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## THE IMPORTANCE OF ECOLOGICAL AND GASTRONOMIC DETERMINANTS OF RURAL TOURISM IN SERBIA

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**Abstract:** The importance and role of tourism is increasing in the world economy as it generates large incomes, creates new jobs and has a positive impact on the development of rural areas. The consequence of this is an increasing number of tourists and therefore an increased demand for tourist services. Current problems of tourism development, both in theoretical approach and in practice, are numerous. Tourist destinations today are facing increased competition in the market, so the owners of tourism policies and offers have realized that understanding the factors that influence the positioning of the destination on the market, ie the competitiveness of the destination, is essential for further development. The increase in the number of tourists has a negative impact on the environment as demands of tourists are increasing. Negative problems and environmental impacts are: pressure on natural resources, the living world and habitats, generation of waste, emission of pollutants. Tourism should have a plan to keep the quality of the environment at a high level, as the development of the destination depends on the status of the natural resources. Never the less the final judges of the tourism product are the consumers of tourist services. From an environmental point of view tourists are to listed on the negative side speaking of ecoperspective, but from an economical and valorizational stand, they are the key stakeholders in the tourism system.

**Keywords:** tourism, tourists, environment, gastronomy, World Tourism Organization, Republic of Serbia.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries with an annual average growth rate of around 5%. After experiencing 25% growth between 1995 and 2005, tourism now accounts for 10% of world economic activity and is one of the main sources of employment. Factors influencing the further development of tourism are: new attractive destinations, accelerated development of transport infrastructure, urbanization, as well as the development of modern technologies (Krstic, 2017). In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of tourism development was applied in many tourist destinations, which took into account only the realization of profit. However, although making a profit even today is a priority, most countries are increasingly paying attention to the environmental interests of destinations. Spontaneous and unplanned use of a destination's natural resources causes a particular destination to lose the primary factor that helped it be attractive. Precisely because of which destinations have become competitive can be jeopardized and their competitiveness weakened. The subject of research is the study of environmental determinants, which are an important issue in the context of sustainable tourism development and maintaining the competitive position of tourist destinations. Mass tourism has put pressure on natural resources and the environment and this impact must be adequately considered because the environment and tourism are interrelated. For destinations that have largely felt the consequences of mass tourism and the spontaneous use of resources, the question arises of applying sustainable competitiveness in securing a position in the tourism market. The general goal of this paper is to analyze the environmental determinants and the environment at the level of competitiveness in the tourism sector of the Republic of Serbia. Successful implementation of environmental components (environmental protection, giving priority to those products that are organized in accordance with environmental standards, etc.) in the further implementation of activities in tourism is the basis on which to build competitiveness. The aim is also to determine the impact of environmental determinants expressed by the Environmental Performance Index (EPI) on the competitiveness of the tourism sector and the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI) in the Republic of Serbia, and represents a good starting point for quality planning of the development of this sector. The social goal of this paper is to review and strive to point out the development of tourism that will reduce the negative impact on natural resources and the environment with economic and sociological effects on destinations and, finally, to improve the competitive advantage of the state as a destination. The main hypotheses on which this paper is based are:

- survival of natural resources and quality environment have an impact on the competitiveness of destinations,

- customers are the core factor for eco-tourism destination development
- importance of visitors for the development of eco-tourism destinations and their valorization.

The following research methods were used to examine the impact of environmental determinants on the competitiveness of tourism in the Republic of Serbia:

- the method of analysis and synthesis was used in the form of collection, selection, processing and analysis of theoretical material on the relationship between environmental determinants and tourism,
- inductive deductive method is used to analyze the quality of environmental determinants and competitiveness in the tourism sector,
- the comparative method is used to show a comparison of the achieved level of competitiveness and the state of environmental determinants in a given period of time,
- correlation and regression analysis were used to examine the relationship and the impact of the state of environmental determinants on competitiveness in tourism,
- the method of interviewing as the core source of primary information and,
- the compilation method was applied for consulting and taking over the results of other scientific research works for the needs of one's own research.

