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Could rural tourism revitalize rural areas in Croatia?

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ABSTRACT

Trends in modern tourism are mainly oriented towards intangible aspects of tourism demand. Consumer experience at a destination is the focal point. Since rural areas in Croatia face significant demographic problems, rural tourism can be one of the answers to the question of how to revitalize rural areas. The aim of this paper is to describe the development of rural tourism in certain regions in the context of overall rural development in Croatia. For the purposes of this paper, methods of content analysis and compilation were used. Rural tourism can contribute to economic diversification and enable new jobs, especially for young people. Due to diversity of climatic, environmental and regional conditions, there are various types of rural tourism in Croatia. The overall diversity shouldn't be perceived as an obstacle for potential development, but a comparative advantage.

Key words: rural tourism, regions, development, Croatia

INTRODUCTION

Croatia's membership in the European Union (EU) in 2013 encompassed changes in the Croatian economy, including rural development. In addition to coastal tourism, which is extremely important for Croatian economy (the share of direct gross value added (GVA) of tourism in the total GVA is about 8.5%), diversification of tourism products and development of new types of tourism such as rural, health, transit etc. began in the last decades as well. According to Skuras et al. (2006) as other forms of tourism become more

available it means that it is becoming more and more difficult for tourism based exclusively on "sea and sun" to satisfy the consumers.

Trends in tourism in general are focused more on intangible dimensions of touristic demand – experience. Consumer experience presents totality of supply (nature, food, accommodation, environment, hospitality, activities etc.). The concept of rural tourism includes various forms of tourism in rural areas (eco-tourism, agro-tourism, fishing and hunting, etc.). Rural tourism is a common term for activities and forms of tourism which exist in

a rural area defined by the natural and cultural resources that are there (Svržnjak et al., 2014). According to WTO, rural tourism is a term used when "rural culture" is a key component of the product or service in rural tourism supply (Mihailović and Morić, 2012). Universal definition of rural tourism is still the subject of discussions without consensus (Pearce, 1989; Bramwell, 1994; Seaton et al., 1994). There are several reasons. Firstly, rural areas are determined differently in different countries; all tourist activities in a rural area cannot be unconditionally determined as rural (depends on context), there many types of rural tourism in rural area without common denominator (Štros et al., 2015). McGehee and Kim (2004) define rural tourism as tourism which takes place in a rural area. Accommodation (apartments, camps etc.) may be different, as well as activities (hiking, walking, sports, visiting cultural heritage, cultural events, etc.).

About 93% of Croatian land area is marked as rural, and it is inhabited by one-fifth of the total population (Svržnjak et al., 2014). There is a great potential for the development of this type of tourism, which can be strong back-up for economic and social development of rural areas. The rural tourism capacity in Croatia has a short history since 1998 when first rural tourism family farms were registered – 32 of them, and is currently at unduly low number – only 447 registered rural households which are very unequally distributed by counties.

The importance of rural tourism is reflected in the strong interaction between agricultural production, traditional products, presentation of tradition, traditional gastronomy and tourist services, and the use of existing resources. Structural changes in agricultural production have led to the weakening of the rural economy, what imposed seeking additional income sources for farmers (Grgić et al., 2015a).

Human resources are needed for the further development of rural tourism, while at the same time Croatian rural area faces the problem of rural depopulation.

Earlier, migrations in rural areas were caused by wars and natural disasters, but in recent years rural exodus is caused by social and economic problems. According to Grgić et al. (2010) the greatest difficulties of life today in the Croatian rural areas are economic; lack of employment, poor choice of occupations and lower wages versus jobs in the city. The biggest problem is that young people in particular leave rural areas due to lack of opportunities.

The migration of the rural population can be prevented primarily by increasing employment and income, and the creation of such physical and social infrastructure in rural areas that will significantly improve the living conditions of rural population. In fact, it can help the development of all forms of rural tourism which will boost other economic activities in rural areas considering that no activity is acting independently, but mutually complementary and reinforcing.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

According to Petrić (1996) there are two groups of rural tourism definitions. The first group consists from definitions that defined rural tourism on the basis of total touristic income (e.g. rural tourism is one type of tourism in general, whereas agritourism is a type of rural tourism). The second group defines tourism in rural area by different supply elements. Depending on the primary component of the product (e.g. rural culture, activity on farm etc.) a expression is used for definition, for example: agro-tourism, green tourism, gastronomic tourism, social, nautical

tourism, hunting, adventure, historical/cultural tourism and so on.

