes the hypothesis derived that there is lower readiness to reduce water consumption.

H4b: Also there was a strong link between the readiness towards eco-labelling and the readiness to comply with the requirement to reduce the amount of waste generated. It received a score of Pearson coefficient of 0.706, reflecting a significant link. This result confirms the general hypothesis that there is a link between the readiness towards eco-labelling and the efforts involved and supports the hypothesis that there is a high readiness towards waste reduction.

H4c, d: A reasonable relationship was revealed by the Pearson coefficient to a value of 0.636 or 0.686 for higher readiness to "Promote the use of renewable resources and less environmentally harmful substances" and "Promote the communication and education in environmental protection."

H5 Invalidated. There is a link between the general readiness towards eco-labelling and the investments involved, namely an indirect link, as investment efforts increase the readiness decreases.

This link has been highlighted only for the following investments: the use of renewable resources for at least 22% of the energy used, the use of a heat boiler with a good yield of 90%, the use of a sauna timer, the use in the bathroom of an automatic or manual washing system. The results revealed a direct link (0.556; 0.469; 0.373; 0.536), reasonable (between 0.4-0.6). The weaker link was recorded for only the use of a sauna timer. The hypothesis has been invalidated, namely the readiness for eco-labelling does not decrease as the investment needs increase (although there is a clearly expressed need of financial support).

H6: Invalidated. Regarding the timeframe necessary to meet the conditions 54.54% said that they needed more than three years, while 31.81% do not know how long they need. Thus, the hypothesis has been invalidated for more than half of the respondents.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

All the assumptions were checked, which allows us to conclude:

- the attitude towards ecotourism and the eco-labelling requirements is favourable among tour operators in the Natura 2000 ROSCI0062 Crişul Repede Gorge - Pădurea Craiului site, an area with potential to become an eco-tourist destination;
- the tour operators in the area studied are willing to make investment efforts and other efforts for eco-labelling, provided that the effort supporting by the leadership of the country were welcome.
- a better and accurate information of tour operators in the area regarding the infrastructure changes, facilities and behaviour that they should do is required. They should see this process as an investment for the future for their business, as a preparation for a niche market that is expanding. Eco-labelling can be seen as a vector of promotion, as a delimitation against competitors.

Beyond efforts, restrictions and hesitations, sustainable development will turn from an option into the only variant of responsible economic growth.

### Research limitations and further directions

The response to eco-labelling, be it about tour operators or tourists, is influenced by the cultural context. The main limitation of this study is given by the small number of respondents, even though they account for over 40% of the research population and meet the requirement of representativeness. Precisely because of the small number of sample, the representativeness was tracked. Expanding the research to other destinations could provide slightly different information. The instrument used was the interview, very interesting discussions took place, many exceeding the allotted 30-45 minutes, the conclusion of the discussions being limited framed in a standard response. A future research direction would be the orientation of research to other destinations, too, certified or not, of the five entrants in the race. At this point, the selected destination has passed the preliminary assent to become an eco-tourist destination. Even resuming the research on the same population may be of interest.

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