

Youngsters' opinions with regard to the ecotourism Potential in Arges County

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Abstract:

The Romanian ecotourism development from the concept point of view, in relation with the multitude of natural protected areas and vivid traditions and customs, the coordination of the marketing efforts starting with the analysis of the youngsters' knowledge and preferences connected with the competitive advantages of each area, has become prerequisite for the tourism development strategy. To this aim, Arges County was analysed by means of a quantitative research, focusing on identifying youngsters' opinions with regard to ecotourism in terms of ecology, ecotourism holidays characteristics, in general, and to the practice of the respective tourism type in the studied destination, considering the necessary criteria.

Key words: ecotourism, opinions, the Arges County, tourism potential.

Introduction

Defined by the Ecotourism International Society as “a responsible travel in natural areas which preserves environment and supports local population welfare”, ecotourism can be transposed into a tourism product, respecting the elements of identity consolidation, such as the one that refers to the sustainable use of resources in the ecotourism destinations, and the one regarding the potential tourists' attitude, with a direct reference to destination development. The elements could be: the nature - the essence of the product, some ecological management processes (for a minimal impact), those referring to the contribution in the preservation and welfare of the local communities, and last but not least, the ecological education – the element responsible for the “continuity” of the entire ecotourism development process.

As ecotourism represents a type of tourism strongly connected with a large variety of resources and, implicitly, types of tourism (perhaps the most important with reference to the sustainable tourism through “education”, its central concept), it becomes critical to identify the conceptual connection among them, in order to test their compatibility with regard to the potential consumers' demands. Such a type of tourism is also considered the active tourism, as it includes various components, having nature as the central element (very much developed with ecotourism), with reference to sports activities, such as rafting, equestrian tourism, biking, and hiking in approved areas respecting ecotourism principles. Also, a type of tourism related to nature, to flora and fauna potential, can be successfully developed with ecotourism, focused on observing plants and fauna characteristics (without any interference or influence in their nourishing way), focused on the way nature develops its own system of preservation and recovery, as important parts of this type of tourism. In terms of cultural resources, ecotourism can be harmoniously developed by visits paid to the local communities, by studying the cultural, material and immaterial elements, thus implying visitors in the community life.

Operational background

Giving a more concrete dimension to ecotourism in the microdestination Arges County, in other words, delimiting its ecotourism resources from the resources of a macrodestination, means to enlighten the competitive advantages of Romania, from the ecotourism point of view, among which: the five biogeographical regions resulting from the geographical position of Romania (the alpine, continental, panonic, steppe, pontic regions, a unique combination at the European level), with altitudes over 2,500m of the Carpathians which create an outstanding natural landscape, with a European well-known network of national natural parks due to their natural and cultural patrimony, with the Danube Delta and the Black Sea coast. Thus, in Arges County there is an alpine biogeographic and continental region, actually the Carpathians, including the protected areas up to the level of the national park, a fact that determines types of tourism which could be practiced in a direct relation to ecotourism, respectively tourism activities, later analyzed within the marketing research. In terms of ecotourism, Arges County boasts with its rich and varied supply, defined by the mountains and sub-Carpathian areas, as its

main relief forms. The detailed description is an argument to the “ecotourism certification”. Thus, the mountain area of the county is dominated by the Făgăraș Mountains (a protected natural area mentioned in Nature 2000); inside the massif there are other protected areas such as Vâlsan Valley, the Buda Lake, the Piscul Negru Cave, the Făgăraș Mountains Alpin Abysm, together with other important areas such as Piatra Craiului and Leaota Mountains (a protected natural area mentioned in Natura 2000). The sub-Carpathians are “dominated” by tourism destinations, which are located nearby Câmpulung Muscel, the most well-known ones being Arefu (the Arges Valley), Brăduleț (the Vâlsan Valley) and Corbi (The Doamnei Valley).

