

Rural Tourism and Territorial Development for Sustainable Development

The Example of Aubrac (in the South of the Massif Central, France)

Olivier Dehoorne

GEODE - University Antilles-Guyane
Faculte des Lettres et Sciences Humaines.
French, West Indies

Corina Criste & Alexandru Ilies

Dept. of Geography, Tourism and Territorial Planning
University of Oradea, Roumania

Abstract: From the example of Aubrac Mountain, we set a discussion paper about the conditions and the issues of tourism development in Europeans rural areas, and especially mid-mountains.

Aubrac Mountain has been the object of major studies since the 1960's. Marked by a long period of rural exodus, it has been a significant example of the rural crisis, which seemed to condemn more enclosed rural spaces. Three decades later, this region is making a comeback in the media. Yesterday's attitudes have been forgotten and the region's remarkable strengths are being widely praised, making it a model for other rural sectors in difficulty.

The reasons for the area's success stem from the combination of three elements: tourism, migration of French citizens (with a reversal of the flow) and local development. The current dynamism seems to be carried by tourism. Aubrac, with its countryside of broad summer pastures and its excellent environment is benefiting from the popularity of green tourism and the search for "authenticity" in rural areas with strong identities. Tourism development is accompanied by resurgence in locally made products, such as flatware and cheese. Gastronomy and the restaurant industry in general are solidifying the region's reputation. Beyond satisfying tourism consumption, production in these industries is intensifying in order to reach urban clientele as well.

The role of tourism seems therefore to be essential to the understanding of the renewal in Aubrac Mountain. It has paved the way for this new dynamic based on a close-knit and determined local society, supported by its emigrants living in the capital city throughout the 20th century.

The lessons from the Aubrac's case allow wondering about necessary conditions for sustainable development.

Keywords: Rural tourism, sustainable development, Aubrac mountain, local development.

Introduction

The subject of this treatise is tourism and its insertion into rural spaces in developed countries. Today, rural tourism, or green tourism, is receiving much more attention. In addition to the increasing number of tourist activities, the countryside offers specific advantages sought after by urban clienteles. While unable to compete with major vacation destinations, the countryside is

increasingly acting as a complement to such places, particularly with an increase in brief trips.

Of course, all parts of the countryside do not share the same assets. We must distinguish between three different categories of rural spaces. Firstly, intensive agricultural regions (with mono-cultural landscape of agribusiness), which are not affected by the renewed interest in, green tourism. Secondly, "rural-urban fringe" where urban settlement and agricultural products are getting muddled up in the landscapes. And thirdly peripheral region characterized by enclosing situation (of course relative inclosing with regard to the past time). Here no advantage of the proximity effect and agricultural incomes stay modest in this kind of rural areas often symbolic of the "rural crisis" (Beteille 1996). Our present interest concerns peripheral rural areas, more poor, often forgotten by agro-business issues because of their numerous handicaps (far from urban centers, major trunk roads, with mountainous obstacles) like the case of the French mountain of Aubrac. The difficulties currently being encountered in the development and remuneration of agriculture mean that close attention is being paid to tourism, but the deterioration of natural resources and the environment is a serious handicap. This situation can be offset by a good amount of sunshine in southern regions; however, in general, it creates problems, which will considerably slow the progress of tourism in these sectors.

Conversely, areas of the countryside marginalized by the modernization of agriculture and the rush towards productivism now have the chance to become interesting sites for the development of recreation in the country. The quality of the scenery and the environment will also constitute new assets.

In this context, a tourism sector that is closer to nature and to local communities is being progressively implemented, creating the potential for sustainable development.

I. A New Context for Rural Tourism

A. Challenges

Tourism is a vital activity in France. The nation occupies a privileged position with more than 70 million foreign tourists - that is equal to 10.5% of worldwide tourist arrivals. And the current economic situation is favorable for tourism. And during the international instabilities, old European destinations, like France, with more safety, are at an advantage compared with new destinations more unstable -for example in the context of international war, the German tourists choose more easily the French country, less reputable, rather than Turkish stations.