This paper will describe the importance of environmental determinants of sustainable tourism in order to improve the competitiveness of tourism. A significant space in this part of the paper will be dedicated to ecology, environmental protection and sustainable development. It will be explained how the development of tourism affects the environment, what is Agenda 21 for tourism, and how to improve tourism but preserve natural resources. Special emphasis will be on the preservation of biodiversity, water, air and land in the function of achieving sustainable tourism.

## 2. ECOLOGY AND TOURISM

The connection between tourism and the environment is reflected in the fact that together they form an indivisible whole because tourism is the main user of environmental resources. Most activities and attractions in tourism (diving, walking, hiking) are related to preserved natural resources and quality environment. Positive effects of tourism on the environment are: renovation and restoration of existing historical sites, buildings and monuments, transformation of old buildings, tourist facilities, protection of natural resources, adoption of various administrative and planning measures to protect certain areas and tourist areas while building environmental awareness and others (Bataljevic, 2016).

The negative effects of tourism on the environment are, among other things: pollution (water, air, land, buildings), destruction of flora and fauna, degradation of landscapes and cultural and historical monuments, etc. Only tourism can valorize sandy, pebble and rocky shores, lakes and rivers, lookouts, snow-capped mountain slopes, swamps, some climate elements, caves, pits, relict and indigenous specimens of plants and animals, sunset picturesqueness of the landscape or necropolis, archeological sites, frescoes, etc.

Protected environment is not only the basis for the development of tourism, but the entire economic activity and even more the basis for improving the quality of life of both tourists and the domicile population of places and regions. Modern tendencies in the tourist market indicate an increase in the demand for naturally preserved and ecologically clean space, because modern tourists need a temporary change of permanent place of residence for recreation.

Tourism of the 21st century is the world's leading service industry and its basic characteristics are a distinct mass and number. International tourist trips in 2010 included 940 million tourists, and according to WTO forecasts for 2020, 1.6 billion people will participate in international tourist traffic, ie. 720 million tourists will visit European countries. However, due to the pandemic at the beginning, the WTO estimates that international tourist visits could fall from 1% to 3% globally during 2020. Years, compared to the growth of 3% to 4% recorded in January this year. Of course, the current situation with the Covid-19 virus is very changeable and unpredictable, so these figures must be taken with caution, given that more and more accurate forecasts will be made as the situation develops. In the Republic of Serbia in April 2022, compared to April 2021, the number of tourist arrivals increased by 98.1%, while the number of overnight stays increased by 68.2%. In April 2022, compared to April 2021, the number of nights spent by domestic tourists increased by 50.6%, while the number of nights spent by foreign tourists increased by 98.7% (stat.gov.rs 2022). International tourism continued to recover in January 2022 compared to the beginning of 2021. However, the war in Ukraine contributes to the current economic uncertainty, as well as many restrictions on travel caused by the pandemic. in relation to the period before the pandemic. Looking at the sub-regions, Western Europe had the best results, with four times more arrivals of foreign tourists in January 2022 compared to the same period last year, but 58 percent less compared to 2019. The fastest recovery compared to the results from 2019 was

in the Caribbean (-38%), southern Europe and the Mediterranean region (-41%), where the most prominent are: Seychelles (-27%), Bulgaria (-20%), El Salvador (-19%), Serbia and Maldives (-13%), Dominican Republic (-11%), Albania (-7%) and Andorra (-3%). Bosnia and Herzegovina had as much as 2 percent more tourists compared to 2019.