The main type of tourism in direct connection with ecotourism, of importance to building ecotourism products, which are thus analyzed, are the active tourism, which can be practiced in the upper areas of the Dâmbovița Valley and Brusturețul Valley on the forest roads available in the region (for instance the hiking in the Făgăraș and Piatra Craiului Mountains border lines, on marked and approved routes according to the national legislation, down-climbing to rivers (The Dâmbovița Valley, down of Rucăr, speleotourism in the South-East of the Piatra Craiului national park, tourism related to nature (mostly referred to flora and fauna observation) which can be practiced in the Piatra Craiului national park (for instance the endemic Garofita Pietrei Craiului flower) and the impressive number of big carnivores); the visit of the local communities of Arefu and Rucăr, both of them in connection with the Muscel ethnographic area mentioned since the 19-th century. It is worth mentioning the two microdestinations of Arefu and Rucăr, which allow practicing active tourism (biking, hiking etc.) in the component villages. In the vicinity of the two villages, the little dingle in the Corbi commune it is well-known mostly for the Corbii de Piatră convent - a partially cave monument, unique in Romania not only through its architecture, but also through the religious message it unveils to visitors.

Method

The research aimed at identifying youngsters’ opinion on ecotourism, focusing on the opinion about ecology, on the characteristics of an ecotourism vacation, in general, by analyzing, at the same time, the possibility to practice such a type of tourism in Arges, the studied destination. The main elements of an ecological living were identified, according to the respondents, together with some components of the buying behavior of ecological products, as well as the opinion about the ecotourism potential of Arges County; the research had a quantitative, descriptive character, based on a sample of 166 persons between 18-24 years, of which 74.7% females and 25.3% males. 34.3% were from Muntenia region, 36.1% were from Bucharest, 12.7% from Moldova and 16% from other regions of Romania (Dobrogea, Transilvania, Bucovina, Oltenia), the most of them having lower incomes than 1,000 lei (57.8%) – (*Questionnaires were filled up by the Master students of the Faculties of Marketing and Commerce of the Academy of Economics of Bucharest, and by the students of the Faculty of Entrepreneurship, Engineering and Business Management of the “Politechnical” University of Bucharest, in 2012/2013, whom we thank on this occasion*).

Results

Evaluating the tourist potential of Arges County from the respondents’ point of view, in terms of the ecotourism destination, the respondents’ way of life had to be analysed, considering ecology and its principles. The most important feature of the ecological products, as seen by the youngsters, focuses on the natural products of the conventional agriculture (Table 1), 47.6% marking them by 5 (on the scale from 1 to 5), considering their way of living. Products manufactured without pollutant technology and unmodified/chemically synthetic products are the ecological products which very little reflect the respondents’ way of living, the scores from 1 to 3 reaching 40% of the answers. As the way of living is an extremely important factor for an ecotourism holiday (according to the principles of this type of tourism), the way in which the ecological products are consumed or relevant to the respondents’ way of living is an important criterion to determine the dimension of the target segment of youngsters, in order to build ecotourism products.

Table 1. The extent of relevance of the ecological products features in the respondents’ life style

	Manufactured without pollutant technology	Unmodified/chemically synthetic	Obtained from plants and organic ingredients	Natural, from conventional agriculture	With a minimum pollution risk on environment
1	2.4	3.0	3.0	1.2	1.8
2	11.4	16.3	5.4	1.8	10.2
3	28.9	22.3	21.1	13.9	24.7
4	30.7	25.9	40.4	32.5	31.3
5	24.7	30.1	27.1	47.6	29.5
No answers	1.8	2.4	3.0	3.0	2.4

Scale: from 1 to 5 ;, 1- very low relevance; 5- very high relevance.

Source: statistical survey of the authors.

The frequency of the ecological products (Fig. 1) is also important, for it can show the habits of using ecological products, which could later ease the choice of ecotourism destinations. At the same time, the ecotourism holidays provide complex products, involving not only the consumption of some services, but also the tourists' attitude which is essential. Yet, only 26.7% of the respondents use ecological products everyday, while most of them (58.2%) would seldom use them.