Even if influx of tourists is important in France, the distribution of the tourists is very unequal. Globally, the countryside is not a destination chosen by many tourists. Far from Paris, Mediterranean coast, receives only 28% of overnight stays (i.e., a total of almost 400 million overnight stays out of 1 450 billion) and 22% of spending (for total sales of 320 billion), in a space that occupies 80% of the national territory. But new opportunities are very essential for the countryside. Tourism is a vital activity in France. The country occupies a privileged position with more

The countryside presents a variety of situation. The rural areas are far from being homogenous. Several criteria must be taken into account like uneven distribution of natural, cultural and heritage assets, various degrees of intensity in agriculture and the resulting impact on the environment, location in relation to issuing centers, quality of service roads. Without forget the specific policies in the various communities (regions, departments, other groups on a local level) and the quality and originality of local initiatives. All rural spaces are in direct competition; their main common interest is the attention being brought to tourism today. Faced with agricultural and demographic crises, rural areas are searching for new activities. Everyone believes that tourism will be the easy solution.

B. The Young History of Rural Tourism in France

The chaotic evolution of rural tourism can be divided into four successive stages (Dehoorne 1998). Prior to 1960, rural tourism was spontaneous and disorganized. Recreation and tourism mostly consisted of returning former residents and their children. They would spend their summer vacations in the areas where they grew up. Visits were therefore very widely scattered. Some larger tourist flows occurred at the most well-known sites, such as Conques, the Gorges du Tarn and the Roquefort cellars. At the time, tourism was an *informal activity*, characterized by gathering.

As of the 1960s, the first investments began in green tourism. Local initiatives led to interesting innovations, such as "*unusual vacations*," during which vacationers stayed in the country while learning a manual activity. A young man from Aveyron with a passion for sculpting has been credited with this initiative; he received his first vacationer-apprentices in his village of Peyrusse-le-Roc in the summer of 1965. In 1968, people began to go "*camping on the farm*," where a farmer would provide visitors with some fairly rudimentary facilities. These were also the first networks of bed-and-breakfasts, with varying terms according to the regions. During this period, the main goals were to *restore rural heritage*, which was being abandoned (due to a particularly large rural exodus), and the desire to *create summer activities*.

Receiving vacationers filled a need for contact and exchanges. Families and visitors became friends and guests. Tourism therefore met a *humanist and social need*; this activity was almost never perceived from an economic point of view.

Rural tourism was declining from 1970 to the end of the 1980s. Various experiences began to move forward. *The new priorities were exclusively related to agriculture*. Agriculture was intensifying and productivism took precedence over everything else. Farmers experienced a sharp increase in their standard of living and they had heavy loans to pay back. Therefore, in these economic conditions, the necessary investments for the development of tourism as a new economic activity were never made. Tourism was not a priority; it was not even considered to be useful: one could live without it.

The rural economy was limited to agricultural production and the revenue generated by agriculture. Investing in tourism and vacations was badly viewed. At times, cohabitation between agriculture and tourism, country residents and vacationers was not possible or even desirable. Also, during this period, city dwellers experiencing a substantial increase in their standard of living had a *tendency to denigrate the countryside* as a destination "chosen" by default, due to a lack of money. From then on, vacationers' interest was centered on coastal areas. However, some rural areas were exceptions. The best example was the Tyrol region; in French territory certain mid-mountains areas like in the south of the French Alps, few Pyrenees parts. Based on the quality of their heritage, the high amount of sunshine they receive and the development of their aquatic resources for recreational activities, they began to seriously invest in tourism and, as a result, to get a head start on the green tourism market throughout the 1980s.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, rural tourism knows a new momentum. After having experienced a certain plateau in the number of visits until the middle of the 1980s, the tourism sector began to take on *a new dimension*. Rural tourism became organized, new clienteles began to arrive and certain areas of the countryside became tourist destinations in their own right. *The year 1991* announced the revival of green tourism, even though, taken as a whole, progress in the number of visits remained moderate in the countryside, with 721 million overnight stays or 27.4% overall. The new situation corresponds to the analysis of William and Montanari about modifications of the regional distribution of tourism frequentation "in consequence of the shift from mass tourism to post-modernist tourism" (William & Montanari 1996, p.5). "Post-modernist tourist is much more evenly spread spatially, and touches almost all urban and rural areas." With less geographic polarization, with specialized holidays or "very nature-emphasizing individualistic". Some rural areas -with "traditional"

landscapes like in hedged farmland- take advantage of this new *nouvelle deal*: new opportunities appear on the horizon with alternative conceptions of tourism far from the classic dominant mode of production: mass tourism which represented a form of mass consumption.