The aim is to describe the development of rural tourism in past few years and to indicate the limitations and possibilities of its development in the context of the overall rural development in Croatia. For the purposes of this article, secondary information research was made, including the information available on the Internet and in the contemporary literature about rural areas. The method of qualitative analysis of secondary data and descriptive (reproductive) synthesis was applied.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sustainable development and rural tourism value

The terms "rural development" and "sustainable development" are complementary terms (Krnar, 2016). The concept of sustainable development was born out of need to emphasize the necessity of conservation and protection, especially of non-renewable resources, and to coordinate development with the environment. Croatian rural area developed slowly throughout history and thus left preserved environment and economic basis for future generations. Three key points determinate the concept of sustainable development: the protection of the ecosphere, stable economic development and the fair distribution of social opportunities. In recent times the tourists' interest is increasingly focused on natural and cultural heritage, life in the countryside, and spending time in the wild and unspoiled nature. Local population often focuses on tourism for economic reasons and easier earnings and becomes dependent on tourist demands, to such a degree as to even endanger local identity. Rural tourism should be developed in such a way that it develops rural

areas and should remain in accordance with the environment. It should also put the existing facilities into use; engage local population and adapt rural tourism to the available space.

Visitors are mostly attracted to rural areas because of their natural environment and cultural and historical heritage. Considering the total area, Croatia stands out with a large number of protected and tourist attractive natural areas, and by environmental biodiversity it is in the European top. According to the Register of Protected Areas of the State Institute for Nature Protection in Croatia there are 409 protected areas in different categories. Protected areas now cover 8.56% of the Croatian area, or 12.24% of the continental territory and 1.94% of the territorial sea.

Culture which takes place in a rural area is the base of development of rural tourism and differentiates one rural place from another. Farmers' culture is based on local creation and social control, traditions and forms of collective action, and is influenced by various local environmental and other local cultures (Cifrić, 2012). Rural tourism based on culture and cultural attractions includes various aspects: cultural monuments, folk culture, habitation and food, ethnic folk practices, folk material culture of the old crafts, products, souvenirs, cultural institutions and events and entertainment, sports and commercial events. The cultural monuments are important factor in every attractive tourist destination (movable and immovable objects preserved from past that point to a specific period of social development). Folk culture plays an important role in rural area, especially folk culture which is preserved in the folklore of the rural population, and includes dressing, dancing, singing, music, ancient traditions, crafts, and the way of living.

Products and services supply in rural tourism

The goal of successful management of a rural destination is to apply marketing principles and techniques in such a way as to enhance attractiveness of destinations in terms of increasing competition. The process of successful destination management is grouped into three areas: products, markets and consumers/users, and consists of resources, products, marketing strategies and measures, consumer/user and segmentation (Rainisto, 2003). Destination reputation (perception) is also important for successful destination management. It is quite difficult for a destination to develop an image and it is a long-term process but once it does, it gets huge competitive advantage over other destinations. The image of a tourist destination is the totality of impressions, beliefs, ideas, expectations and feelings about the place collected over time (Kesić and Jakeljić, 2012).

Some counties, regions, places or cities use their prominent urban historical symbols (fortress in Đurđevac city) because they serve as the easiest and quickest association with a place and are a powerful visual symbol, which symbolizes and reinforces the image of a particular place (Svržnjak et al., 2014). Environment which includes social, cultural, economic and political features with the usual characteristics such as soil, climate and food supply is considered to be an important supply. From the perspective of potential tourists, rural tourism product is perceived and consumed as a compound or combination of attributes that will satisfy their desire and need (Kotler, 2001). When assessing rural tourism attributes the following is essential (Canoves et al., 2005): direct connection of nature and landscape, peace and tranquillity, price-quality ratio, the

ratio of tourism products bidders to tourists, tourism activities, content and timetable of tourism residence object, direct contact with nature, additional services with basic tourist service, ease of attractions availability, architectural (traditional) characteristics of tourist facilities, sports activities etc. According to Grgić et al. (2011) at the Zagreb County, agritourism services providers have to be ambitious (37.3% of respondents think so), kind (19.3%), hardworking (13.3%), resourceful (8.4%), educated (6.0%) and other (15.7%).