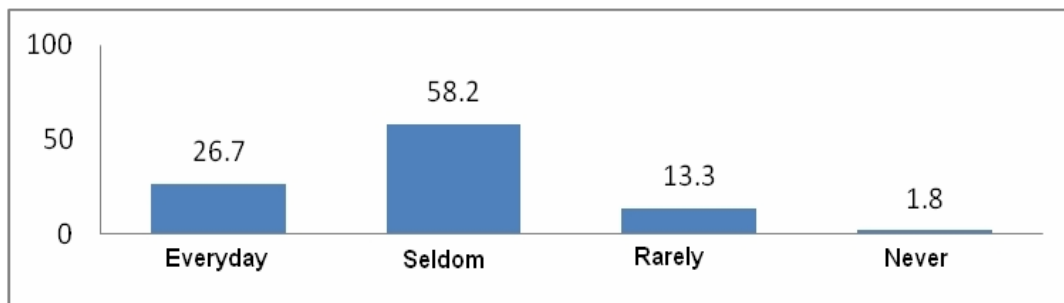


Fig. 1 The frequency of ecological products consumption

Referring to the type of ecological products, the mostly used ecological products are the alimentary ones (38.0%) - Fig.2; given the natural products relevance, from the conventional agriculture, that may show a higher probability of the respondents' preference for the local agricultural products in the real consumption, a part of the ecotourism product. Also, hygiene cosmetics are significantly used (23%), a fact that can be the premises to enlist them in the future ecotourism products structure.

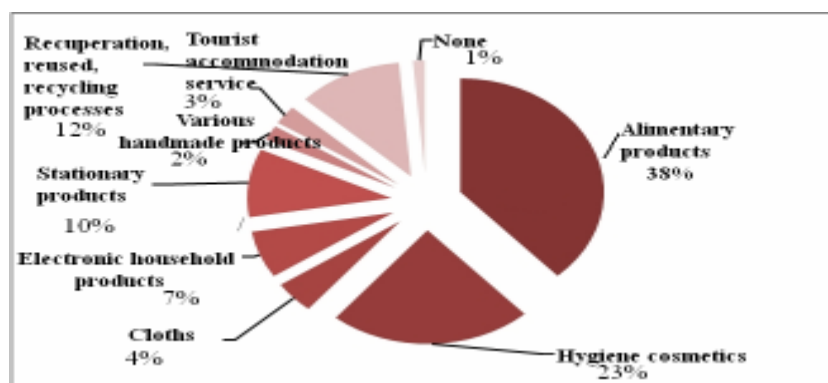


Fig. 2 Ecological products/services used

The complex significance of ecotourism is founded on tourists' proactive attitude, on two important directions, namely nature on one side and the local community on the other side. Thus, the respondents were considered in relation to ecotourism, an issue regarding its degree of understanding, in view of building the communication strategy. 33% of the respondents associate ecotourism with "nature based tourism" (fig.3), while 30% associate it with "a responsible attitude". Involving local community is considered associated to ecotourism in a lower percentage (15%), which indicates the need for focusing on local products importance and on encouraging preservation of local culture by means of ecotourism products consumption.