C. Favorable Economic Conditions

Rural space has become desirable to well-informed, discriminating tourists, and has been credited with good values. It is now a choice vacation destination for new creditworthy clientele, no longer a vacation site for people with less disposable income. However, for these new clients, the countryside remains a destination that is secondary, or rather complementary to other main destinations, particularly for short stays.

These tourists are looking for:

- *Large spaces, greenery;*
- *Quality:* quality of the air, the environment, nature, but also food quality, with products from local farmers and, of course, an increasing demand for organic food.
- *"Authenticity" and friendliness.* The importance of human relationships, encounters, and the sharing of culture and know-how are increasingly critical aspects. This forms what are now being called "high touch" products. The concepts of food production don't dominate the present rurality representation in the industrialised countries.

In the same time, rural populations are showing a real interest in tourism. And this time, their expectations are clearer. More is being asked of this activity, which must become truly marketable. There are a wide variety of expectations:

1. First of all, tourism should be capable of *generating economic benefits*, both direct and indirect, fostering *job creation* and *maintaining* local trade for rural communities in difficulty.
2. Next, tourism should also become *a tool for planning land use* and *managing rural spaces*. Tourism is an activity that should participate in the revitalization and diversification of rural spaces.
3. On a local level, *the concerted effort of residents on these projects* could give rise to new dynamics. Tourism can become a *catalyst* likely to stimulate the creation of policies for local development based on territorial realities.
4. Tourism can also contribute to *improving the living environment*. For example, it allows for wider circulation of *cultural, artistic, sports-related and recreational*

practices by encouraging the undertaking of events and the setting up of facilities aimed equally at vacationers and residents.

5. Tourism is a way to contribute to better information on natural and developed heritage and better *awareness of this heritage on the part of vacationers and the local population.*
6. Finally, it is important to remember that tourism allows the *promotion and growth of the image and public awareness of an entire region.*

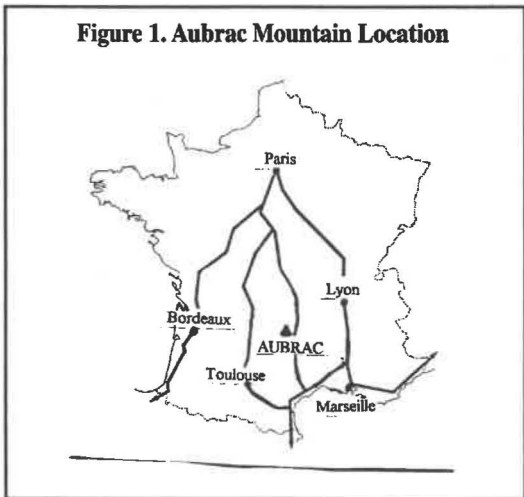
Therefore, the *economic situation* for rural tourism is *extremely positive*, with the existence of potential clientele (demand, consumer in holidays) (“positive public opinion in favor of the countryside”) and, locally, populations with expectations. So, in theory, the economic situation is favorable and all the elements are in place for the launching of a veritable tourism sector in the countryside.

II. The Example of the Aubrac Mountain

Aubrac is a symbolic region: in the 1960s, everyone predicted the worst and today its initiatives are a source of inspiration, with the region considered to be a development model.

Located in the southern part of the Massif Central, Aubrac is a volcanic highland, covering a distance of forty kilometers. This high plateau built on volcanic flow is situated between 1 000 meters and 1 400 meters at its highest points.

It is bordered by the Margeride to the east, the Truyère valley to the north and the west, and the Lot valley and the Olt region to the south.



