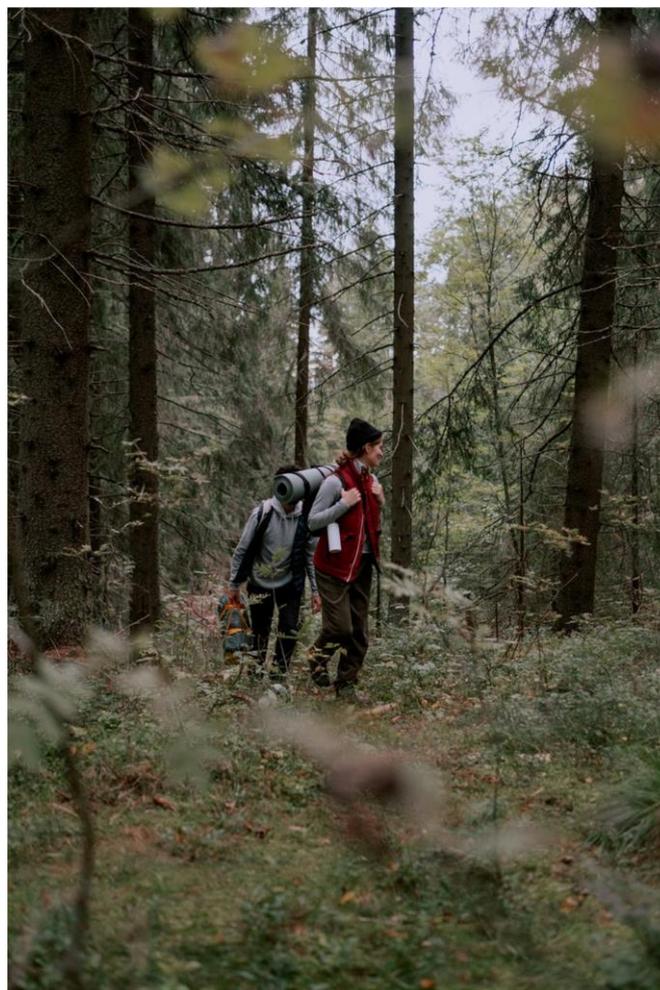


Policy recommendations on ecotourism for the countries of the Danube region



**FOSTERING ENHANCED ECOTOURISM PLANNING
ALONG THE EUROVELO CYCLE ROUTE NETWORK IN
THE DANUBE REGION**

ECOVELOTOUR DTP-055-2.2

FINANCED BY:

INTERREG DANUBE TRANSNATIONAL PROGRAMME

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ISBN 978-963-503-892-3

University ID: CCS 2/21

**PROJECT CO-FUNDED BY THE EUROPEAN UNION FUNDS (ERDF, IPA) AND
THE GOVERNMENT OF HUNGARY**

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1. Introduction

EcoVelo Tour Project (Fostering enhanced ecotourism planning along the Eurovelo cycle route network in the Danube region (DTP-055-2.2) along with the EuroVelo 6, 11 and 13 cycling routes at the Danube develops ecotourism and cycling tourism and ecotourism. The project aims to exploit synergies with the EuroVelo network, communicate effectively about ecotourism in the region, ensure the preservation of cultural and natural assets including biodiversity, landscape elements, and air quality while developing local ecotourism strategies.

Ecotourism is a new form of travel that seeks to reduce the negative effects of mass tourism in the 20th century. The International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources defined ecotourism as "environmentally responsible visiting of relatively unspoilt natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features - both past and present), that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations" (Hector Ceballos-Lascurain, *Tourism, Ecotourism and Protected Areas*, 1996). Ecotourism is thus a complex concept that emphasizes the importance of preserving local values, the natural environment and culture.

This study builds upon the research on ecotourism in the Danube region carried out by national stakeholders from Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia. The study aims to provide a helping hand for project partners in formulating policy recommendations at national as well as regional levels. In addition, this study also provides professional support and exchange of experiences to those countries where ecotourism is not yet on an advanced level.

2. Methods

The policy recommendations have been developed using the following research methods.

2.1 Desk research

Project partners collected secondary data of national ecotourism perspectives from available national and international sources for this study. National research teams from each of the participating states of this study compiled an overview about the ecotourism situation in their country and then formulated policy recommendations for national level improvements.

2.2 Qualitative research

The qualitative research was based on the results of the desk research. The empirical qualitative research aimed to collect ecotourism related policy recommendations for the concerned seven project partner countries along the Danube. The main topics defined by the national policy recommendations (desk research) are the following:

- Strategy development and planning
- Development of infrastructure, products, and services
- Conserving landscape and nature
- Creating financial support
- Cooperation
- Awareness-raising
- Education of staff, employment

As a first step to carry out this qualitative research an expert database was established with the help of the project consortium. The established database covers all the seven project partner countries and contains names as well as organisations of ecotourism experts from each county. The database is useful to synthesize the opinions of experts, while it ensures a solid base for knowledge transfer.

Expert interviews were chosen to collect empirical data for analysis. Dr. Krisztina Keller, Corvinus University of Budapest (Corvinus, Hungary) carried out 7 in-depth interviews with experts from participating countries via Skype. The interviews took place between 1 November 2020 and 20 December 2020. Table 1 displays details of the interviewees including their name, organization, and country of residence.

Table 1: Characteristics of the participating ecotourism experts

Country	Name	Organisation
Austria	Alice Wanner	Institute of Landscape Development, Recreation and Conservation Planning, University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna
Bulgaria	Eleonora Yosifova	Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism
Germany	Teresa Schreib	Bavarian Forest National Park
Hungary	Bajor Zoltán	Hungarian Ornithological and Nature Conservation
Romania	Andrei Blumer	Association of Ecotourism in Romania (AER)
Serbia	Hulo Ištvan	Etnolife Civic Organization
Slovakia	Zuzana Okániková	Pronatur Civic Association

Source: own research, 2020

3. Policy recommendations on ecotourism in the countries of the Danube region

3.1 Policy recommendations on ecotourism for Austria

3.1.1 Introduction

A huge share of the tourism in Austria is based on natural assets such as the Alps, rivers, lakes as well as different cultural landscapes. Additionally, tourism strategy papers recognise sustainability and regionality/authenticity as lasting trends that have to be addressed. This is why more and more tourism products are being developed that focus on regional specialties and on the creation of experiences of sustainability in gastronomy, accommodation and activities. This is seen as a unique selling point, giving tourism in Austria a competitive advantage and enabling further growth.

And growth is happening, as the demand for touristic services in Austria has experienced a steady increase of 4 to 5 per cent per year over the last decade (Österreich Werbung, 2020a). In a representative study of travel motives in Germany, the country from which the lion's share of tourists to Austria come from (Österreich Werbung, 2020b), "Experiencing nature" is rated as a very important travel motive by 45 per cent of survey participants. For 42 per cent of the participants environmental and for 51 per cent social sustainability is important (Oberösterreich Tourismus, 2019).

Even though climate change is recognised as a major threat to tourism, tourism's own contribution to it is hardly talked about. Growth is seen positive and possible limits to growth are seen as hurdles that can be overcome, and these approaches are not considering the physical limits of an ecosystem's carrying capacity and the consequences of their exceedance.

After a period of use in the early 2000s, the ecotourism concept was all but replaced by the more market-friendly concept of sustainable tourism. Short-term growth is favoured over long-term sustainability, the latter requiring the respect of natural limits as not to deteriorate the natural assets on which tourism is based.

3.1.2 Policy recommendations

Ecotourism aspects in existing tourism strategies

First, the current Austrian tourism strategies were screened for measures and recommendations regarding ecotourism. The focus was on the tourism strategy of the federal states Upper and Lower Austria, through which the Danube flows. We also looked at the current tourism strategies of Tyrol and Burgenland but couldn't find anything related to ecotourism. In a second step, we developed additional recommendations to fill any identified gaps in the existing strategies.

Tourismusstrategie Niederösterreich 2020

The tourism strategy of the federal state Lower Austria identifies the main fields of competence of the touristic region (Amt der Niederösterreichischen Landesregierung, 2017). These fields are to be further developed in order to strengthen the touristic profile (p.13). Among these fields are:

- Landscape, nature, mountains
- Regional cuisine, wine, regional products

Based on these nature- and regional culture-based assets, touristic products should be developed that fall within the following themes:

- Joy of living / Lust for live
- Wellness
- Adventure

These strands address different target audiences which are attracted by the assets of the touristic region (p. 16).