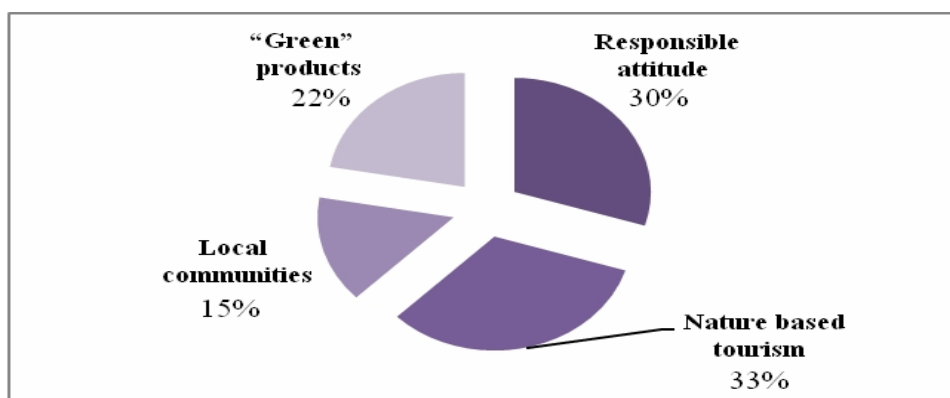


Fig. 3 Associating ecotourism with specific notions

Among the activities the respondents would like to practice during their holidays, 60.8% involved visiting parks, other 49.4% (fig.4) nature oriented activities, while 44.6% referred to exploring wild life and cultural and historical activities. Nevertheless, there is a real need for developing ecotourism, considering that the most important activity the respondents mentioned referred to ecotourism, a nature and culture based tourism, which showed a responsible tourists' attitude.

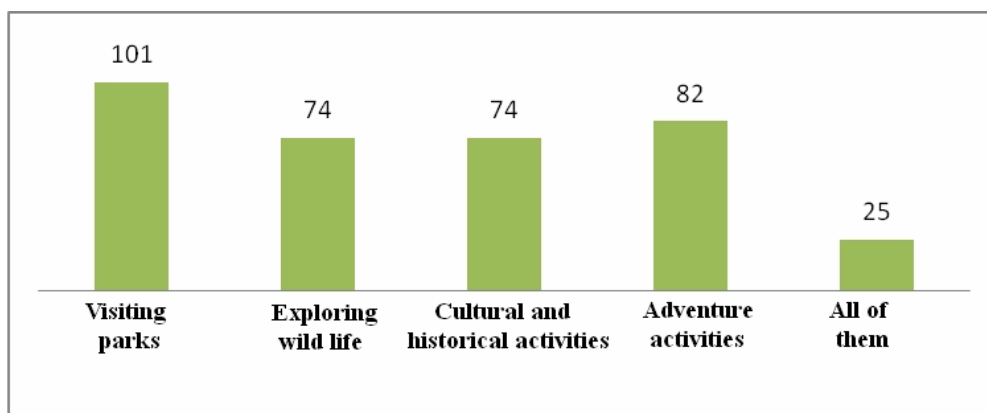


Fig.4 Activities respondents would like to practice

Development is all the more necessary, as not only the tourists' preferences show a high degree of compatibility among the wished activities and ecotourism practicing, but also the real intention of buying a tourism product; thus, 34.9% would much like an ecotourism holiday (fig.5), while 16.3% would very much like that. The fact that only 2.4% would prefer an ecotourism vacation, can indicate a considerable openness to a future consumption of ecotourism products as well as to the lifestyle it provides.