A. Aubrac Yesterday

Our societies' perspectives on territory's potential have continued to change and evolve over time. This highland mountain is marked by poverty and a harsh climate. Up to end of the 19th century, people lost on the mountain would die from the cold. Living conditions are particularly difficult. Since between 1830 and 1850, the region has been experiencing large migrations to the capital city of Paris. These migrations are still continuing today (Beteille 1974).

However, these emigrants have always maintained ties with their home regions through associations and community networks. They worked delivering coal; they specialized in running drinking establishments, and then managed cafes and invested in the hotel industry. These hard workers have a reputation for spending nothing to invest everything. Children born in Paris would grow up on the Aubrac Mountain and at around the age of 20, they would leave to work in the capital. When they retired, they would usually divide their time between Aubrac and Paris. This region therefore experienced large population losses, between the combined effects of the rural exodus and World War I (1914-1918). The remaining populations are aging and the percentage of unmarried residents is high.

Faced with the difficult modernization of activities and growing productivism, the rural and agricultural economy had weakened (Durand 1946). In a context of intensification and the rush for production, an isolated highland region like Aubrac could not stay competitive. The local stock of Aubrac cattle was being progressively abandoned. It produced both meat and milk and its work strength was invaluable. This rustic race seemed not to have adapted to the new context. It was the basis of this economy (Marre 1904). Cheese production, which takes place in burons (small temporary houses in mountain pastures), was dropping off quickly; there were no more than 3 burons in use compared to 300 at the beginning of the century (for a total of 1200 active burons). Finally, the small handicraft cutlery business that used cattle horns had almost completely disappeared, due to a lack of modernization.

It was in this context that, in 1963, the C.N.R.S. (National Scientific Research Centre) began an in-depth study on Aubrac, the set for a "crumbling society". While "the forms of social organization [were regressing] and the entire community was threatened with death, which enabled us to foresee the dramatic demographic loss, the aging of the population, the increasing number of isolated people," Michel Roux was pondering the "chances of the success of individual initiatives within the framework of a society which is crumbling amid general resignation" (C.N.R.S. 1970).

These external perspectives brought to study the native populations with archaic methods on the way to disappearing are still in the memories of many residents who fought to prove them wrong.

B. *Aubrac's Current Revival*

Today's perspective on these spaces is no longer the same. Travel is easier; the perception of enclosed spaces is relative. Cold and snow, perceived yesterday as harsh and paralyzing to local activities, are today assets for developing a winter tourist season. But now, the complaint is a lack of snow; the amount of snow is insufficient to allow the operation of recreational facilities. Small family businesses on the highland mountain need to use artificial snow. This environment, rugged and restricting in the past, is becoming attractive for populations coming from very urbanized spaces. City dwellers look for these spaces and they are going in greater numbers, even if their presence there is limited to short stays.

Visiting city dwellers appreciate the countryside, the quality of the environment and the particular characteristics of the country.

Despite the zone's continuous depopulation, the Aubrac region has a close-knit, organized and determined community. And let's not forget the close ties with emigrants living in Paris who continue to participate in local decisions and act as links with political powers.

- *The return of the cutlery business.* Local cutlery experienced a boom between 1880 and 1930, while nonetheless remaining at the handicraft stage. It disappeared altogether in 1930. Laguiole knives were then made in the rival town of Thiers, which had semi-industrialized production. In 1981, a group of people with a passionate interest in local cutlery created an association. At that time, only one family continued to make knives in Laguiole. In 1985, a business was created with the support of the Aveyron Department and capital from former Aveyron residents (Crozes 1990, Laurens 1999). As of 1990, seventy people were working in cutlery in the borough of Laguiole; today there are approximately 150 people, with more than 20 sales points in Laguiole.
- *Within the new dynamic, the birth of a tourism sector.* Since 1985, tourist activities have been taking shape around large spaces, scenery and the quality of nature in the area (Dehoorne 1998). Aubrac is also experiencing rural tourism, based on the vernacular riches maintained by local culture. The summer pasture scenery with the herds of Aubrac cattle (Bordessoule 1994), gastronomy and Laguiole knives are all elements that make up Aubrac's tourist image. The tourism sector is supported by local people carrying out

interesting initiatives that highlight local potential and widen the range of available points of interest. In particular, they are projects developed by farmers who are increasing their exploitation, contributing to a better understanding of the agricultural world in general and in Aubrac in particular.