Nachhaltigkeit im Tourismus

In the paper Sustainability in Tourism of the tourism marketing board Austrian National Tourist Office (Österreich Werbung, 2012), the following statements are included (p.6f):

- Guests should be able to experience sustainability in touristic products
- Sustainable mobility solutions for guests and sustainable management of cultural and natural resources of touristic importance can be examples of a strong international presence in tourism
- Embedding experiences of sustainability in communication and marketing can attract tourists from the respective target groups
- In order to achieve these goals, these measures – among others – are suggested:

- Tourism should enhance awareness for ecological relations, both among guests and locals
- A sustainable use of energy and resources valorises touristic products
- Regional products and materials should be preferred both in use and in marketing
- Guests are given the opportunity to experience protected natural areas and biodiversity. Hosts have a leading role in sensitising guests for a sustainable use of these.
- Regional identity, historical heritage and local culture are appreciated, strengthened as well as strategically used for enhancement and marketing of touristic products.

Trendreport Naturtourismus Oberösterreich

The trend report on nature-based tourism in Upper Austria presents nature-based tourism as future trend and a growing market. In order to make use of it, the following recommendations are given:

- Develop unique selling points for your region from the available natural assets
- Involve stakeholders for the sustainable development of tourism
- Create touristic value through the presentation of nature and its embedding into experienceable narratives
- Spread knowledge about the natural assets in touristic organisations who will present this knowledge to tourists
- Provide an attractive environment and good infrastructure for the guests

Additional recommendations of Institute for Transport Studies at the University for Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna

1. recommendation: Reduction of further land consumption

Tourism is dependent on unique and beautiful natural as well as cultural landscapes. Only a fraction of those landscapes is protected by conservation legislation. Even some unique sites are threatened by the ongoing land consumption through construction activity. The touristic sector is not only affected by this, but also partially responsible, as the expansion of touristic facilities as a result of growth contributes to this effect within the most vulnerable regions.

2. recommendation: Raising awareness for the long-term sustainability of touristic offers

Sustainable touristic offers has gained attention in tourism strategies and increasingly in practise. Shifting to more sustainable practises in tourism is an important first step, but it has to

be followed up with a long-term understanding of sustainable tourism. The pursuit of continuous growth must be replaced by a discussion and consensus among researchers as well as touristic stakeholders about a level of tourism intensity that stays within the long-term capacity of ecosystems.

3. recommendation: Raising awareness for sustainability and preservation among tourists

While the experience of nature is an important touristic motif, there is a lack of awareness among tourists about the state of these natural assets and the ways they are affecting them with their choices both on vacation and everyday life. The experience of nature should therefore be amended with respective information and practical behaviour choices that encourage its preservation.

4. recommendation: Evaluate and respect the ecosystem limits of touristically used natural assets

In order to stay within long-term ecosystem capacity, the capacity has to be evaluated first. The evaluation should be based on a holistic understanding of the functioning of the ecosystem. Then, tourism products can be designed in a way that minimises negative impacts. Access to natural assets should be managed in a way that provides equitable access while avoiding the tragedy-of-the-commons problem. Payment for ecosystem services schemes could be used for financing the evaluation, management and supportive measures.

In table 2, all policy recommendations for Austria are summended up and explained in more detail.

Table 2: Summary of the policy recommendations for Austria

Priority Topic	Recommendation	Status Quo Description	Proposed Policy Change Description	Date for Implementation	Affected Stakeholder(s)	Final Recipient(s)
1. Spatial planning	Reduction of further land consumption	Austria has a continuously high rate of land consumption, using up natural resources that form the basis for ecotourism.	Enhance efforts towards more integrated spatial planning, including the protection of natural and green areas as well as promoting inward oriented development of settlements and space-efficient construction.	2022-2030	Federal legislators State administrations Municipal administrations	Hosts and providers of nature-based tourism services

<p>2. Awareness raising</p>	<p>Raising awareness for touristic offers, which are sustainable in the long-term</p>	<p>Sustainability is mentioned in touristic strategies a lot. However, it is primarily seen as a unique selling point in touristic marketing and a growth enabling factor, not necessarily as a good per se, ensuring the long-term feasibility of tourism.</p>	<p>Extend current sustainability checklists and certification procedures with long-term goals and measures. Shift the focus of tourism strategies to the long term, stopping the promotion of unsustainable tourism products. Create a sense of ownership of tourism providers that goes beyond their businesses and extends to the natural assets, on which their business models are based. Encourage the use of sustainable energy, resources and construction materials.</p>	<p>2020-continuous</p>	<p>Destination management organisations (DMOs) State administrations Federal administration</p>	<p>Local population Current and future tourists Current and future hosts and tourism service providers</p>
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<p>3. Awareness raising</p>	<p>Raising awareness for sustainability and preservation among tourists</p>	<p>While the experience of nature and natural landscapes ranks high as a touristic motive, tourists are only beginning to become aware of sustainable touristic choices that help to preserve nature.</p>	<p>Create learning opportunities that complement the experience of nature and biodiversity with information on the state of ecosystems and ways of helping with protection. Highlight sustainable choices like regional products, low-carbon mobility and accommodation and encourage sustainable behaviour that can be transferred into everyday life.</p>	<p>2020-continuous</p>	<p>Destination management organisations (DMOs)</p>	<p>Local population Current and future tourists Current and future hosts and tourism service providers</p>
<p>4. Management</p>	<p>Evaluate and respect the ecosystem limits of touristically used natural assets</p>	<p>Little is known about the carrying capacity of touristically used ecosystems and their regeneration rates. There are hardly any management schemes in place.</p>	<p>Evaluate ecosystems based on a holistic understanding of their functions, tailor tourism products to minimise negative impacts and implement regulations ensuring just access as well as put payment for ecosystem services schemes into practise.</p>	<p>2021-continuous</p>	<p>Federal administration State administrations DMOs</p>	<p>Local population Current and future tourists Current and future hosts and tourism service providers</p>

Sources: Leuthold, 2001; Baumgartner, 2002; BMWFJ, 2010; Stejskal-Tiefenbach et al., 2014; BMNT, 2019

3.2 Policy recommendations on ecotourism for Bulgaria

3.2.1 Introduction

Based on an analysis of the National Tourism Act and the Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism in the Republic of Bulgaria 2030 (adopted in 2014 and updated in 2018), the current situation regarding tourism policy has many problems that must be taken into account for the compilation of policy recommendations regarding ecotourism.

There is no specific legislation for ecotourism in the Tourism Act. The Tourism Strategy positions the entire tourism sector on the sustainability path, but a deeper look in the measures of the Strategy shows that it means mainly to economic sustainability. The Legislation that aims to protect environment from negative impacts arisen from tourism is within the Protected Areas Act and the Public Concessions Act. These regimes are not followed by the Ministry of Tourism, but by the Ministry of Environment and Water and the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry (both of which have their regional structures). The Tourism Act regulates only tour operators, hotels, restaurants, SPA centers, guides, ski instructors, ski infrastructure and beach operators and not touch upon environmental and social concerns, including local interest. Regarding regional policy it is important to note that Ministry of Tourism is only responsible for the national policy. At regional level, tourism policy lies within the responsibility of the Regional Governor (28 administrative regions), whose main function is to coordinate and control the actions of municipalities in implementation of the tourism policy instruments at local level. At regional level there is a separate initiative for establishing management organizations for tourism regions, which are NGOs under the Tourism Act. The role of these management organizations is to unify public and private tourism stakeholders in 9 tourist regions (the regions with their boundaries are established with an Act of the Minister of Tourism in 2013), which are entirely different from the administrative regions. This fragmented and not harmonized structure is an obstacle to implement tourism policies efficiently.

Sustainability is highlighted among the main strategic objectives, but ecotourism is not sufficiently prioritized in the Tourism Strategy. The Tourism Act envisions respective product strategies, which have not developed yet. One of the strategies shall address rural and ecotourism, but there is again no sign of steps taken in this direction. From the policy that Ministry of Tourism currently follows it is visible that the main priority is summer-sea, winter-ski and cultural tourism, to smaller extent SPA and wellness, but far less on ecotourism.

Ecotourism in Bulgaria is attractive for both foreign and domestic tourists. Organized tours by tour operators attract mainly foreign visitors. There is a long tradition for hiking holidays among

Bulgarians with their peak in July and August. The three National Parks are the main attractions with their hiking routes and mountain huts. In addition, the rest of the country is also rich on natural attractions, which are usually maintained by the municipalities, resulting in their varying quality, some of them are in good condition but others suffer the lack of financial resource.

3.2.2 Policy recommendations

1. recommendation: Overview of the legal framework and strategy development

As far as the Ministry of Tourism is not responsible for the protection of the nature (the main resource of ecotourism) it is recommended that the Ministry should initiate consultations with the Ministry of Environment and Water, the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry and the municipalities to create a strategy to deal with the negative impact of tourism.

In Bulgaria, the policy makers put mainly efforts on the development of mass tourism on the seacoast and in the big ski resorts. Unfortunately, in addition to those regions, some protected areas are also overcrowded and the ecosystems within them are disrupted. There is no initiative from the institutions for their protection and restoration. Often environmental NGOs are the ones who alert to problems and seek solutions. It is recommended to formulate and enforce policy for sustainable use of natural resources and upgrade accordingly the Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development, which is currently mostly exploring the economic scope of tourism. It is necessary to communicate on high level the regulations for sustainable and responsible development of tourism, the priorities. Furthermore, the Ministry of Tourism should become active for the protection of one of the main tourism attractions in Bulgaria – the nature.