#### **4. PROSPECT FOR RECOVERY**

After an unprecedented decline in 2020 and 2021, international tourism will continue to grow gradually this year. As of 24. March, 12 destinations have lifted all restrictions imposed by the pandemic, while a growing number of countries are slowly reducing the number of protection measures. The closure of airspace in Ukraine and Russia, as well as the ban on flights for Russian airlines, has a great negative impact on European countries, but also on longer travel times and higher prices for flights to distant destinations. The markets of Ukraine and Russia have a great influence on the surrounding countries, as well as on European destinations that attract tourists during the summer months. The latest data from the World Tourism Organization indicate that international tourism trends more than doubled (+ 130% or 18 million more tourists) in January this year compared to the same month in 2021. In contrast, we have sustainable tourism that represents balanced development and as such it imposes itself as a new trend of modern tourism. To be sustainable, tourism must guarantee optimal use of natural resources and biodiversity, support socio-cultural heritage of local communities and ensure long-term economic growth, providing economic benefits for all participants in the process. Therefore, the concept of sustainable development must be harmonized with the needs of protection and improvement of the environment and the needs of future generations, as well as with the principles of development policy and environmental protection policy. Protection and conservation of tourism resources are a key factor for the future development of the tourism industry. In order for the further development of tourism not to be spontaneous and unsustainable, it is necessary that the concept of sustainable development be presented as part of a broader strategy for the protection and preservation of natural resources.

#### **4. TOURISM RESOURCES AND INVESTING IN THEIR DEVELOPMENT**

Tourist resources are all those means that enable, ie. they are in the function of the tourist development of a certain place or area. The term tourist resources include the contents of space that can encourage tourist movements, dividing them into natural and anthropogenic resources (Jovanovic et al. 2009).

According to the classification of the World Tourism Organization, tourist resources are:

- natural tourist resources;
- cultural and historical heritage;
- climatic conditions;
- infrastructure;
- tourist services and content.

Natural resources are elements of the natural environment whose properties are the basis for economic activities, which include the development of tourism. Natural resources have a stimulating effect on tourist movements, since their attractive properties are suitable for adventure, recreation, experience and the like. It was noticed that their use in the development so far has been excessive and irresponsible. Therefore, in many studies dealing with the relationship between tourism and the use of natural resources, there are opinions that a significant change in the concept of tourism development and its further sustainability is necessary. Natural tourist resources are physical-geographical elements on which the tourist quality of the space and the degree of its attractiveness depend, as well as the possibility of economic valorization through tourism. Natural resources according to the WTO classification include: beaches, coral reefs, mountains, deserts, forests, national parks, waterfalls, lakes, rivers, thermal and mineral springs, caves, flora and fauna. Anthropogenic tourism resources, socially attractive factors in tourism, are the product of human activity. Their inclusion in the tourist offer has a positive effect on the attractiveness of the tourist space and increases the attractiveness of the tourist product. One of the basic concepts of sustainable development is to establish a balance between economic growth, conservation of natural resources and improving the quality of the environment. In the development of tourism so far, the main development goals were related to various economic effects, such as foreign exchange inflow rates, tourist spending, tourist traffic, number of visitors and overnight stays, new construction and investments, etc., which ultimately boiled down to permanent and endless increase in consumption by tourists - and which was the ultimate goal of development plans - that is, the dominant profit content and exploitation of tourist "raw materials". In addition to economic ones, this concept had numerous negative effects on social development, especially on the environment, such as: water and air pollution, waste accumulation, endangerment of flora and fauna, etc. Due to all the above, this concept of development has been

abandoned in favor of sustainable tourism. Due to the excessive urbanization of areas with the largest population on the planet, which in themselves represent the greatest potential for tourist demand, modern forms of sustainable tourism are based on integrated observation and use of resources of one area. Sustainable development of tourism should enable long-term sustainability of natural tourist resources, but also the realization of profits for those who develop tourism based on them. On the other hand, uncontrolled exploitation threatens the ability of resource resources to renew and improve their quality. Therefore, in tourism there are very present understandings and requirements for the preservation, protection and improvement of natural environments in order to maintain the lasting attractiveness of the natural values of the area where tourism is developing.