So, in the space of twenty years, one farmer transformed his land into a tourist destination in the country, with a hotel and restaurant, a pool, tennis courts and a golf course. A neighbour transformed part of his farm into a veritable living museum, inviting tourists to come work with him. All these people benefit directly from tourism and contribute to enriching the activity.

- *Transhumance, a media event.* Transhumance, which draws more than 30 000 visitors per day, is the culmination of the Aubrac promotion strategy. This event attracts the interest of the media, which transmit images on all the major national television stations. Local participants carry out the organization and animation. Transhumance had disappeared; herds were transported to the summer pastures in trucks, to make the process easier. The communities, concerned with maintaining their traditions and culture, revived this event without ever considering it as a tourist attraction. Very quickly, however, their celebration attracted the media and a crowd of visitors. No tourism product has been organized around this event. Visitors do not hesitate to contact the organizers so that they can accompany the farmers when the herds are brought up to the summer pastures; they leave at dawn and can easily cover 10 kilometres in a day. Knowing that they are getting closer to the pastures, the animals speed up, while the people with them are getting out of breath. These day-tripping visitors come from Bordeaux, Toulouse and sometimes Marseille. Motor homes gather around the clearings; as they go by, the cattle, decorated with flags and cowbells, are in such a hurry that they brush against the vehicles parked among the amazed visitors.

Work that was restricting and disheartening in the past has become a cultural and tourist event, which acts as a draw to bring visitors to Aubrac.

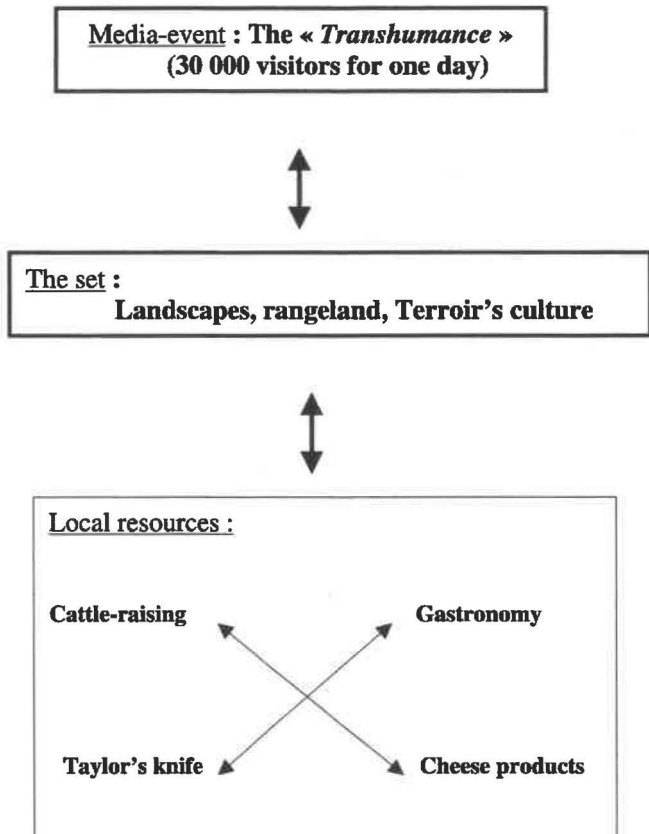
C. The Foundations of The Renewal

Tourism and recreation are new challenge for Aubrac Mountain and most of rural areas. Tourism development hinges on the valorization of environmental resources and vernacular riches. It is no doubt benefiting from the current trend involving the search for authenticity and roots (fig.2). Tourism is the region's trademark. This valuable image acts as a driving force for the rest of the local economy: cutlery, gastronomy and agriculture.

In a general sense, tourism development' strategy is based on an environmental market. The wide, open spaces and the beautiful scenery are innately linked to the Aubrac culture. This culture stems from its history, but the aspects emphasized by tourism are not based on static folklore. Tourists discover living culture through updated local know-how.