Ecotourism is becoming more popular and there are many people looking for it. In Bulgaria biodiversity and landscape have a lot to show and it will be silly to continue investing efforts in tourism that ruins nature. The development of Bulgaria as a destination for ecotourism provides opportunity that needs to be well analyzed and carefully put into strategies on national, regional and local levels. The Ministry of Tourism can coordinate working groups with institutions, NGOs and experts in the field of responsible and sustainable tourism that can help in elaborating the strategy and work for sustainable development not only on paper.

2. recommendation: Statistics and analysis

The tourism statistics in Bulgaria summarizes the basic information: number of foreign visitors in Bulgaria (by country/ region and by month), Bulgarians travelling abroad (by country/region and by month), accommodation (number, nights, beds, visitors, income by region), national resorts (nights, accommodations, visitors, income), nights of foreigners by country, travel expenses in the country and abroad and expenses for services in tourism. There is no information about the different types of tourism, interest of visitors, used channels for information and other more specific statistics that can help better understand the situation in

Bulgaria and the preferences of the tourists. With no detailed analysis, the strategies are only papers.

Ministry of Tourism can initiate changes in the statistics that is summarized on national, regional and local level and would provide more detailed picture for tourism business about tourists' preferences. There is a need for detailed analysis of tourism and more knowledge about the different types of tourism.

3. recommendation: Education and training of tourism businesses

The education in the field of tourism in Bulgaria is focused on mass tourism products. A few universities offer opportunity to study alternative tourism / responsible tourism. Most of the students are trained to become employees in large companies and resorts, while the attitude to responsible consumption of resources, work with local people and support for the destinations they visit is absent. Nowadays, there is a growing interest for ecotourism. Therefore, and for the sake of nature, all the principles for responsible and sustainable travel should be studied in the universities and schools that teach tourism and related studies. This could serve as a principle at university level led by national level initiative.

In Bulgaria the tourism business is mainly working with tourists looking for low cost holiday and for short breaks in the big cities and resorts. The negative impact of tourism is becoming more and more tangible and most of the companies don't seem to care about the protection of natural and cultural resources and the support of local interests. There are experts from the NGO and the business sectors who can support the Ministry of Tourism and other decision makers on national, regional and local level to organize trainings and events focusing on the responsible and sustainable tourism concepts. With well-structured and practice-based information more tourism entrepreneurs will have the chance to understand the problems and find a way for their business to have positive economic, social and environmental impact.

One of the NGOs that is working for more than 20 years for the development of responsible and sustainable tourism is Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism. They are working with local authorities, businesses and experts and support SMEs in their efforts to become more conscious and fair businesses.

4. recommendation: Encourage networking

There are 9 tourism regions in Bulgaria, each of which has its administration as well as its management practices and priorities. The sustainable development of the destinations is only analyzed from an economic perspective, while the support for the preservation of resources and communication with local stakeholders are fairly presented in any of the concepts of the 9

regions. Regions are working separately and do not have common basis where the sustainable practices can be introduced and then flourish. The Ministry of Tourism should initiate dialogue among the regions and thus help them find common principles and encourage development of sustainable policies.

In Bulgaria, the number of ecotourism companies is growing but still they comprise small part of the sector. Their experience and expertise can help the Ministry of Tourism and all other authorities at different levels to understand the needs and the problems of the sector. Support for the creation of networks of tourism businesses on local, regional and national levels is essential for the sustainable development of the destination and the decisions that will be influence these destinations. Many active people in ecotourism work for the development of the regions, they have business in. These stakeholders together with their colleagues from other regions can enlarge the positive impact of the tourism sector.

5. recommendation: Promotion of Bulgaria as ecotourism destination

The national marketing strategy of Bulgaria is presenting the country as destination for low-cost vacations, summer seaside holidays and winter holidays in big resorts and recently as a destination with some SPA and culture tourism products. There are some brochures for eco, rural and adventure tourism but they form a small part of the variety of promotional materials. In the Ministry of Tourism, only few people are aware of alternative tourism in Bulgaria and can present the country as a destination for nature lovers and adventurers who are growing in numbers worldwide. The Ministry of Tourism present Bulgaria in many tourism fairs, but none of them is specially for ecotourism/adventure/outdoor tourism. The national website of the Ministry is outdated and the information for nature and adventure tourism products in Bulgaria is poor. All of these problems can be solved with the support of organizations and experts who work in the field of ecotourism.

Nowadays more people are looking for active holidays in nature. This type of tourism potentially supports local people and culture. These tourists are spending more money in the destination, the landscape and the quality of the services are essential to attract them. Bulgaria is not so well known on the international tourism market but it has good transport connections with the countries in Europe. There is an unexploited opportunity to show its attractiveness for those tourists who are searching for new destinations. The potential of the country to become a destination for ecotourism is big but needs serious work on national, regional and local levels. If the Ministry of Tourism becomes motivated and involves all relevant institutions and stakeholders to enhance ecotourism in Bulgaria the efforts can be rewarded in the next 5 years.

Table 3: Summary of the policy recommendations for Bulgaria

Priority Topic	Recommendation	Status Quo Description	Proposed Policy Change Description	Date for Implementation	Affected Stakeholder(s)	Final Recipient(s)
1. Strategy development	Overview of legal framework and strategy development	The National strategy for sustainable development of tourism exists only on paper.	The sustainable and responsible tourism principles forming the base of ecotourism are not part of the strategy. The strategy focuses on the economic aspects of tourism. More efforts need to be put on better communication between institutions on national, regional and local levels. More experts in the field need to be involved in the process. Every strategic document has to be consulted with experts, stakeholders and institutions. Revision of the Strategy and consultations with experts and stakeholders are needed.	2020-2022	Ministry of Tourism Local authorities Tourism destinations management organizations NGOs Tourism businesses	Ministry of Tourism Local authorities Tourism destinations management organizations NGOs Tourism businesses

<p>2. Statistics and analysis</p>	<p>More detailed statistics and analysis of tourism</p>	<p>The lack of details in the tourism statistics and deeper analysis are reasons why there is no understanding of the potential of the country for ecotourism and other special tourism activities.</p>	<p>The Ministry of Tourism needs to initiate detailed statistics collection. It is necessary to start working more actively with the National Statistics Institute and local authorities who are responsible for the collection of tourism data. Deeper analysis of the current situation and what is missing information needs to be done. This will help to see where the gaps are and what can be done. The tourism NGOs know well the problems and can help with information about the missing data. A work group or regular meetings of the Ministry and the NGOs is recommended.</p>	<p>2020-2025</p>	<p>Ministry of Tourism National Statistics Institute Local authorities NGOs Tourism destination management organizations</p>	<p>Ministry of Tourism National Statistics Institute Local authorities NGOs Tourism destination management organizations</p>
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3. Education and training	Education and training of tourism businesses	Lack of understanding of the sustainable and responsible tourism principles and their implementation in the tourism business.	In the Universities: More hours for sustainable and responsible tourism with guest speakers from the business side. Trainings for staff of tourism businesses organized on national, regional and local levels.	Continuously	Universities NGOs Tourism businesses Local authorities	Students Staff Business owners
4. Networking	Encourage networking	Few sustainable networks work. Most of the networks are created during some projects and after that, most of them stop working together.	Organization of periodic meetings of the businesses on local level where they will have the chance to discuss the problems and ideas and work better together. The authorities and Tourism destination management organizations can start initiatives that focus on the potential of the region and promote its authentic and unique customs, nature, etc.	Continuously	Tourism destination management organizations Local authorities Tourism businesses NGOs	Tourism businesses

<p>5. Ecotourism destination</p>	<p>Promotion of Bulgaria as ecotourism destination</p>	<p>There are small efforts for the promotion of Bulgaria as ecotourism destination. Some promotional materials and information on the website of the destination exists. No special interest fairs are part of the annual marketing program.</p>	<p>It is recommended to start with revision of the promotion materials and websites information. The planning for the next periods participation in fairs needs to be done with focus not only on mass tourism events but also specialized fairs for eco tourism.</p> <p>It is important Bulgaria to be part of fairs that attract people interested in nature and adventure.</p>	<p>Continuously</p>	<p>Ministry of Tourism Local authorities</p>	<p>Tourism businesses</p>
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Source: BAAT, 2020

3.3 Policy recommendations on ecotourism for Germany on the example of East Bavaria

3.3.1 Introduction

„East Bavaria is one of the most sustainable tourism regions in Germany” – this is one of the most important policy and mission statements for future actions by the Tourism Association of East Bavaria (OB).