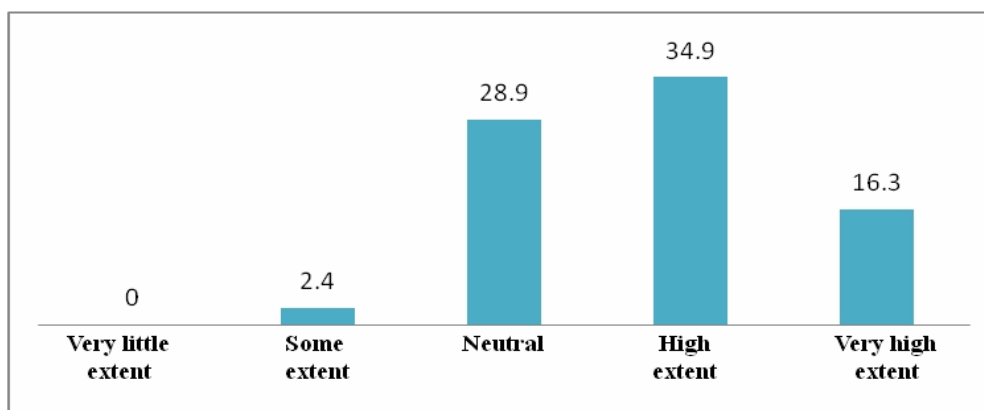


Fig. 5 Respondents' wish for an ecotourism vacation

Given the fact that tourism products have an ever high degree of complexity, and practicing only one, single form is less probable during vacation time, the next research target referred to practicing ecotourism in parallel with other tourism forms, to create more complex tourism products. The respondents considered that ecotourism can be successfully practiced in a parallel way, with relaxation tourism (49.4% marking 5 to this combination on a scale from 1 to 5), with rural tourism (43.4%) and with balneotherapy tourism (30.1%) – Table 2. There are possibilities to practice such adjacent types of tourism in the Arges County, at Curtea de Arges – for relaxation tourism, at Nămăiești village, with its 16-th century cave convent - for rural tourism and at Câmpulung and Bughea resorts - for balneotherapy tourism with climate therapy, mineral waters treatment and physiotherapy. The mentioned destinations show that Arges County owns a lot of assets to enrich the ecotourism product. To create such complex products, some combinations among tourism forms to be practiced in Arges County were tested. 73 respondents chose the combination ecotourism-cultural tourism-relaxation tourism as the right one, of which 52.1% considered it the most representative one and classed it first. The next representative combination was ecotourism-balneotherapy tourism-relaxation tourism, chosen by 58 respondents, of which 31.0% classed it first.

Table 2 The respondents' opinion on how ecotourism can be successfully practiced in parallel with other types of tourism

	Rural tourism	Cultural tourism	Balneotherapy tourism	Sports activities tourism	Relaxation tourism
1	4.2	1.8	2.4	4.8	1.2
2	8.4	9.0	8.4	10.8	5.4
3	14.5	27.1	27.7	32.5	15.1
4	28.3	36.7	29.5	28.3	26.5
5	43.4	24.1	30.1	21.7	49.4
No answers	1.2	1.2	1.8	1.8	2.4

Scale: from 1 to 5; 1- very low relevance; 5- very high relevance.

Source: statistical survey of the authors.

The previous experience in the analysed destination – Arges County (with three of the analysed towns - Curtea de Arges, Câmpulung Muscel, Rucăr), also play an important part, in both expectations and the respective opinions. In the case of the mostly visited micro destination - Curtea de Arges - the most important visiting reasons were the cultural activities (48.2%), followed by relaxation (12.4%).

As for Câmpulung Muscel (another important microdestination of the county), other reasons were invoked (most probably visits to relatives and friends) - 11% and relaxation (8.8%), most of respondents (66.9%) not having ever visited the microdestination.

The relaxation reasons (29.9%) represent the main visiting reason for Rucăr. Relaxation tourism, the main youngsters' motivation for Arges County is part of the most representative combinations which have ecotourism as a component (ecotourism-cultural tourism-relaxation tourism and ecotourism-balneotherapy tourism-relaxation tourism), a fact that might have positive consequences for practicing ecotourism as an “associated” and “correspondent” type of tourism.

Table 3 Visiting reasons of the destinations in Arges County

	Total sample	Curtea de Arges	Total sample	Câmpulung Muscel	Total sample	Rucăr
<i>Respondents</i>	137		137		137	
Medical reasons	2	1.5	4	2.9	2	1.5
Relaxation reasons	17	12.4	12	8.8	41	29.9
Cultural activities	66	48.2	10	7.4	15	10.9
Active tourism/sports activities	3	2.2	2	1.5	4	2.9
Other activities	6	4.4	15	11.0	9	6.6
No interest	1	0.7	2	1.5	2	1.5
Did not visit	42	30.7	91	66.9	64	46.7
No answer	0	0	1	0.7	0	0

Source: statistical survey of the authors

In the issue of practicing ecotourism, not only the potential consumers' opinions are important, but also finding those ecotourism components in which this type of tourism can be developed in the chosen destination; the fact that no component taken into account (roads and modern means of transport, accommodation observing ecological principles, traditional and/or ecological products, various traditional local events, cultural elements in the tourism activity, traditional local culture) registered scores higher than 7.8 (on a scale from 1 to 10) in the considered destinations would indicate a certain degree of perception of the Arges County as a limited ecotourism destination; thus, marketing specialists should focus on identifying the destination assets from the ecotourism perspective, and afterwards communicating them the targeted consumer segments.

