

EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITIES FOR RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE SOUTH-WEST PLANNING REGION OF THE REPUBLIC OF N. MACEDONIA¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper is the result of the conducted research activities in the preparing of a Sub-strategy for Rural Tourism in the Republic of N. Macedonia in 2019 in which the authors were directly involved. The research involved determining the current state of rural tourism through situation analysis and valorization of various rural tourism potentials. This resulted in specifying concrete values and spatial units for the development of rural tourism. The goal of this paper is to diversify the region's current tourist offer, as well as to create new tourism values for promoting rural tourism development.

KEY WORDS: Rural tourism, tourism development, tourist valorization, South-west Planning Region.

¹ original research paper

INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism can be defined as an “experience of the country” which includes many activities and that take place in agricultural or non-urban areas (Irshad, 2010). This type of tourism is characteristic for being implemented in areas or countries that are economically undeveloped (Pearce, 1989). Given the fact that the R. N. Macedonia is a rather underdeveloped country, rural tourism can represent a significant potential (Sekulovska et al., 2018). The main notion is that rural tourism development must be located in areas that are dominantly rural (Lane, 1994). The element of *traditionality* should have center stage because tourists become more and more interested in experiencing the local surroundings and its population. Defining rural tourism should also encompass the resources which are being used for the creation of different tourism offers and tourism programs (Risteski & Rakicevik, 2018). In this sense, the possibilities for development of rural tourism in the South-west Planning Region (SWPR) are explored in this paper. The results and findings presented in this paper derive from the research *Sub-strategy for development of rural tourism in the Republic of N. Macedonia*, Ministry of Economy – Skopje, where the authors were directly involved, thus making it an original research paper (Marinoski et al., 2019).

The research included desk and field activities. The findings of the desk research were the result of an extensive situation analysis of the region's potentials. This meant making an inventory of predominantly nature-based tourist resources. Afterwards, those findings underwent a process of tourist valorization. The valorization resulted in the proposing of concrete rural tourism activities. The field research included not only visiting specific localities and areas in the SWPR, but also a questionnaire. Both the results from the conducted desk research and the field activities allowed the proposition of specific rural tourism products and areas for development. These findings can be used by the creators of tourism development programs and strategies, but also by specific service providers in the domain of rural tourism. This should allow the enrichment of the current tourist offer in the region. There is a need to shift the tourism activities from traditional (lake-based) to more alternative types of tourism, such as rural tourism (Andreški et al., 2020). Thus, this paper has not only theoretical importance but also practical implications.

Situation analysis and valorization of the possibilities in the South-west
Planning Region for the development of rural tourism

The SWPR has numerous and significant natural and cultural values with some of them being already in the function of tourism. However, most of the values are still insufficiently used in a rural tourism sense. The situation analysis explores such natural values that have the most potential for inclusion in future rural tourism activities on this territory. In the following table (Table 1) the most important characteristics of the SWRP and the existing natural values are presented through the different possibilities of their inclusion in tourism.

Table 1.Characteristics and natural values in the South-west Planning Region

Category	Indicators and parameters	Possibilities for rural tourism development
Surface area	Vevcani – 35 km ² , Debar – 85 km ² , Debrca – 425,39 km ² , Ohrid – 390 km ² , Kichevo – 838 km ² , Makedonski Brod - 889 km ² , Plasnica–54,44km ² , Struga – 483km ² , Centar Zhupa – 107,21km ²	The region has a total of 286 settlements situated in 9 municipalities. The majority of settlements are rural and belong to five urban municipalities and four rural
Contactability	Albania	Albania's contact regions are Debar, Elbasan and Korca, that are bordering with the N. Macedonian municipalities of Ohrid, Struga, Debar and Centar Zhupa
Transitness	-Motorways E-65 (towards Pelagonija and Skopje Region), E 852 (to Albania), P-1201 and P-501 (to Albania) -International airport - "St. Paul the Apostle " -Boat trips from Ohrid to Pogradec	The region is the most important transport artery to the Republic of Albania
Mountains	Galichica, Jablanica, Stogovo, Karaorman, Plakjenska Mountain, Ilinska Mountain, Chelojca, Bistra, Deshat, Karadzica, Dautica	There are sheepfolds, forests (pine, beech, fir) - and numerous hiking and mountain biking trails, rock climbing on steep surfaces