In terms of OB’s mission for sustainable growth of the tourism sector in East Bavaria the ecotourism strategy elaborated together with key stakeholders during the EcoVeloTour project foremost aims for travel/transfer via public transport which meets the essential criteria of sustainable tourism: low consumption of resources, small ecological footprint, small CO₂ footprint. According to the ecotourism strategy integration of ecofriendly service providers and the hospitality industry into touristic value chains is essential, too.

Sustainable tourism includes regional economic effects (income in the region visited, contributions to regional economic cycles), the strengthening of local culture and identity as well as the quality of life. Bicycle tourism for example can achieve all of the above if the offers are integrated into regional value chains, in which regional specialties of local producers are included, plus the revenues gained through enhanced tourism also are dedicated to the preservation of landscape and culture.

The prerequisite for advantages through tourism for the population and regional economy can be the successful acquisition of guests. The prerequisite for this is an attractive, customer-oriented offer. In tourism, this means above all high product and experience quality. The “Guidelines for sustainable bicycle tourism”, developed in the framework of the EcoVeloTour project, provide suggestions and standards for an unsurpassed evolution of sustainable offers.

Sustainability forms both the guiding principle and the framework around which the policy of the Bavarian State Parliament is oriented. Under the auspices of the State Ministry for the Environment and Consumer Protection, the Parliament has developed the cross-divisional Bavarian Sustainability Strategy (Bayerische Nachhaltigkeitsstrategie). During the development process, ten action areas for sustainable development in Bavaria were identified and objectives defined with respect to each area. Tourism is one of the action areas. As defined by the strategy, the State Ministry for the Environment and Consumer Protection is committed to follow the principles of sustainable development in Bavarian businesses, society, and municipalities.

Therefore, the State Ministry for example is responsible to enhance the network of sustainable communities, promote education for sustainable development and environmental education through the Bavarian Environmental Pact (Umweltpakt Bayern).

According to a survey from 2019, 58% of those surveyed did not consider sustainability as an important aspect in traveling for the main vacation trip to Bavaria. However, 6% stated that sustainability was the deciding factor for their trip (Bayern Tourismus Marketing GmbH, BayTM).

Nevertheless, OB observes that offers for people for whom sustainable tourism is important are steadily increasing in Bavaria and Germany. One example would be the cooperation network “BIO HOTELS” (biohotels.info). The BIO HOTELS aim to use only organic products (as far as possible) from regional production. In terms of quality, BIO HOTELS prefer products that meet Bioland's requirements or are of similar quality. On top of that BIO HOTELS aim to develop their hotels as ecologically and sustainably as possible. With every renovation, extension or new building and purchase, ecological materials and solutions are chosen.

OB is currently developing a slow travel concept together with hotels, local producers, the Bavarian Forest National Park, and many others. In the best-case scenario, a destination-wide network of sustainable providers will be created, and slow travel offers will be marketed.

Tourism after the Corona virus will be different than before the Covid crisis. But what will change is not clear even to experts. Outdoor-oriented forms of vacation such as hiking tourism and bicycle trips will most probably increase in the short and medium term. The Covid crisis offers opportunities for innovative models and creative ideas, for more sustainability and greater digitization.

3.3.2 Policy recommendations

Whether through the choice of travel destination, means of transport or through behavior at the destination, there are numerous ways people can protect nature and local communities. Travelling by plane leads to the release of climate-damaging greenhouse gases. Based on 2019 travel data, the research alliance Urlaub und Reisen (FUR), on behalf of the Federal Environment Ministry, drew up demand-based indicators for sustainable holidays for the first time. The analysis reveals that the gap between a positive attitude to sustainability and actual sustainable behavior on holiday remains very wide. But why so is still a matter of ongoing research.

Policy recommendations for sustainable tourism in Germany on a national level are provided mainly by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Naturschutz und nukleare Sicherheit).

Specific measures defined by the Ministry aim to support the improved integration of environmental protection, climate action and biodiversity conservation into corporate decisions and in communicating tourist attractions. Support by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety is provided, for example, for:

- enhancing cooperation and networking between stakeholders from nature conservation, tourism, and sport
- spread of nature conservation and environmental education-related nature experience activities in National Natural Landscapes
- organizing sustainable trips for children and young people (Change and the City, Zero Impact Camps)
- carrying out school hiking programs (Schulwandern) for the sake of nature and environmental protection in the Alps (for example Alpine Pearls on sustainable mobility or Alpenkonvention AAA+)
- funding of Germany's largest energy-saving campaign in the hospitality sector on increasing energy efficiency and resource efficiency, while protecting the climate, in cooperation with DEHOGA, the German Hotels and Restaurants Association.

1. recommendation: Tourism strategy considering aspects of sustainable development

Every destination should have a tourism plan (e.g. tourism strategy, destination strategy, tourism mission statement, etc.). The plan incorporates the three dimensions (ecology, economy, social aspects) of sustainable development and describes the opportunities and risks presented by

tourism. The Destination Management Organisation (DMO) regularly evaluates the strategy using measurable objectives.

2. recommendation: Tourism contributes to the economic well-being of the local population and stimulates local economic development

Regional stakeholders and their products are supported through their incorporation into the tourism supply chain. The DMO works with regional stakeholders, associations, and institutions to support tourism businesses in purchasing regional products and services.

3. recommendation: Tourism respects and promotes historical heritage as well as regional culture and traditions, strengthening the regional identity in the destination

The DMO communication materials highlight the special characteristics of the destination's cultural heritage (e.g. dialects, art, craft). The DMO develops and markets corresponding tourist activities and events.

Table 4: Summary of the policy recommendations for Germany on the example of East Bavaria

Priority Topic	Recommendation	Status Quo Description	Proposed Policy Change Description	Date for Implementation	Affected Stakeholder(s)	Final Recipient(s)
1. Management	Development of a tourism strategy tailored to the area which considers aspects of sustainable development.	Varies considerably from DMO to DMO. In East Bavaria, a tourism strategy was developed as part of the EcoVeloTour-project in 2019-2020.	Incorporation of the three dimensions (ecology, economy, social aspects) of sustainable development in all business segments along the tourism chain by DMO.	Ongoing	German Federal Ministries Regional and local organizations and institutions Companies	Local authorities (towns and municipalities) Companies General Public
2. Economy	Tourism contributes to the economic well-being of the local population and stimulates local economic development.	Regional stakeholders and their products are partially supported through their incorporation into the tourism supply chain.	The DMO elaborates a strategy specifically for the overarching promotion of local food, beverages, and craft.	Ongoing	German Federal Ministries Regional and local organizations and institutions Companies	Local authorities (towns and municipalities) General Public Producers of local food, beverages, or craft

3. Social Aspects	Tourism respects and promotes historical heritage as well as regional culture and traditions, strengthening the regional identity in the destination.	The DMO is familiar with important examples of the destination 's cultural heritage and presents these for visitors in communication material.	The DMO is included in planning related to protection of the cultural heritage of the destination.	Ongoing	German Federal Ministries Regional and local organizations and institutions Companies	Local authorities (towns and municipalities) Companies General Public
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Source: Developing criteria for the sustainable structuring of tourism destinations in Germany, 2016

3.4 Policy recommendations on ecotourism for Hungary

3.4.1 Introduction

Ecotourism is a new form of travel that seeks to reduce the negative effects of mass tourism in the 20th century. As far as active tourism products are concerned, the traditional activities covering the whole society and available at a relatively low price are the determining factors in Hungary. In addition, special forms of activity, previously done by small groups of tourists, such as adventure tours, eco-tours, and extreme sports, are beginning to become popular. The popularity of high-cost activities has not increased significantly.

According to the National Tourism Development Strategy 2030, eco/active/green tourism is mainly popular among domestic guests, the number of tourist attractions is increasing, and the demand for family- and elderly-friendly design is also growing "Glamping is also a new niche market: typically, young campers who love organic, holistic, new age venues and services looking for trendy, special places and experiences." (National Tourism Development Strategy 2030, 2017, p. 55.)

In Hungary, protected areas rich in natural values are often located in economically disadvantaged areas, and "as a result of their disadvantaged situation in terms of economic utilization (water-scarce sand, saline area, karst hillsides, marshy/swampy countryside), they did not fall victim to intensive agriculture and could be conserved." (National Ecotourism Development Strategy, 2008, p. 11.) In mountainous and hilly areas, the cessation of mining activities made it possible to preserve valuable habitats. In these areas, ecotourism can provide a breakthrough opportunity for the local economy.

3.4.2 Policy recommendations

1. recommendation: Development of ecotourism strategy

The development of ecotourism is not only an opportunity but also a challenge for areas with natural values. Ecotourism guidelines and development plans on local, regional and national levels should be formulated in a way that they are in line with the general goals of sustainable development, preserving natural resources, the services they provide and thus strengthening the local social well-being. The design of plans requires an extensive consultation process with ecotourism stakeholders and local residents.