The ecotourism component, mostly identified by the respondents in Arges County, is the one related to traditional and/or ecological (with scores over 7 in the case of the 3 microdestinations) and the presence of the cultural elements in the tourism activity (with scores over 6.7 in the case of the 3 microdestinations).

These two elements, introduced in the marketing strategy of Arges County with regard to ecotourism, has the highest probability to become relevant to the public in the issue of Arges County.

Table 4 Respondents' opinions on ecotourism components in the chosen destinations of the Arges County

	Curtea de Arges	Câmpulung Muscel	Rucăr
Roads and modern means of transport	5.7	5.3	0
Accommodation according to ecological principles	6.0	6.0	6.5
Traditional and/or ecological products	7.0	7.1	7.8
Various traditional local events	6.9	7.2	7.4
Cultural elements in the tourist activity	7.5	6.7	7.4
Traditional local culture	7.5	7.2	7.6

Source: statistical survey of the authors

The potential of Arges County, as considered by the respondents, has an important cultural component (69%), followed by the natural one (14%), these being, in terms of resources, important premises to the development of ecotourism in this destination (fig.6). The significant share of the rural tourism resources (10%) - in Nămăiești, Gruiu and Nucsoara microdestinations - motivates their presence in the structure of the ecotourism profile tourism products, significantly contributing to the preservation of customs and traditions of the region.

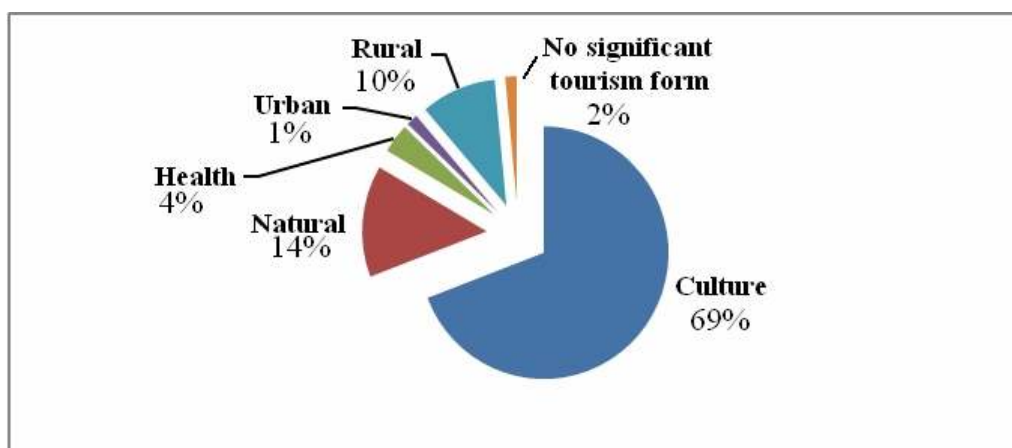


Fig 6 Arges County tourism potential

The protected areas in Arges County, the very well recognized by the respondents, are the national parks - 26% (a fact explained by the existence of a part of the Piatra Craiului National Park in Arges County area, a well-known park for the sports activities practiced there). It is worth mentioning the natural reservations (22%) - among which the numulythic limestone and the granite of Albesti, Lacul Galben, Jgheburoasa and Zârna. These locations, with a direct reference to ecology principles, according to the interest, and also, partly to the degree of acknowledgement, can support the development of ecotourism in Arges County, the efforts being mainly concentrated in the respondents' opinion, towards preservation of the natural environment (37,5% of the answers, that is 51 respondents) - Figure 7.