Forests	218,884 ha (65.53% of SWPR, 21.15% of the total forest area of the Republic)	Rich in forest fruits (forest strawberries, blueberries, blackberries, raspberries) - picking wild berries, locating cottages and lodges, viewpoints for bird watching, organizing picnics, camp fires, education activities. Several relict and endemic plant species exist in the forests which are also rich in diverse wildlife (herbal tourism, hunting and photo safari)
Valleys	Ohrid - Struga, Debrca, Kichevo and Porechie	Farm activities, petting zoos, national restaurants, rural accommodation, agricultural activities with active involvement by tourists
Gorges	Crn Drim Gorge, Radika Gorges, Treska Gorge, Rusjaci Gorge, Brodska Gorge, Gorge of Mala Reka in Debar, Gorge of Beleshnichka River, Jelovechka Gorge, Gorge of River Debrshtica - Ehlovechka River)	Sightseeing, educational activities, climbing, canyoning, gorge walking, zip line
Springs	Biljana Springs, St. Naum, near Ramne, Vevchani Springs, spring of r. Treska, Belica, Studenchica, spring of carbonized water Popolzhani, spring with salty water Svinjishta, spring of carbonized water Kozica, Banjishte and Kosovrasti	Excursions, drinking clean spring water and educational activities (outdoor teaching, excursions) and locating restaurants. Spa tourism activities are possible in the well-equipped spas Banjishte and Kosovrasti
Rivers	Crn Drim, Belichka, Labunishka River, Golema Reka, Jablanica River, Radika, Garska River, Treska, Studenchica, Vevchanska River	Water sports, swimming, fishing, diving, waterfalls for sightseeing
Lakes	Ohrid Lake (natural) Globochichko Lake, Debar Lake, Kozjak, Slatino	Recreational and professional fishing, canoeing, swimming, diving. Some of the lakes' shores

	Lake, Oslovej and Shum (artificial)	are suitable for camping, hiking and recreational activities on their shores
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From the table above it can be seen that the South-west Planning Region covers an area of 3306 km², which represents 12.99% of the total territory of the Republic of N. Macedonia (Jankuloski et al., 2016). The rural municipalities cover a total area of 622.04 km² or 18.62% of the total territory of the region which shows the existence of favorable territorial preconditions for the development of rural tourism. Its contactability has international character and is based on the existing connections with the Republic of Albania. Given that the population structure of SWPR also includes Albanian population, the region is favorable in terms of possible visits by tourists from Albania. The region is characterized by a relatively good level of accessibility and connectivity. This opens up opportunities for developing transit - tourism elements. The polyvalence of the region is emphasized by the possibilities for including the many mountain villages in rural tourism activities and contents. This can significantly enrich the content of tourists' stay. Given the fact that rural tourism is closely linked to the landscape of a particular area, mountain activities are especially important for its development. Especially attractive are rural areas in mountainous regions. It should be pointed out that the South-west Planning Region has interesting mountain areas that can be used for such purposes. Another significant potential for future development are ski tourism activities. Such activities can be a significant complementary content for combining with rural tourism during the winter months. Forests are an important element of an attractive rural tourism offer. The valley areas are being used for many agricultural activities which can represent a significant potential. The total agricultural area in the region measures 133619 ha which is 10.58% of the total surface area of the country. Arable land amounts to 50029 ha, which accounts for 37.4% of the total agricultural land (plough fields and gardens are dominant with a share of 79.6%). There are also excellent conditions for the development and improvement of livestock breeding (pastures as non-arable land cover 62.6% of the total agricultural area of the SWPR) (Risteski & Kocevski, 2018).