The Hungarian ecotourism strategy prepared by the University of Pannonia and Aquaprofit Ltd. in 2008 needs to be updated and supplemented. Ecotourism planning is also unsatisfactory at lower levels: only a few development plans have been drawn up at regional and local levels. Involving local people into the policy development is particularly important, and the opportunity to express one's opinion, to take part in decision-making and to share the benefits of ecotourism should be ensured.

2. recommendation: Cooperation and networking among service providers

One of the key success factors of active tourism is the effective regional cooperation. The state-owned Centre for Development of Active and Ecotourism, established in August 2019, aims to intensify the cooperation. The most important task of the Centre is to coordinate projects and developments in active and ecotourism, as well as supervise the work of state, municipal, civil and business actors in the field. If the projects were carried out connected (not separately), the number of visitors would increase. Two major tasks can be identified: the basic ecotourism infrastructure should be devised (the service provider and the manager of the tourist-receiving area provide the basic infrastructure related to travel, accommodation, waste disposal, presentation and protection of the attraction), while the service providers should create high-quality and sustainable attractions and services based on the devised infrastructure. Progress has been made in both areas in recent years, but only a few attractions and destinations operate at a high standard.

One of the major problems of the Hungarian ecotourism is that the programs and venues are scattered, so the tourists cannot be retained and thus the economy does not benefit from tourism; i.e. the guests do not spend the night in the given area, in some cases they do not even consume, and as a consequence, the locals do not benefit from tourism. A product development policy may solve this problem by collecting several attractions that do not fit into a one day package, thus encouraging tourists to visit the area not only for a day trip, but also for several days.

Educated specialists is crucial in ecotourism planning and service provision. It is essential to train staff with practical knowledge of tourism and to educate the role of nature conservation in ecotourism already in secondary schools, but also in higher education institutions within the field of tourism and hospitality.

3. recommendation: Sustainable use of natural and cultural resources while developing ecotourism products

Competitive tourism products have to be developed in harmony with the environment and the interests of the local society. Developers should take into account the balance between economic, social and environmental objectives, so that the area does not lose ecological values, which need to be preserved and which form the basis of ecotourism. It is necessary to examine how many tourists and what environmental load the area can take so that we can keep its values in balance. Therefore the number of tourists should be controlled.

Environmental sustainability should be considered in all active, nature-related activities - golf, for example, is not a sustainable activity due to its high water and energy requirements (continuous mowing) and impact on the landscape.

Among the stakeholders, the local population is the most marginalized, although it is important to examine the extent to which ecotourism influences the values, safety, individual and group behaviour, lifestyle and community life of the local residents. During the development of ecotourism, it is important to keep in mind that tourism should not mean the self-serving exploitation of local social and ecological values - and the consequent overuse or misuse - but these activities should prove mutually beneficial and valuable to all concerned.

4. recommendation: Effective ecotourism marketing communication

The Centre for Development of Active and Ecotourism shapes Hungary's ecotourism image, supports the local service providers and organizations dealing with ecotourism, and promotes the developments both domestically and abroad. The Active Hungary Portal is being prepared, where all active and ecotourism offers will be provided, gathering the potentially available locations, sights and related services in one place for all generations of Hungarian and foreign tourists. It helps the local service providers to become generally known, while the interested visitors can obtain information and plan their journeys. Later, this database will have to be made available in the form of a mobile phone application.

According to the Centre, Hungary, an ecotourism destination, can build on "soft tourism". For this, the best way to use the country's environmental potential is to create a strong and unique

character. The attractions are operated by local service providers, whose marketing activities need to be aligned with national ecotourism communications.

Table 5: Summary of the policy recommendations for Hungary

Priority Topic	Recommendation	Status Quo Description	Proposed Policy Change Description	Date for Implementation	Affected Stakeholder(s)	Final Recipient(s)
1. Strategy development	Development of national, regional and local ecotourism strategies	The Hungarian ecotourism strategy prepared by the University of Pannonia and Aquaprofit Zrt. in 2008 needs to be updated and supplemented. Ecotourism planning is also unsatisfactory at lower levels: only a few development plans have been drawn up at regional and local levels.	Ecotourism guidelines and development plans should be formulated that are in line with the general goals of sustainable development, while strengthening the local social well-being and preserving natural resources. The design of plans requires an extensive consultation process with ecotourism stakeholders and local residents.	2020-2025	Centre for Development of Active and Ecotourism Hungarian Tourism Agency Destination Management Organizations (DMO-s) Nature conservation authorities and organizations Local authorities Local population	Centre for Development of Active and Ecotourism Hungarian Tourism Agency DMO-s Nature conservation authorities and organizations Local authorities

<p>2. Cooperation and networking among service providers</p>	<p>Regional cooperation, networking, development of joint program packages, training professionals with ecotourism knowledge</p>	<p>Regional cooperation is not typical in Hungary yet. The state-owned Centre for Development of Active and Ecotourism aims to promote this. The programs and venues are scattered, only a few attractions and destinations operate to a high standard, so the tourists cannot be retained and the economy cannot be sustained, locals do not benefit from tourism.</p>	<p>The basic ecotourism infrastructure should be devised, while the service providers should create high-quality and sustainable attractions and services based on them. Collecting several attractions that do not fit into a one-day package, thus encouraging tourists to visit the area not only for a day trip, but also for several days. Training staff with practical knowledge of tourism and nature conservation.</p>	<p>2020-continuously</p>	<p>Centre for Development of Active and Ecotourism Hungarian Tourism Agency Nature conservation authorities and organizations DMO-s Local authorities</p>	<p>DMO-s Nature conservation authorities and organizations Local authorities</p>
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<p>3. Sustainable use of natural and cultural resources while developing ecotourism products</p>	<p>Developing competitive tourism products that are in harmony with the environment and the interests of the local society</p>	<p>In Hungary, the independent Ministry of the Environment was abolished, which would have helped to protect the interests of the environment. Currently, environmental aspects do not apply to all investments. There is a strong political and economic lobby against which NGOs cannot act with great success.</p>	<p>Environmental sustainability should be considered in all active, nature-related activities. Tourism should not mean the self-serving exploitation of local social and ecological values - and the consequent overuse or misuse - but these activities should prove mutually beneficial and valuable to all concerned.</p>	<p>2020-continuously</p>	<p>All governmental and non-governmental institutions Private and state companies Nature conservation authorities and organizations Local population</p>	<p>Local population</p>
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<p>4. Effective ecotourism marketing communication</p>	<p>Shaping Hungary's ecotourism image and promoting the developments both domestically and abroad</p>	<p>The Active Hungary Portal is being prepared, where all active and ecotourism offers will be provided, gathering the potentially available locations, sights and related services in one place. It helps the local service providers to become known, while the interested visitors can obtain information and plan their journeys. Later, this database will have to be made available in the form of a mobile phone application.</p>	<p>Creating a strong and unique character. Marketing activities of service providers need to be aligned with national ecotourism communications.</p>	<p>2020-continuously</p>	<p>Centre for Development of Active and Ecotourism Hungarian Tourism Agency DMO-s Local authorities Service providers</p>	<p>DMO-s Service providers</p>
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Sources: National Tourism Development Strategy 2030 (2017);
National Ecotourism Development Strategy (2008, latest document in this area)

3.5 Policy recommendations on ecotourism for Romania

3.5.1 Introduction

Romania has a unique natural heritage, which offers an excellent chance of transforming the country into a special attraction for the international tourist market, considering the current international trend regarding the growing appeal for nature related destinations. Romania has some of the largest areas with virgin forests still remaining in Europe, the large majority of European brown bears, wolves and globally outstanding flora and fauna. Biodiversity in Romania, however is under serious threat from unsustainable exploitation, pollution and land-use changes. Sustainably-managed ecotourism could bring sources of income, which could be channeled towards conservation measures, benefit sharing and service-based industries.

According to the National Strategy for Ecotourism Development (2009), Romania has a highly varied natural capital. Due to physical and geographical conditions, which include mountains, plains, major river networks, wetlands and an extensive delta system (Danube Delta), Romania is the only country on the continent, where 5 of the 11 bio-geographic European regions (alpine, continental, pannonian, steppic and pontic) are present. Romania has high biological diversity, expressed both in terms of ecosystems and species. In addition, the lack of mechanization in the forestry sector and the weak economic development led to a lower exploitation of resources than in most other areas in Europe.

Natural and semi-natural ecosystems cover 47% of the country's surface. Moreover, 783 types of habitats (13 coastal habitats, 143 specific habitats of wetlands, 196 specific pastures and hay field habitats, 206 forest habitats, 90 specific habitats of dunes and rocky areas, and 135 farmland habitats) were identified throughout the country. Due to the geographical position of Romania, its flora and fauna have Asian influences from the north, Mediterranean from South and continental European components from the northwest. In Romania, 3700 plant species have been identified, out of which 23 are declared natural monuments, 39 are endangered, 171 are vulnerable and 1253 are rare.