According to the same research, the main reason for doing agritourism is better sale of agricultural products (57.1%), while other reasons are better sales of non-agricultural products and a love for countryside and agriculture. Consequently it comes to agricultural production and rural areas preservation (products are sold at minimum cost and maximum sales prices). The diverse rural tourism supply certainly contributes to the development of the local community. It includes preservation and sufficiently pure landscape, rich natural and cultural heritage (churches, fortresses, and castles), environmentally preserved area with numerous natural resources, environmentally friendly production, indigenous and traditional products, many natural, cultural and historical attractions and traditional production. In similar research (Grgić et al., 2015c) potential rural-tourism farmers in one micro-region in Croatia showed positive attitude towards tourism activity in rural area, but only 3.3% of them were interested in agritourism. The need for major investments and administration are the biggest problem they emphasized.

Products and services demand in rural tourism

Consumers themselves (tourists) have the greatest influence on the development of tourism activities. They are motivated with new priorities, environmentally conscious and looking for new experiences and activities during the trip. They also require more attention, better services quality and interesting stories about the place they are visiting and the food consumed. Recently, interesting stories or legends (linked to total experience) about the place kept increasing demand in rural areas. A distinctive characteristic of tourist demand is its elasticity, which may be primary and secondary. In the primary elasticity, the focus is on income sensitivity or prices, and in the secondary on the volatility of tourism demand to changes in supply (Dobre, 2005).

Tourist demand can be influenced by numerous factors: prices, consumer attitudes, political environment, etc., but mainly disposable income and prices play a decisive role in defining the tourism demand (Song et al., 2010). According to Grgić et al. (2011) in Zagreb County, the majority of respondents answered that nature/environment, hospitality and food supplied had the biggest impact in agritourism services. Sporting events supply, cultural events and other interesting content are essential for younger population. Also, according to the same survey, respondents expect improvement of agro-tourism supplies through advertising, services quality increasing and lower prices.

Demand for rural tourism in Croatia is recently characterized by a significant increase due to tourists' greater awareness, environmental concerns, availability of cultural heritage, and the need for rest, adventure,

excitement and enogastronomic experience. Majority of rural tourists come from urban areas; belong to middle and upper middle class and despite the economic crisis have increasing disposable income. Rural tourism presents not only an opportunity for greater returns, but it also encourages the revitalization of agriculture and repopulation of rural areas and keeps young people in the area. One of the most important factors of demand is seasonality, and the most attractive period for consumers is spring because it is time when nature is awakening and becoming more attractive. Other similar research (Grgić et al, 2015b) in another part of country showed that major part of respondents would spend holidays on touristic family farms during summer or spring.

Seasonality of tourism combines temporal and spatial variations in tourism demand, since the ultimate manifestation of the seasonality of tourism palpable and visible in time and in space (Kožić, 2013).

Rural tourism in Croatia

Rural tourism in Croatia began to develop after the War for Independence (1991-1995); firstly in the context of promoting the development of continental tourism, and later as an essential factor in the development of rural areas and village renovation. It developed unevenly, depending on the goals and programs of individual country regions. It started to develop in Istria as an integral part of the destination product of coastal tourist destinations and in other regions in order to raise the quality of life in rural areas and acquire additional income. Various institutions have undertaken great actions for tourism development on family farms (Croatian Chamber of Economy, Ministry of Tourism, different associations of producers and consumers etc.), but the effects of those

actions were not consistent with their efforts. The biggest problem was the size of rural farms in Croatia, which was in average 2.8 hectares of agricultural land per farm in 1991 (then further fragmented, usually in 5 particles). It is quite hard to organize the tourism supply on such small farms. Systematic development of rural tourism in Croatia can be divided into two important periods (Šarić, 2016):

- From 1995 to 1999 – the Croatian government adopted the National program for development of small and medium enterprises in the tourism industry with an emphasis on sustainable tourism development in rural areas.
- In 2004 – when the new Croatian government began to seriously care about rural areas and economic activities in the rural areas.