Tourism is therefore the opportunity for discovery, for awareness of the environment. It facilitates understanding of places visited, the countryside, flora and fauna, but also the pastoral aspect of Aubrac's summer pastures, the country's skills and knowledge. From a tourism-based point of view, an environmental market definitely exists, including demand related to the environment, the understanding of societies and contact with people. This kind of tourism allows us to contemplate visits in harmony with natural and human environments.

Figure 2: the Tourism Strategies of Aubrac mountains



Aubrac Mountain is an example of open and global territorial development. It is based on:

- A specific territory: a highland mountain
- Human resource: a community with a small population, but close-knit and determined, and, most importantly, with strong ties with its emigrants living in the capital city. They promote exchanges with Paris and support local action, both political and financial.
- Original activities, related to the territory and the local culture.

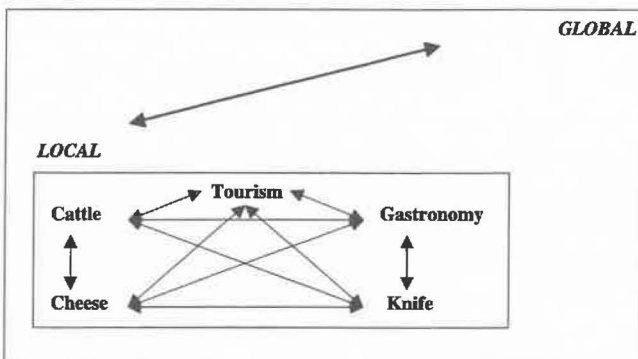
Therefore, there is a consistent local system where the various activities support and stimulate each other. Tourism, which has become an economic sector in its own right, is at the heart of this dynamic. It has a notable status-enhancing effect, as much for the local society as for external perspectives.

At the same time, the local system is open to the outside world. Each of these activities is in direct competition with identical productions from other regions. However, the complementary nature of activities within the local system is helpful to them. There is no dependence on one single activity. They can therefore take a step back in relation to market requirements, which enables communities to maintain local control and consider original ideas.

III. Aubrac's Experience: Teachings For Sustainable Tourism

From economic stagnation, according to dominant economic and cultural models of the sixties and eighties, the Mountain lives again nowadays. Thanks to will of the local community, his attachment to values, local resources, quality of life. Even if at this time local actors plan future with equanimity, they know that conjuncture will not be always favourable. They must know find new adaptations with reasonable choice of development.

Figure 3. Aubrac mountain : Global and Open Interscalar Development



Often, too easily, public institutions en private actors consider tourism the key: “an easy path to economic development and restructuring». Like consider Hall and Jenkins “it is not easy to plan high quality and sustainable tourist development that balance the economic and social needs of local residents with tourist’s needs and expectations, and tourism with environmental (namely, conservation and preservation) concerns” (p.38). Of course “sustainable tourism is not an easily achieved goal”, the planning board stays often “ a wishful thinking”. Solution is not unique, way of development for rural areas are multiple like illustrate the older example of the Tyrol Mountain, the Spanish Montaña palentina (Gil de Arriba 1998) or the other Spanish case of Taramundi (province of Asturias, WTO 1997). Considering Aubrac case and some other European examples, five general lessons can be emphasized:

1. Tourism within a territorialized development system. Sustainable tourism is adapted to a local context, the area’s resources and rural potential. It is integrated into a territorial strategy, consistent with other activities (fig.3).
2. {At the community scale, sustainable tourism requires local control of resources} (Hall & Lew 1998). The local community largely supports sustainable, well-thought-out, planned tourism. The involvement of local participants is essential, so that they can benefit financially from tourism, but, at the same time, control its development. Too often, territories that receive tourist infrastructures are perceived simply as available support, waiting for any kind of recreational development. Neither is the idea to privatize a space by separating it from the local environment, forbidding the native people access. Local participants must therefore control these developments and have the means to control the direction of tourism in their area. Choices of development need to be in harmony with the rural communities needs, demands and use of the lands.
3. A development strategy in line with the times. The results of this kind of tourism are more progressive. It does not have the economic impact generated by mass tourism. However, all proportions, any financial consequences that directly benefit the local fabric are larger.
4. Developing complementary activities, compatible with tourism, in order to avoid dependence on a single activity In order that local communities do not depend solely on tourism revenues, the emergence of new activities must be encouraged, in conjunction with tourism. The tourism sector must be integrated into the pattern of complete local activities. Don’t treat tourism industry “in isolation from the other factors, which constitute the social, environmental, and economic fabric of the region,” (Butler & Hall 1997, p. 254)