## **5. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION MEASURES OF TOURISM SERVICE PROVIDERS**

The key determinant and integral part of the tourist offer is the attractiveness and preservation of the environment, which leads to a higher level of competitiveness of the destination. This is possible only by defining and applying environmental protection measures. These measures represent various activities that help prevent, reduce and eliminate environmental pollution due to the process of using goods and services. In order to reduce the negative consequences of human activities on the environment, tourism service providers have a special role to play. For every tourism company, these measures represent an expense, and therefore the costs of environmental protection are the sum of investments and current expenditures for taking over activities related to environmental protection. According to the European Classification of Environmental Protection Activities and Expenditure (CEEPA 2000), tourism enterprises need to take the following protection measures (Pavlovic, 2014):

- Wastewater management measures - the application of these measures prevents or reduces water pollution, but they also provide for the construction of a sewerage network for wastewater among tourist entities, which is usually achieved by installing wastewater filtration devices, equipment for transporting activated sludge, etc.;
- Air protection measures - it is necessary to remove or reduce waste gases in the air (this can be achieved by regular air quality control and installation of devices for purification of harmful gases);
- Waste management measures - these measures require tourism service providers to regularly collect garbage with the help of bins and containers, provide dedicated vehicles for collection and transportation and ensure proper disposal and storage of waste at landfills;
- Measures related to the protection and remediation of land, groundwater and surface water - it is necessary to decontaminate contaminated land and filter water;
- Measures for protection against noise and vibration - these measures are carried out with the help of available construction and technical measures to reduce noise and vibration in terms of installing protective linings in tourist facilities, protecting walls and windows from noise, construction of embankments near rivers and lakes etc.;
- Nature protection measures - it is necessary for the providers of tourist services to take measures to protect against soil erosion and flooding, protect legally protected species of plants and animals, etc.;

Providers of tourist services should also regularly take other environmental protection measures, primarily research into development, radiation protection, education of staff employed in tourism, regular information, as well as other activities that are not classified in other areas (Jovičić and Brankov 2009).

## **6. INVESTMENTS OF TOURISM SERVICE PROVIDERS FOR PROTECTION AND PRESERVATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT**

Investments of tourism service providers refer to investments aimed at collecting, treating, monitoring and controlling as well as reducing, preventing or eliminating pollution or any form of environmental pollution arising from the tourism business. Investments aimed at environmental protection are divided into: investments that occur after the provision of tourist services, and investments of tourist companies in the prevention of pollution that occurs during the process of providing tourist services. The first type of investment involves investments in modern techniques and technology for the collection and remediation of pollution after its occurrence, for the treatment and disposal of harmful substances and for monitoring and measuring the level of pollution. The second type of investment involves investing in modern technologies to prevent or reduce the amount of pollution generated during the provision of tourism services. In addition to the fact that these investments in every tourist company are a mandatory expense, it should be mentioned that the tourist company also has current expenses, which are the costs of hiring labor. In the winter period, at the end of december in 2020 and at the end of december 2021, fasts were made in rural areas and rural households. The research was conducted on the number of visits, gastronomic offer and the offer that the household has, as well as the number of nights. Surprising results were obtained. The main goal of this research was to gain insight into how the Kovid pandemic affected tourism and hospitality in the rural

and rural areas of these destinations. In addition to asking questions about the number of nights and the number of arrivals, that is, the quantity of guests, part of this research is to make a qualitative approach around tourist visitors.