In order to preserve the biological diversity, numerous protected areas have been established at the level of the development regions, and the future expansion of this network is taken into account.

Ecotourism has begun to develop in Romania in the past twenty years. Foreign tourists who prefer ecotourism are mostly aged between 30 and 60 years, have higher education and

appreciate nature. They often have specific interests (studying birds or some type of animal), but some of them just want to feel well in nature, away from the big, crowded cities.

Most tourists come from the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria and Switzerland and they choose long routes, lasting at least one week. Romanian tourists interested in ecotourism represent about 20% of the domestic tourists and choose short-term programs. Most visitors come between May and October when the weather is good for walking. Otherwise, special programs for winter are being arranged - hiking with snow rackets or ski touring, sleigh rides drawn by horses, participation in the traditions of Christmas or Easter (National strategy for ecotourism development in Romania, 2015).

3.5.2 Policy recommendations

1. recommendation: Creating the framework for inter-institutional cooperation to increase the number of partnerships in the field of ecotourism, at local, regional and national levels

In the short term it is expecting the resumption of the activity of the Inter-ministerial Group for the development of ecotourism in Romania and the creation of the National Council of Ecotourism. The national and international recognition of criteria for the designation of ecotourism destinations is also important, as well as identifying and advising other areas wishing to implement this concept and evaluating those destinations that have already started this process. The creation of DMO for designated destinations will ensure the inter-institutional cooperation and partnerships along with the well trained and qualified staff.

In a medium and long term, it is very important to reassess the declared ecotourism destinations, in order to see the extent to which commitments have been met, while to establish DMOs for those areas that do not yet have such a structure. Furthermore, it is necessary to integrate the DMOs within a network, in order to better represent their interests at national level and to create a package of measures to support management structures established at the destination level. Strengthening the role that the park / protected natural area plays at local level as well as the role that ecotourism plays in national, regional policy and in local tourism are very important, too. In addition, it will be necessary to set up associations of small local producers in order to better represent their interests.

2. recommendation: Creating tools for developing specific ecotourism infrastructure at destination level

Protected natural areas acquire a real value in tourism only if they are organized for visiting, thus contributing to the establishment of a competitive ecotourism offer. It turned out that a poor organization lack of good organization of these sensitive areas or lack there of exposes them to degradation, caused by tourist pressure (continuous and oversized flows of tourists, hunters of tourist "memories", etc.), thus causing damage, sometimes irreversible, to nature.

Although things differ quite a bit from one destination to another, and many of them have made some investments in visiting infrastructure, still in many cases there is a precarious level in terms of ecotourism infrastructure.

3. recommendation: Increasing the level of awareness, appreciation and knowledge of natural and cultural values

Public awareness and education are important components of the process of managing protected natural areas and ecotourism destinations. Education has the potential to enhance awareness of the idea that behavioral changes towards responsibility, participation, involvement in specific ecotourism activities are possible and that there are other ways of organizing specific activities in the field. Education and awareness-raising actions on the importance of nature conservation, as well as understanding and respecting the principles of ecotourism, must start with local communities and visitors, but they must influence also local and central public administrations or among economic agents. Most protected natural areas have included in their management plans awareness, education and public information to understand the importance of nature conservation. All these actions will have to be enhanced in the short term and continued in the medium and long term.

4. recommendation: Improving the level of professional training, as well as organizational, professional and career development for the staff involved in ecotourism activities

Human resources are essential for the development of tourism in Romania and ecotourism in particular. Moreover, in order to create and develop ecotourism destinations, a well-trained, trained human resource is needed, aware of the need to support ecotourism, able to deal with problems that may arise along the way, anticipate future development directions and minimize the effects negative induced by the economic, social and political environment.

Human resource development aims to improve the capabilities, skills, performance of human resources directly or indirectly involved in ecotourism activities through learning and career development. The actions developed on this level should include trainings for DMO staff, colleagues of the protected natural areas, people responsible for the tourist reception structures (accommodation structures, food, travel agencies) and other individuals who carry out a lucrative ecotourism activity or an activity related to it.

5. recommendation: Development of ecotourism products offer made by local communities within the ecotourism destinations

Stimulating local communities and encouraging them to develop a complete and complex range of ecotourism products is one of the main requirements of ecotourism.

In the short and medium term, it is envisaged to stimulate the population and small local businesses to develop ecotourism products with high quality. Among these, maximum importance should be given to traditional customs as a form of preservation and perpetuation of local culture and identity. In addition, local communities including small private entrepreneurs should be encouraged to develop leisure, accommodation and food services. All these will contribute to the creation of unique ecotourism products both nationally and internationally.

6. recommendation: Intensification of market research and monitoring of tourist flows

In the development of ecotourism products, it must be taken into account that, in general, potential ecotourists have a high level of education. Therefore, their expectations are much higher, and the realization of the products that meets these expectations is essential.

For this, reliable marketing plays significant role, which involves providing customers with complete and responsible information that leads to increased respect for the natural and cultural environment of the areas visited and thus the degree of tourist satisfaction.

Table 6: Summary of the policy recommendations for Romania

Priority Topic	Recommendation	Status Quo Description	Proposed Policy Change Description	Date for Implementation	Affected Stakeholder(s)	Final Recipient(s)
1. Partnership framework	Creating the framework for inter-institutional cooperation to increase the number of partnerships in the field of ecotourism, at local, regional and national levels	Currently, there is not the framework for inter-institutional cooperation to increase the number of partnerships in the field of ecotourism, at local, regional and national levels	In the short term it is expecting the resumption of the activity of the Inter-ministerial Group for the development of ecotourism in Romania and the creation of the National Council of Ecotourism. The national and international recognition of criteria for the designation of ecotourism destinations is also important, as well as identifying and advising other areas wishing to implement this concept and evaluating those destinations that have already started this process. The creation of DMO for designated destinations will ensure the inter-institutional cooperation and partnerships along with the well trained and qualified staff.	2020-2030	Organizations (interest associations and societies) involved in ecotourism Ministry of Tourism of Romania	Local authorities (towns and municipalities) Ministry of Tourism of Romania

<p>2. Tourist infrastructure and land use planning</p>	<p>Creating tools for developing specific ecotourism infrastructure at destination level</p>	<p>Inadequate quality of road and railway infrastructure for access to tourist destinations; access by public transport to most areas major protected is limited.</p>	<p>Protected natural areas acquire a real value in tourism only if they are organized for visiting, thus contributing to the establishment of a competitive ecotourism offer. It turned out that a poor organization lack of good organization of these sensitive areas or lack thereof exposes them to degradation, caused by tourist pressure (continuous and oversized flows of tourists, hunters of tourist "memories", etc.), thus causing damage, sometimes irreversible, to nature.</p>	<p>2020-2030</p>	<p>Organizations (interest associations and societies) involved in ecotourism</p>	<p>Ministry of Transport of Romania Ministry of Tourism of Romania</p>
<p>3. Education and awareness</p>	<p>Increasing the level of awareness, appreciation and knowledge of natural and cultural values</p>	<p>Low education and awareness of what national and local natural heritage means and its importance.</p>	<p>Public awareness and education are important components of the process of managing protected natural areas and ecotourism destinations. Education facilitates the awareness of the idea that behavioral changes towards responsibility, participation, involvement in specific ecotourism activities are possible and that there are other ways of organizing specific activities in the field.</p>	<p>2020-continuously</p>	<p>Organizations (interest associations and societies) involved in ecotourism</p>	<p>Schools Tourists</p>

<p>4. Human resources development</p>	<p>Improving the level of professional training, as well as organizational, professional and career development for the staff involved in ecotourism activities</p>	<p>Fairly low level of training for ecotourism guides /the specialized staff that manages the accommodation structures; Lack of staff prepared for the development of ecotourism destinations</p>	<p>Human resources are essential for the development of tourism in Romania and ecotourism in particular. Moreover, in order to create and develop ecotourism destinations, a well-trained, trained human resource is needed, aware of the need to support ecotourism, able to deal with problems that may arise along the way, anticipate future development directions and minimize the effects negative induced by the economic, social and political environment.</p>	<p>2020-continuously</p>	<p>Organizations (interest associations and societies) involved in ecotourism Ministry of Tourism of Romania</p>	<p>Local authorities (towns and municipalities)</p>
<p>5. Business development and local development</p>	<p>Development of ecotourism products offer made by local communities within the ecotourism destinations</p>	<p>Poor development of ecotourism products offer made by the local communities within the ecotourism destinations / with ecotourism potential.</p>	<p>Stimulating local communities and encouraging them to develop a complete and complex range of ecotourism products are main requirements of ecotourism.</p>	<p>2020-2030</p>	<p>Organizations (interest associations and societies) involved in ecotourism Ministry of Tourism of Romania</p>	<p>Local authorities (towns and municipalities) Ministry of Tourism of Romania</p>