According to the Institute for Tourism (2015), the vision for the rural tourism development in Croatia until 2020 is as follows: in 2020, rural tourism will be a competitive, commercially established and increasingly popular export product in Croatia. Taking into consideration the ambience feeling and ecological preservation of the environment, rural tourism in Croatia will attract domestic and international tourist demand mostly due to its authentic atmosphere, "the warmth of home" and distinctive "custom-made" supply tailored experiences customized to different consumer segments. The dynamic development of rural tourism in Croatia will be the result of a stimulating business environment, responsible destination management and high level of involvement and commitment of all holders of tourism policy at national and regional level. The goal of rural tourism development in Croatia till 2020 is to enhance its

international competitiveness, desirability and recognition.

Regions with the most developed rural tourism in Croatia

Rural area of Slavonia and Baranja (Figure 1) is rich in tourist attractions that have the potential for tourism development, such as thermal, healing waters, rivers, sanctuaries, wine routes, natural parks, cultural heritage, etc.



Figure 1: Slavonia and Baranja (Eastern part of Croatia)

Source: https://hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavonija_i_Baranja (10.1.2017.)

This special rural area with unpolluted environment and sustainable development is at the same time is rich in tradition, cuisine, famous Slavonian hospitality and what is very important with low prices of goods and services. Slavonia and Baranja are poor with newly created tourist attractions, and the problems of rural tourism development are reflected in a lack of entrepreneurial knowledge and skills, legislation, promotional activities etc. As a least developed tourist region of continental Croatia, Slavonia should use its tourist potentials, natural beauty, tradition and culture that have been neglected for long time in a better and more efficient way and brand itself to market as a tourist destination that supplies something

new and distinctive. People live in a traditional way, but in a modern spirit.

Starting points that give preference to Slavonia as a tourist destination according to Bolfek, Jakičić and Lončarić (2012) are: preserved nature of the Pannonian Plain, quiet and peaceful refuge from the urban lifestyle, richness in history, architecture and unique urban complex, respect of traditional values and proud tradition known for the hospitality of local people who make the stay enjoyable, romantic atmosphere provided by authentic towns and castles known for numerous legends, and rich cuisine with the sounds of autochthonous music instruments.

It is necessary to include the "economy experiences" in Slavonia and Baranja, and expand the supply through innovative adventure-sport tourism which allows further diversification of the product with other socially useful activities.

The development of rural tourism in Međimurje County (Figure 2) was positively affected by the neighbouring Republic of Slovenia, but also with the ideas and experiences of emigrants returning from Austria, Switzerland and Germany, where this form of tourism was developed many years ago (Mesarić-Žabčić, 2008).



Figure 2: Međimurje (North part of Croatia)
Source: <http://www.murkovic.org/05---places/>

croatia---medimurje (10.1.2017.)

The development of rural tourism in this region was prompted by the possibility of creating an extra income, and thus increasing the quality of life and mitigating the depopulation of rural areas in Međimurje County. Rural tourism is beginning to be used in a planned way for the purpose of revitalizing the rural areas. Additional motivation for this kind of investment and entrepreneurship, both with individuals and the County, are specific rural farms in the area, tradition presentation through the folk customs and traditional crafts, traditional products production and the fact that the preservation of natural environment is at a high level. Folk customs are visible in the way they built "hiže" (traditional name for house), in national costumes, wedding ceremonies, Međimurje County traditional songs, music and dance. Međimurje County is an area with a healthy climate, excellent conditions for recreation, leisure, good road connections to the rest of Croatia and the nearby neighbour countries – all important elements for the further development of rural tourism in the area of Međimurje County (Mesarić-Žabčić, 2008).