5. Local development, open on the world, within a global context. This tourism cannot only be conceived within a narrow, local context. It must be in line with a global system, be open to external expectations, give elements of response and promote exchanges.

Conclusion

Sustainable tourism aims to maintain the integrity of the host territory's ecological, cultural and social resources. All economic activities must be taken into account. They can enrich tourist attractions (such as in the example of Aubrac) or sometimes harm tourism initiatives.

Tourism "needs to be appropriately embedded within the particular set of linkages and relationships which comprise the essence of rurality". The development of sustainable tourism requires three aspects to be taken into consideration:

- The environment (natural and human);
- The expectations of the native population and their participation; and
- The expectations of potential clientele.

Too often, it has only been the markets, more or less close to imprecise and changing consumer demands, which have prevailed. Tourism must now better consider the interests of local populations, encourage exchanges and encounters, without forgetting to take into account how much the natural environment can handle. Tourism today is consumption, while enjoying oneself and respecting others, without forgetting to plan for tomorrow.

But beyond the lessons of the Aubrac' case, and the other western European models which can be observed, we have doubts about the application of these conditions outside this regional area. The way is radically different in less developed countries. Rural and mountain areas of Western Europe use subventions of Brussels and respective national economies. Without forgetting urban consumers vigilant about countryside preservation.

Further to East, new mountain regions, like the Carpathians (in Poland, Slovakia, Romania) also receive financial supports from European Union. Local communities miss money to achieve their projects. Even with benevolence, attribution of Brussels subventions is specified according to external criterion. Local projects must be adapted. Opening-up means progressive loss of the best resource in favour of private and/or foreign actors who invest their capital. Local communities are dispossessed gradually to the benefit of foreigners – from exterior urban centres or non-national people. They lost control of their

territory, their fragile cohesion split in front of the individual interests. Economic advantages first. The different conceptions of sustainable development are in conflict between temporary residents (from western states) who own second home (like in Carpathians) and local actors who want to develop tourist resorts. Also protected areas, according sustainable programs, sometimes with ecotourism programs, rule out local communities.

One of the main keys stays the economic inequalities between way of life of tourist and local's communities. Specific power relationships become established to the benefits of the more privileged. But the own views of the world are variable like their own comprehension of the local interests. Splitting up of the territories –with appropriation process in relation of external actors, closure of more interested places-, break-up locales societies less disadvantaged in front of financial issue, and complex relationship of power between public and/or private actors, individual and/or collective, constitute the fundamental elements for analyze that we call “governance” of this territories – easily qualified good or poor, forgetting a large part of person involved and responsible- and perspectives of sustainable developments for our territories.

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About The Author

Olivier Dehoorne is Assistant Professor at the University of Antilles and Guyana (French West Indies) and Associate Professor at the University of Oradea. His main field of study is tourism and its political implications with comparative approaches in the field between developed countries and less developed countries.

Corina Criste is an Assistant within the Department of Geography, Tourism and Territorial Planning of the University of Oradea. Her present research work approaches the territorial planning and tourism strategies in the hydrographic basin of Crisul Repede (Romania) and tourism on a general basis. Her work involves the development of tourist strategies for the mountainous area according to successful international and European sustainable strategies model.

Alexandru Ilies is a Ph.D Assistant Professor at the University of Oradea, Department of Geography, Tourism and Territorial Planning. His research work is oriented toward political geography, particularly cross-border issues and tourism. As far as the latter is concerned he is preoccupied with tourist panning in the European mountainous regions.