<p>6. Marketing and promotion</p>	<p>Intensification of market research and monitoring of tourist flows</p>	<p>In Romania, not much market research is done, and tourist flows are not monitored</p>	<p>In the development of ecotourism products, it must be taken into account that, in general, potential ecotourists have a high level of education. Therefore, their expectations are much higher, and the realization of the products that meets these expectations is essential.</p>	<p>2020-continuously</p>	<p>Organizations (interest associations and societies) involved in ecotourism Ministry of Tourism of Romania</p>	<p>Local authorities (towns and municipalities) Ministry of Tourism of Romania</p>
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Source: National strategy for ecotourism development in Romania, 2015

3.6 Policy recommendations on ecotourism for Serbia

3.6.1 Introduction

The Republic of Serbia has a central register of protected natural assets, which is maintained and updated by the Institute for Nature Protection. The central register records 469 protected natural assets with various degrees of protection, out of which 5 are national parks. A total of 677,950 ha are under protection, which is 7.66% of the country's territory. There are 1763 strictly protected species of plants and animals, and 860 protected species of plants, animals and fungi. These natural resources are managed by public companies, which have their own work and protection plan every year. With the exceptional commitment of the environmental associations, public companies have promoted eco-tourism on protected natural assets, like: hiking, biking, eco-camps, events and education. Observatories, canopies, and visitor centers were established on the edges and inside natural resources. A private initiative has been launched to establish accommodation facilities in rural areas. Often eco-tourism is included in rural tourism but its's not treated as a separate type of tourism.

The eco-tourism development strategy (Razvoj eko turizma u Srbiji) is included in rural development related local document and many micro-regions possessing protected natural assets have adopted these strategies. The development of eco-tourism as defined in the international framework, is still in its infancy, although there is great potential in it. The Strategy defined by CenORT (Centar za odgovorni i održivi razvoj turizma; Center for Responsible and Sustainable Tourism Development), has a special role in promoting eco-tourism service certification.

The non-governmental sector has made great strides in drawing attention to eco-tourism, no matter if we are talking about green hotels with less than 100 beds, or a small, private accommodation facility that offers agro-tourism services. There is, however, still a lack of specialized tourist guides and good marketing.

The eco-tourism market is constantly growing, so it must adapt sustainable development to concerned territories, and follow the tolerability of the number of tourists in a certain period of time in order to avoid devastation. Although there is more and more talk about eco-tourism in Serbia, and many professional and scientific papers on this topic has been appeared, there is still a delay in implementation and in attracting foreign tourists. Even tough the landscapes are so diverse, unusual and interesting (besides the sea there are biodiversity from steppes,

mountains, hills, alluvial plains, forests, rivers and lakes, thermal baths, even to the rainforest) that the choice is difficult for both domestic and foreign tourists.

The development of ecotourism in Serbia should be, not only a way to achieve the overall sustainable development of tourism, but also an adequate approach for repositioning Serbia as a tourist destination on the international market by creating a desirable image for the country rich in natural and cultural resources.

General recommendations related to policy makers rely on the Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia 2016-2025 (which needs to be updated due to the changed conditions in the world) as well as on some of the goals set in the Strategy: "Sustainable economic, *ecological* and social development of tourism in the Republic of Serbia."

3.6.2 Policy recommendations

1. recommendation: Providing information to tourists and launching national media campaigns

Providing local information to cycling tourists is of great importance. This includes placing info boards in visible places with important phone numbers, information, websites important for eco-cycling tourists, as well as designing a logo for service providers of eco-cycle tourists that will be recognisable and using it in promotional materials. Also, more attention should be paid to unique national signalisation, which means building a system that is easily recognisable and wherever tourists go, they can get the same information during the cycling tour. Besides, it is important to intensify national media campaigns on cycling tourism as a sector with excellent potential in Serbia.

2. recommendation: Building partnerships

When we are talking about building partnership first of all it is very important to create a database of all tourism service providers that in some way appear on the supply side in cycling tourism. On the other hand, it would be interesting to create shorter and longer tours, along a natural asset or about natural wealth, which pass near a Eurovelo route, but also separately from it, in order to connect individual thematic tours, not only in terms of cycling tourism, but also such areas that can be reached by bike. After this, a good cooperation should be established. Especially, cooperation with other providers of tourist services. They should cooperate and develop new projects and joint tourist products, packages. Furthermore, cooperation between local population and tourists should be enhanced. Every resident of the local community who rides a bicycle should be an ambassador of eco-cycling tourism, to give information to tourists regarding nature, environment and services. Last but not least, regional cooperation is very important in order to develop joint program packages, tours, with joint marketing and market presence and to harmonize the offer with the tourism criteria at regional level.

3. recommendation: Development of an ecological approach and education on natural rarities for locals and visitors

Development of an ecological approach, means providing trainings (in order to put pressure on public companies and local self-government) and shaping attitudes in order to create an environmentally conscious way of life. Also, initiating measures with public companies to enhance and maintain the hygiene of the infrastructure and perpetuate other necessary maintenances.

It is of great importance to educate local population and tourists on natural rarities and beauties. By raising awareness on the uniqueness of the natural beauty of an area, we can enrich the tourist offer and attract more nature lovers.

Table 7: Summary of the policy recommendations for Serbia

Priority Topic	Recommendation	Status Quo Description	Proposed Policy Change Description	Date for Implementation	Affected Stakeholder(s)	Final Recipient(s)
1. Providing information to tourists and creating a national ecotourism image	Providing local information to cycling tourists (info boards, online, maps)	Eco tourists have basic information only from the site of JP Palić-Ludaš	Placing info boards in visible places with important phone numbers, information, websites important for eco-cycling tourists. Designing a logo for service providers of eco- cycle tourists that will be recognisable, using it in promotional materials	2020-2021	NGOs Local self-government	Eco-cycle tourists Travel agencies
	Creating a national image	There are environmental associations, but their strength is not united to put pressure on state institutions	Intensifying national media campaigns on eco-tourism as a sector with excellent potential in Serbia	2020-2025	State institutions	Eco associations Eco tourists Travel agencies

<p>2. Building partnerships</p>	<p>Cooperation with other providers of tourist services - development of joint tourist products, packages</p>	<p>There are individual activities and events within eco-tourism but other providers are not included</p>	<p>Integrating other tourist products with eco- cycling tourism in the offer: wine routes, cultural-historical objects, events, gastronomic routes, recreation and spa, forest and meadow trails, theme parks, attractions encouraging the sale of local products and networking of service providers.</p>	<p>2020-2025</p>	<p>NGOs Travel agencies A wider range of providers</p>	<p>Tourists Locals</p>
	<p>Cooperation between local population and tourists</p>	<p>The local population is not motivated enough to provide information to tourists</p>	<p>Every resident of the local community who rides a bicycle should be an ambassador of eco-cycling tourism, to give information to tourists, guide them, give advise on bicycle repair. Organising joint local tours of eco-cycle tourists with the local population</p>	<p>2020-2025</p>	<p>NGOs Local population through various forums</p>	<p>Tourists Locals Service providers</p>

	Regional cooperation	Standards of eco-tourism are not represented, although protected natural assets have cooperation with similar ones in the region	Inside and outside the country, development of joint program packages, tours, with joint marketing and market presence. Harmonisation of the offer with the Tourism criteria at regional level.	2020-ongoing	NGOs Local and state institutions Public enterprises	Tourists Travel agencies
3. Development of an ecological approach and Education on natural rarities for locals and visitors	Cooperation of NGOs and public companies	Public companies have activities to promote eco-tourism, including NGOs, but this is not well known	Training and shaping the attitudes of the population in order to create an environmentally conscious way of life Initiating measures with public companies to maintain hygiene and cleanliness of infrastructure as well as the necessary maintenance	2020-ongoing	NGOs Public enterprises	Tourists Travel agencies Locals

	Tourists	Marketing of protected natural assets is not sufficiently targeted at stakeholders	presenting valuable areas for tourists, putting them in the context of nature protection	2020-ongoing	NGOs Public companies	Tourists Travel agencies
	Local population and tourists	Insufficient motivation of the local population to explain the autochthonous values of biodiversity to tourists	Raising awareness of the natural beauty of the region	2020-2021	NGOs Public companies Local population through forums	Tourists Travel agencies

Source: Institute for Nature Conservation of Serbia

3.7 Policy recommendations on ecotourism for Slovakia

3.7.1 Introduction

Slovakia has very good natural conditions and a geographical position for the development of tourism, which is referred to as a dynamically developing sector. The landscape is rich in flora, fauna, including protected and rare species of animals, plants. Forests cover up to 36% of the total area. The most valuable natural areas are 9 national parks (NP) and 14 protected landscape areas (PLA). Their area occupies a total of 17.5% of Slovakia's area, these are the most attractive and most visited for tourists. Many of them have many caves on their territory, there are more than 5,300 in Slovakia. 15 of them are open to the public and equipped with services. As a relatively small country, Slovakia have 5 cultural and 2 natural sites on the UNESCO list. From tourism development point of view, 15 water recreational areas are also important, which are popular mainly for domestic tourists. All the above-mentioned areas are designated as recreational areas with infrastructure and services for guests and thus support tourism.