**Table 1. Tourist visitors and number nights (by author)**

	number of visits to households	number of overnight stays for 2018	number of overnight stays for 2019	number of overnight stays for 2020	number of overnight stays for 2021
Kopaonik	11	2475	2936	4004	3960
Divčibare	26	5885	6895	10842	9568
Zlatibor	13	3215	4025	6323	5836

After the obtained results and performed analyzes, amazing results were obtained in table 1, even if the goal of the research was to see the negative impact of the pandemic in Eco destinations (Kopaonik, Divčibare, Zlatibor). The Kovid pandemic had a positive impact on visits to rural and rural areas, and this can be seen in the results from 2018 to 2021 years. On the example of the destination Kopaonik for 2019, the percentage growth is 18.5%, due to the pandemic and for the closure of borders and limited travel in 2020, we have a dizzying growth of 61.8%, while a slight decline of 1.8% compared to 2020 year. Divčibare for 2019 also recorded a growth of 17.1%, and in the year of the end of the pandemic it recorded a dizzying growth of 57.1%, and a small decline of 12.74%. At the destination Zlatibor, in relation to the number of overnight stays, it increased by 8.1% compared to 2018 and amounts to 4025 overnight stays. While 2020 years records a growth of the previous year by 21.98%.

## 7. CUSTOMERS SATISFACTION REGARDING ECO-FRIENDLY TOURISM DESTINATIONS

The survey questionnaire was based on the survey conducted by Naumov (2020). The original research was conducted in Sidney in 2001 by McDonnell, and its goal was to determine the satisfaction of the tour guides presentations. In Naumov's case were included several other questions about gastronomic offer satisfaction within a destination (Naumov et al, 2020). The questionnaire in this research touched the aspects of the customers' satisfaction regarding the eco-tourism destinations. The research contains field work based on research sample of 377 respondents.

## 8. RESEARCH SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

The total number of processed questionnaires was 377 and it is important to note that the answers were received from the respondents to all questions. Therefore in all questions, there is no difference in the sum of answers. Men make up 39,12% of the research sample, while women make up 60,87%. Out of the total number of respondents, 55,56% belong to the age category over 50 years. In fact, 12,46% belong to the category of 50 to 60 years, while 43,10% of the respondents belong to the age group of 61 years and above. Only 7,69% belong to the age group between 40 and 49 years and 15,64% belong to the age group between 29 and 39 years. In the age category between 18 and 28 years belong 13,66% and under 18 years 7,42%. The majority of the respondents or 55,56% belong to the third age group, or in other words tourists who are mostly retired or before retirement. Regarding the level of education were obtained relatively normal results.

## 9. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The answer to the first question should indicate what is the main concern of the tourists with the local tours in the destination, ie. which aspect of the tour they take into account when deciding on it. As can be seen from Table 3, the two main and dominant concerns of tourists are the "low trace of human presence" (22,67%) and the "environmental protection" (36,47%). Other aspects of the main concerns regarding the Serbian eco tourism "revisiting intetnion" and "sustainable develoment" are presented in a statistically insignificant percentage, 4,37 %, and 6,49%; "responsible use of resources" and "responsible travel" was rounded out by 12% and 10,61% accordingly or in total by 22,61% of the respondents. The conservation as a feature of the Serbian eco-tourism is rounded by 20 respondents or 5,30 %.

*Table 1. Main concerns of the tourists with the gastronomic offer of the destination (by author)*

	Frequency	Percentage %
Environmental protection	137	36,47
Low trace of human presence	86	22,67
Revisiting intention	16	4,37
Responsible use of resources	46	12
Responsible travel	40	10,61
Other	4	1,98
Sustainable development	25	6,49
Conservation	20	5,41
Total	377	100 %

If the data from the previous table is taken into consideration, it is natural that 59 % of tourists think that the environmental protection and low trace of negative human presence are the most important concerns regarding the eco-destinations in Serbia. Eco-visitors are the most environmentally responsible people. The low human presence and no negative environmental impact in the original surroundings is the most important issue speaking of eco-destinations. Regarding the assessment of the overall quality of the Serbian Eco-Destinations, the respondents managed to achieve a scale from 1 to 10. As can be seen from the table below, more than 60% of the respondents believe that the quality of the Eco-destination exceeded their expectations and is more than satisfactory, just over 35% consider it satisfactory and less than 3% consider the quality of the eco-destination to be unsatisfactory. The average score is 8,31, which can be interpreted as an outstanding grade.