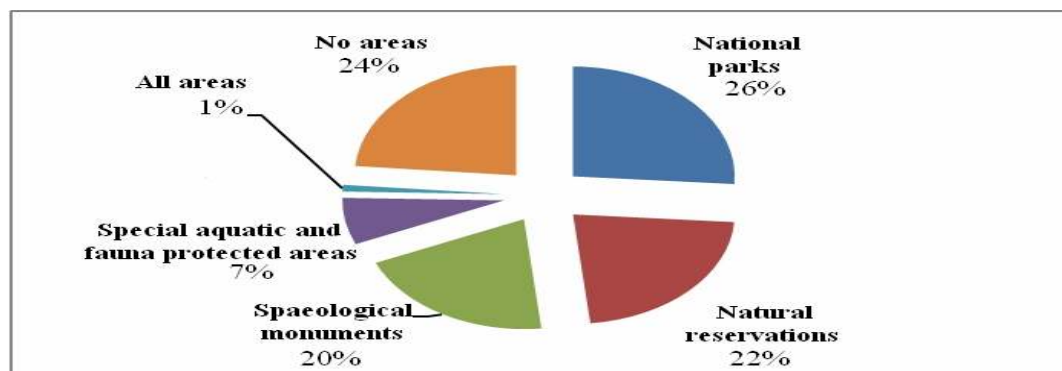


Fig 7 Awareness on Arges County protected areas

Associated with the protected areas, the mostly well-known touristic itineraries mentioned by respondents (of which 54.2% referred to at least one) are Dâmbovicioara Commune - Grindu Shelter (27.75%),

Voina Chalet - the Dâmbovița Valley (16.9%), Arefu Commune - the Negoiu Peak (13.3%), Leresti Commune - Nămăiești Village (10.85), Piscu Negru Chalet - the Paltinu Mountain (6.6%). Encouraging ecotourism development along these itineraries could add another value to the area, both by supplementing tourism activities with a new type of tourism, as well as by protecting the present cultural and natural resources.

With a view to the area of cultural resources, mainly architectural elements (Table 5), the research indicated that the three analyzed destinations (Curtea de Arges, Câmpulung Muscel and Rucăr) boast of area specific architecture (48.7% of 117 respondents for Curtea de Arges, 39.1% of 87 for Câmpulung Muscel, and 57.1% of 98 for Rucăr), the other style the respondents could recognize being the Romanian one. The fact that architecture is thought to be an element of the area specific character, could encourage “nominating” and “maximizing” other cultural resources, both tangible and intangible, such as historical monuments, architectural, cultural and spiritual sites preservation, to obtaining a score of 4.86 (on the scale from 1 to 10) in terms of involving Arges County (followed by the awareness of the importance to maximize nature and local culture - 4.21).

Table 5 Finding architectural elements in Arges County destinations

	Total sample	Curtea de Arges	Total sample	Câmpulung Muscel	Total Esantion	Rucăr
<i>Respondents</i>	117		87		98	
Local specific character	57	48.7	34	39.1	56	57.1
Romanian specific character	34	29.1	31	35.6	27	27.6
Urban	8	6.8	9	10.3	6	6.1
Classic	9	7.7	5	5.7	5	5.1
No identified style	9	7.7	8	9.2	4	4.1

Source: statistical survey of the authors

On the issue of the most representative accommodation services for ecotourism, the respondents firstly considered the agrotourism pensions (49.6%), chalets (21.6%), camping sites (18.7%), local private households (2.2%), while hotels were the last on the preference list.

Local products are an important factor to ecotourism development, contributing directly to the development of local communities, whose efforts should be focused in this direction; 81.3% of the respondents mentioned at least one local product, 59.6% considered the Topoloveni plum jam as the best-known product, the Brădet pressed cheese (26.5%), the Costesti fresh cow cheese and the Bradu sour milk (12.0%), the Brătia cottage cheese (10.2%), the Bascov Leberwurst (7.2%).