The geological structure of the SWPR is interesting in the sense of gorges and canyons. There also exist caves and pits in the region but most of them are not accessible. An interesting post-volcanic landform of the type of sulfatara and mofette exists as well (Duvalo in the village of Kosel). It is a unique landform in the country and in the Balkans and therefore it can be

used as an attractive complementary category in the rural tourism content, primarily in the form of educational and geo-tourism activities.

In addition to geological values, SWPR is also rich in hydrography (springs, rivers and lakes). There are several natural and artificial lakes present in the region. Lake Ohrid is the most significant natural potential (domestically and abroad). It is an essential factor for tourism development on which a large number of other complementary natural and cultural values related to rural tourism can be combined. Rural tourism is interlinked to fishing and hunting. This allows the combining of these activities with gastronomy. Gastronomy is an integral part of creating rural based tourism activities (Kocevski & Risteski, 2010).

A total of 182 accommodation facilities and 16304 available rooms are registered in the region. In particular, the Municipality of Ohrid is characterized by the highest number of accommodation facilities at the state level. Accommodation in rural areas is the basis for the development of rural tourism. In that sense, there exists the potential for accommodation in the villages of Izhishte, Osoj, Izvor, Manastirec, and Knezhino. Vevchani as a solely rural municipality shows the highest potentials for accommodation. There are several hospitality facilities in Struga that provide accommodation services in rural areas such as the villages of Gorna Belica, Radozhda, Kalishta, Elen Kamen, Lokov. A total of 111 categorized buildings and 182 houses with the possibility to accommodate tourists exist in Struga. There are numerous private accommodation facilities in Ohrid (3539 units) with 8472 available beds. In the rural areas of Ohrid there is also a significant potential for accommodation: Racha - 178 units with 409 beds, St. Stefan – 77 units with 163 beds, Konjsko - 237 units with 543 beds, Lagadin - 165 units with 360 beds, Eleshec - 58 units with 136 beds, Elshani - 12 units with 44 beds, Peshtani - 554 units with 1314 beds, Trpejca - 210 units with 505 beds, Ljubanishta - 62 units with 143 beds, Velestovo - 6 units with 16 beds. It must be emphasized that proper categorization of accommodation facilities in private households is required. Based on such data it can be concluded that there is a high number of facilities that could be put in function of the development of rural tourism.

Analysis of the demand for rural tourism

Tourism supply and demand are important indicators for determining the situation on tourism markets. It provides a realistic look into the needs for creating new and attractive tourist contents. Such contents should meet the requirements of both the tourist supply, as well as the tourist demand. This will allow for an increase in the destination's competitiveness (Risteski et

al., 2012). For the purposes of conducting the analysis of the demand for rural tourism, field research findings were used. A questionnaire of a relatively large research sample of 1165 respondents was used as part of the conducted research *Study on the Provision of data in the field of tourism and preparation of a model for projection of future indicators* (Andreiski, 2017). The research sample consisted of domestic and foreign tourists who were questioned during their visit to the different planning regions of R.N. Macedonia in 2017. The gained results from the questionnaire regarding the question about the degree of tourists' level of satisfaction from gastronomic presentation (food and wine) are provided below (Table 2). Gastronomic values are an important and integral part of the tourist experience included in the rural tourism offer. The results are presented in the table below.