Historical monuments, national heritage (costumes, masks, customs, feasts and food), watercourses, vineyards and specific farms attract more and more tourists year after year. Tourists are delighted with the landscape beauty, the quality of wine, rich local cuisine, unique food specialties and hospitality. Local music, songs and dance have an important role in the promotion of rural tourism in Međimurje County. Renovation of old houses for rural tourism is a recent phenomenon in Međimurje County, and it is related to the return of former residents from abroad. The advantages of rural tourism development in the

area of Međimurje County are reflected in the expansion of the existing tourism, expansion of tourist business in the spring and autumn months, and the ability to generate higher revenues from tourism. At the same time this type of tourism is encouraging the preservation of native customs, traditional crafts, socio-cultural features of the Međimurje region, and the traditional primary production and processing of agricultural products (Mesarić-Žabčić, 2008).

This type of tourism is present in Istria from 1996 (Figure 3). Istria was the first region in Croatia to begin with this type of tourism. In the beginning rural tourism was the supplementary activity to the main coastal tourism. Nowadays Istria is branded as the most developed rural touristic region and also it has a specific type of rural tourism if we compare it with other regions with rural tourism in Croatia.



Figure 3: Istria (Western part of Croatia)
Source: <http://www.realestateistria.com/default.aspx?p=39> (10.1.2017.)

Rural-touristic goods and services extended the main touristic season from two months to almost a whole year season. Istria is known for the production of cheese, ham, olives, olive oil, asparagus, truffles, fine wine spirits and liqueurs. There is a very rich supply in every segment of touristic demand (from food to

accommodation to different activities, tradition and specific nature). Istria generates the highest income from rural tourism in Croatia and is a good example for other regions. Rural tourism is also developed in the southern part of country (rural parts of Dalmatia, Dubrovnik city region etc.).

It is quite interesting that despite the small total area or a relatively small number of total population in Croatia (4.2 mil inhabitants), there is such heterogeneity in nature, cultural or historical heritage, way of life and way of rural tourism. It is quite hard to find some common denominator for rural tourism in different Croatian regions. If we should do this it would be the wealth in heterogeneity and differences.

Such type of national rural tourism could be the comparative advantage of domestic tourism as a whole. Due to natural and cultural heritage, rural tourism can have a very good perspective in Croatia but demographic and financial/economic problems in rural areas are the main obstacle.

CONCLUSION

Geographical position of Croatia makes the country very heterogenic in climate conditions, nature and cultural heritage. Croatian tourism sector is primarily known as coastal tourism with its peak and supply in summer (sun and sea). The share of tourism activity in total GDP is about 8%. Thanks to continental part and significant rural areas (about 93% of the total area) rural tourism is also becoming an important part of touristic supply in the country. Rural tourism can be perceived as one part of solution for rural areas which are facing depopulation (deagrarisation) and low income problems. Agricultural producers can sell their products through rural tourism and reuse unused infrastructural and intangible

potentials in those areas. Moreover, it can contribute to economy diversification and open new jobs, especially for young people. Regional deployment of rural tourism is uneven and rural-tourism supply is interregionally different. That fact should not be perceived as a problem but an opportunity that could be turned into a comparative advantage.

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Može li ruralni turizam revitalizirati ruralna područja u Hrvatskoj?

SAŽETAK

Trendovi u modernom turizmu usmjereni su u većoj mjeri na nematerijalne dimenzije turističke potražnje - iskustvo. Iskustvo potrošača u nekoj destinaciji predstavlja ukupnost ponude. Budući da se ruralna područja u Hrvatskoj suočavaju sa značajnim demografskim problemima, ruralni turizam može biti jedan od odgovora na pitanje kako revitalizirati ruralna područja. Cilj rada je opisati razvoj ruralnog turizma u pojedinim regijama u kontekstu ukupnog ruralnog razvoja u Hrvatskoj. Za potrebe ovog rada korištene su metode analize sadržaja i kompilacije. Ruralni turizam može pridonijeti ekonomskoj raznolikosti i omogućiti nova radna mjesta, posebno mladima. Zbog raznolikosti klimatskih, okolišnih i regionalnih uvjeta postoji raznolika ponuda ruralnog turizma u Hrvatskoj. Takove značajke svakako ne trebaju biti prepreka potencijalnom razvoju, već prilika koja bi bila komparativna prednost.

Key words: ruralni turizam, regije, razvoj, Hrvatska