The territorial location of the cultural resources in Arges County is relatively uniform (Figure 8), the best-known being the churches, convents and monasteries (36%), especially the Curtea de Arges and Cotmeana monasteries, as well as Brădetu convent. Combining the visits to these locations which belong to the local cultural asset with the natural environment can represent, as well, a background to new ecological-profile tourism products.

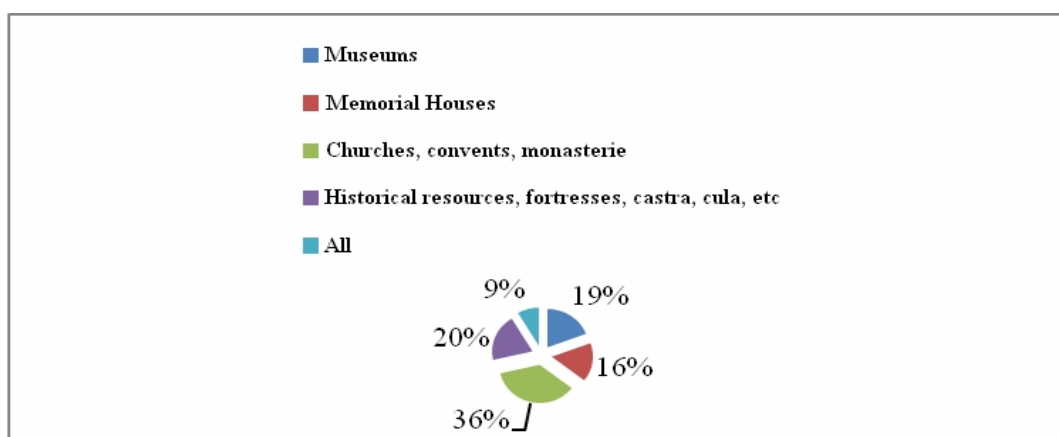


Fig. 8 Cultural resources in Arges County, by respondents

Of the Arges County festivals, a mean of “concentrating” local culture, the most important for 54.8% respondents are the Tulip Symphony (25.3%), a symbol of Pitesti, Dracula Fest, and the International Festival of

History (21.1%); yet, the festivals which are based on local craft traditions, are not significantly popular (for instance the Brăduleț Pressed Cheese Festival - 6.6%, the Bottom Drawer Treasure - 3.6% or the Arefean Social - 3.0%. On the county's great personalities issue, the respondents referred to I.C. Brătianu (56.6%), Ion Barbu (48.8%), Ion Antonescu (31.3%), Dumitru Brătianu (29.5%), and Theodor Aman (16.3%).

Limits

Considering the rapid development of the ecotourism market, the marketing research works on various market segments opinions are critical for founding marketing strategies, according to the area identity, and the potential consumers profile. Thus, the present work should be enlarged to other destinations and regions in Romania, as to other segments of potential tourists, attracted to this tourism form or belonging to other age categories.

Conclusions

On ecotourism issue, the paper provided an important, multisided, scientific approach, not only by including all its component elements - like nature and culture- which are major to the development of this tourism form inside "normal parameters", also considering other types of tourism which can be practiced in Arges County, the studied destination. As ecotourism has a rather "restrictive character, combining it with different other types of tourism may raise multiple nonconcordances, leading to negative consequences in relation to environment and local communities.

Building mixed, complex products need planned actions, in a "controlled" background, in which the potential tourists' opinions should be the ground to considering tourism products, together with the objective criteria in terms of natural and cultural environment protection.

With regard to the high degree of cultural knowledge in Argss County, it is critical to maximize the architectural elements, the local products, festivals, and the most representative personalities inside the nature framework (necessary for an ecotourism experience), as well as additional elements, associated to relaxation and balneotherapy tourism.

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