Table 2. Importance of gastronomy presentation as part of the tourist offer (food and wine)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Poor	6	.5	.5	.5
Fair	17	1.5	1.5	2.0
Good	72	6.2	6.3	8.3
Very good	359	30.8	31.3	39.6
Excellent	693	59.5	60.4	100.0
Total	1147	98.5	100.0	
Missing System	18	1.5		
Total	1165	100.0		

From the table above it can be concluded that a total of 1147 respondents gave answers out of the total 1165, which provided sufficient relevant data. It can be noted that more than half of the respondents gave the highest grade (grades 5) about the degree of their satisfaction from the presentation of gastronomic values. More precisely, 60.4% responded that the presentation of such values was "excellent". In second place came the answers about a "very good" gastronomy presentation (grade 4), i.e. 31.3% of the respondents. This means that over 90% of respondents provided highest grades (4 and 5). A cross-tabulation was also conducted for this question (Andreiski, 2017). The first was a cross-tabulation for the ages of respondents who were divided into three groups (till 30 years of age, 31-55, and above 55). The respondents that were less than 30 years old responded that they were very satisfied with the presentation of such values and rated

them as excellent (just over 62%). In the middle aged group (aged between 31 and 55), the percentage share that gave the highest score was almost the same as the previous group, only slightly less (59.7%). From the oldest group of respondents (over 55 years of age), who represented the bulk of the research sample, 62.6% answered with “excellent”. The second cross-tabulation examined domestic and foreign tourists. In this sense, domestic tourists showed somewhat greater interest in the quality of the presentation of gastronomic values, as opposed to foreign tourists. The analysis showed that as many as 99 % of the domestic tourists provided the highest grades for the gastronomy presentation (grades 4 and 5). On the other hand, 91.6% of foreign tourists gave such answers. This shows a great interest by tourists for the presentation of gastronomic values and its importance in the overall level of satisfaction.

It can be concluded that in RN Macedonia and SWPR there are good preconditions for including these values in the future tourist offer, especially in rural tourism, where gastronomic specialties are the main inevitable elements of the offer.

Proposed contents for rural tourism development from the research findings

The findings in the project allowed the expert team to propose areas for development including contents related to rural tourism. In this sense, proposed were new areas that have the potential for adapting to rural tourism development (Table 3), but also existing areas with potential for expanding and reequipping of their current offer that will meet the needs of rural tourists (Table 4). These two types of proposed areas arose from the field research, the questionnaire, as well as interviews with different stakeholders in the region. Below are the proposed areas in the SWPR.

Table 3. Defined new area in the SWPR with the potential for adapting to rural tourism

Area	Features and possibilities
Malesija (Struga)	Visiting typical flatland villages, consuming gastronomic specialties, selling indigenous products, outdoor and nature-based activities

Table 4. Defined existing area in the SWPR with the potential for expanding and reequipping

Area	Features and possibilities
Kosel,	Volcanic visits (Duvalo-Kosel), eco-center and accommodation in

Openica, Rechica, Kuratica, Skrebatno, Zavoj (Ohrid)	rural settings (Openica) visiting valavici (Rechica), accommodation in private households, mountain-based and winter sports activities, visiting the annual carnival and ethno restaurants, traditional architecture (Kuratica). Excursion areas with outdoor activities, camping and picnics (Skrebatno)
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These two areas should be developed in the forthcoming period. This means that concrete results of rural tourism development are being expected in the SWPR. Thus, the local population will have more job opportunities. Rural tourism is an important tool for economic and social reviving of the region, given the fact that the rural areas are facing problems of depopulation, mostly the young population is emigrating abroad.

Conclusion

This paper has not only theoretical, but also practical implications. The SWPR is the touristically most developed region in the R.N. Macedonia. However, the bulk of tourism development is based on lake-based activities and cultural tourism, namely in the two municipalities of Ohrid and Struga. This shows an uneven level of development in the regional sense. That is why alternative tourism types, such as rural tourism, are explored in this paper. The situation analysis and the analysis of the demand for rural tourism contents, such as gastronomic values, show that the SWPR has great possibilities for developing a wider tourist offer. This paper also presents two proposed areas with concrete elements that can easily be included in the future tourist offer. This in turn will lead to an intensified economic and social development in the region. The approaches used in this paper can be used by other similar spatial units for developing rural tourism.

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