## 10. CONCLUSION

The subject of a large number of researches is the impact of the environment on the competitiveness of tourism in the Republic of Serbia. Because it provides income, new jobs, preservation of cultural heritage, and investment in infrastructure and thus affects the development of all tourist areas, the development of tourism today is one of the most important economic activities. The benefits of tourism development are great. In this paper, the impact of the environment that affects the competitiveness of tourism is analyzed and it is the basis for the functioning and development of tourism activities. The so-called modern tourism has a great impact on the environment because, depending on that, tourism develops and brings profit. Statistics show that the growth of tourist demand at the global level is putting pressure on the environment and thus limiting the functioning of tourist attractions in the coming years. The demands of tourists have been growing over the years, so the Republic of Serbia is facing numerous challenges and survival in a highly competitive global environment. As the environment and tourism are interrelated, so this research was focused on the consequences that the demands of tourists, but also tourism itself have on the environment. The consequences can be both positive and negative. The priority of tourism service providers is certainly the highest possible revenues, and the consequence of that is the uncontrolled use of natural resources and increased environmental pollution. Some forms of tourism, such as agritourism, religious tourism, hunting or camping tourism, can lead to landscape degradation, endanger flora and fauna, destruction of natural habitats, pollution of water, air and land, and can even negatively affect climate change. Responsible behavior and resource constraints can prevent or reduce negative impacts. On the other hand, there are positive consequences such as an increase in income that can be used to invest and improve the environment. The most important thing is proper planning of tourism development. Natural and artificial resources are the primary source of tourist activities. Therefore, any negative impact on them has a negative impact on the environment, and thus on tourism. Natural and artificial resources are primary resources in addition to which there must be secondary ones, such as restaurants, hotels (accommodation), shops, etc., which will satisfy the demand of tourists. Modern tourism has the task of providing tourists with a sense of closeness to nature and the local community, and Serbia, as a tourist destination, must aim to attract such tourists and thus protect its natural resources. In order for this to be implemented in practice, all actors within the country related to tourism must participate. The advantage of the Republic of Serbia is that its tourist potentials are still not sufficiently used, but there is an obvious lack of appropriate infrastructure that would support the sustainable development of tourism. There is also a lack of efficient and adequate planning of waste management in tourist places, in order to minimize the negative impact of tourist activities on the environment. Special emphasis should be placed on so-called environmentally friendly technologies. Cooperation with local schools and colleges is also very important in order to integrate environmental issues into educational programs, starting from preschool age onwards. When it comes to the competitiveness of tourism in Serbia, the

methodology of the Index of Competitiveness of Tourism and Travel by the World Economic Forum is of great importance, because it is a combination of data from publicly available sources, and based on that an annual report is formed every year. Thus, the Index provides an accurate overview of the competitiveness of tourism through a detailed analysis of all factors, and its purpose is to make it easier for countries to identify and influence factors in order to increase their competitiveness and thus progress. The Republic of Serbia has numerous natural, geographical, cultural-historical, climatic and many other advantages that it can use to improve all forms of tourism. The main advantages are the existing mountain centers, spa centers, lakes and many other pearls of nature. Serbian hospitality and the rich table to which tourists gladly return should not be left out, but this preserves the national identity. Finally, in the policy of tourism development as an unavoidable and important sector, Serbia must make a strong and quality turn to a new approach to harmonizing tourism development that minimally endangers the environment. Through this research it can be clearly seen that the quality of the environment leads to a higher level of competitiveness of the destination, i.e., the competitiveness of tourism in the Republic of Serbia. The impact of the Kovid pandemic on tourism and catering has shown that the number of overnight stays is higher in the destinations of Kopaonik and Zlatibor, in the period from 2018-2021. years. The largest number of overnight stays and household visits is near the destination Divčibare, which shows that the Kovid pandemic did not directly affect the development of tourism and catering.

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