3.7.2 Policy recommendations

Despite the fact that Slovakia does not have a developed national strategy for the development of ecotourism, its principles are defined in national and regional strategic documents. The concepts of ecotourism and nature tourism in Slovakia are part of the philosophy of sustainable tourism, which is the basis for important strategic documents. E.g. Tourism Development Strategy until 2020, Vision and Development Strategy of Slovakia until 2030, Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy until 2030 (which is currently in preparation and should be submitted to the Government of the Slovak Republic at the end of 2021 and Environmental Policy Strategy of the Slovak Republic until 2030 (Greener Slovakia).

In the 8. table we present other strategic documents on international and national levels working with the concept of sustainable tourism and the principles of ecotourism and are related to Slovakia too.

Table 8: Strategic documents working with the concept of sustainable tourism

Level	Document	Relation to tourism and principles of ecotourism
International (UN)	Agenda 2030 for sustainable development (2015)	- Aims for sustainable development (SDG)
International (UN)	Environmental program UN	- Ecotourism as development tool
International (EU)	Towards sustainable Europe in 2030	- Fulfill the SDG principles - Development of sustainable tourism - Ecosystem services in tourism
International (association of countries Czech republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, Ukraine)	Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians (2003)	- Environmental protection - The benefits of tourism for residents
National (SR)	Vision and strategy of Slovakia's development until 2030	- Sustainable development of regions - Regional tourism
National (SR)	National Strategy for Sustainable Development (2001)	- Sustainable tourism as an opportunity to meet the objectives of sustainable development
National (SR)	Tourism development strategy until 2020 (2013)	- Development of "subtle" forms of tourism

		- Development of cycling, hiking and water tourism in Slovakia
National (SR)	Sustainable tourism development strategy until 2030 (in preparation)	- Sustainable use of the country's potential - Support for authentic experiences
National (SR)	Protocol on Sustainable Tourism (2011)	- Promoting the uniqueness of nature, landscape and cultural heritage through tourism
National (SR)	Strategy of the environmental policy of the Slovak Republic until 2030 (Greener Slovakia)	- Promotion of "soft" forms of tourism - Raising environmental awareness

Source: own elaboration, 2020

At the political level, the principles of ecotourism are implemented in two key areas. The first area is the protection and restoration of natural environment, the second area is regional development with an emphasis on increasing the economic potential of regions. Each of these areas has developed National Strategies (or are in the process of preparation) which are listed in Table 1.

Examples of applying the principles of ecotourism

For easier orientation and explanation of the situation in Slovakia in the implementation and application of the principles of ecotourism in individual areas, we present brief examples for the area of protection and restoration of natural environment and the area of regional development.

1. area

Protection and restoration of natural environment - the application of the principles of ecotourism is generally understood as a tool for better management of national parks, protected landscape areas and their accessibility for tourists, but also environmental protection so that the landscape is not devastated and preserved for future generations.

A relatively often problem of various natural areas in Slovakia, including the Carpathian beech forests, which were added to the UNESCO World Natural Heritage List in 2007, is insufficient protection of the area from excessive logging. Experts working in these territories in 2017 already agreed that a measure aimed at proposing the modification of the boundaries of

territories¹, their buffer zones, which would prevent excessive logging or excessive game hunting, would help them. Equally important for them is the introduction of a system to monitor the impact of tourism. Further they stressed the importance of a strategy to promote and carry out proper marketing for the site / area so that it is attractive to tourists. Lastly, there is a need to develop destination management as a way of systematic management of the natural site as a tourist destination (or as part of a larger tourist destination). The draft measures supporting these needs were prepared by the Ministries of the Environment, Agriculture and Foreign Affairs on the basis of the recommendations of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee regarding the Carpathian beech forests.

2. area - **Regional development**

The development of ecotourism is becoming an additional (sometimes main) tool of economic recovery and for enhanced economy of less developed regions. Many of these regions have the potential to develop sustainable tourism and use direct subsidies to develop tourism activities. The method of support is part of Act no. 336/2015 Coll. of 11 November 2015 on the support of the least developed districts and on the amendment of certain laws and Act no. 539 of 4 November 2008 on the promotion of regional development. The above-mentioned starting points are already taken into account in the forthcoming document Strategy for the Development of Tourism Sustainability until 2030, as well as in the forthcoming document Vision and Strategy for Slovakia's Development until 2030, which reflects the situation in tourism in the regions.

CURRENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMENTS ON NATIONAL STRATEGIC DOCUMENTS FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ECOTURISM PRINCIPLES

In May 2019, the process of creating a Strategy for the Development of Sustainable Tourism until 2030 was launched at the national level, the contracting authority of which is the Ministry of Transport and Construction of the Slovak Republic. The Strategy for the Development of Sustainable Tourism until 2030 is the main strategic material that determines the direction of the industry for the next ten years. The focus of the document was set to support the fulfillment

¹ Interviewee plans to create different zones, these zones are predefined. The zones with the highest protection has specific rules, then there is another with lower protection, normally around the most protected with a different set of rules, etc.

of tasks arising from the Program Statement of the Government of the Slovak Republic, Agenda 2030 and taking into account the need to build a cohesive presentation of the landscape and the appropriate use of natural and cultural resources. The strategy aims to develop the tourism sector in a sustainable way.

The strategy is currently being worked on and only draft material is available to which we can react in advance. It will be officially possible to comment on only after its publication later than 2021.

The measures proposed below are based primarily on our knowledge of the situation in the tourism in the Košice Self-Governing Region (KSK) and other regions of Slovakia, as well as on the analytical part of the Ecotourism Strategy for the Development of the Košice Region.

PROPOSED MEASURES FOR A STRATEGY FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN SLOVAKIA UNTIL 2030

One of the main parts of the strategy is the area of tourism infrastructure and services development proposing the following measures in accordance with the above-mentioned objectives of the strategy:

1. recommendation: Creating suitable and administratively simple financial mechanisms to support the development of tourism and ecotourism in all regions of Slovakia

The financial situation in Slovakia and the current mechanism for obtaining support for the development of tourism or direct ecotourism are challenging in Slovakia. Lengthy administrative processes and demanding forms lead to a low use of currently available resources, which are: European resources - European investment and structural funds (hereinafter "ESIF"), Foreign endowment resources other than EU funds, Non-financial resources of civic associations - mainly volunteer work. At the regional level, financial mechanisms are simpler and less administratively demanding, these are: the state budget, budgets of self-governing regions, cities and municipalities, domestic foundation resources, private resources (sponsoring), own resources of civic associations, but the volume of funds is small. Clear and simpler mechanisms would be very helpful for all small, medium-sized businesses as well as organizations operating in tourism.

2. recommendation: Supporting of the establishment of infrastructure and services suitable for the development of ecotourism in all regions of Slovakia

Building tourist attractions taking into consideration the natural environment, the use of ecological and local materials, is one of the ways to support the establishment of infrastructure on the principles of ecotourism. Cable cars, lookout towers, boat and bicycle rentals, building tourist shelters and small additional infrastructure in a natural environment will allow the visitor to get more experiences. The higher quality of the offered services is a guarantee of the visitor's satisfaction, his stay in the destination for a longer time as well as his possible return in the future. According to the latest surveys, many visitors are dissatisfied with the services provided. There are regions where services are less developed and despite the region's potential, they lack the infrastructure for a proper tourist destination that supports the development of natural areas suitable for ecotourism and economic growth.

3. recommendation: Introduction of a system for monitoring the impacts of tourism on natural areas

A common problem for visitors in the natural environment is that they do not realize the importance of environmental protection. Mass and consumer tourism contributes to the devastation of the environment. The introduction of a monitoring system will enable better management of natural areas, the systemic management of the tourist destination and the development of ecosystem services.

4. recommendation: Raising environmental awareness, supporting formal and non-formal environmental education of the public

Establishment and networking of eco-centers in order to provide appropriate activities and services in the field of ecotourism for the public, including e. g. special guide, educational programs to selected natural areas, etc. Various educational activities promoting ecotourism, ecological travel, support for specially targeted marketing campaigns in national and regional media, information centers to raise awareness of ecotourism as well as the possibility of eco-trips, bird and animal observation or other products supporting ecotourism are needed.

5. recommendation: Support for the creation of new jobs and employment in the field of tourism and ecotourism

At present, many regional centers, municipalities, cities, organizations operating in tourism are struggling with the lack of available funds for the creation of new jobs, respectively to keep the current ones. Human resources are underestimated and their increase would fundamentally help to develop all services and supplement the necessary qualified capacities.

CONCLUSIONS

The existence of national strategies and documents is very important for the development of ecotourism and sustainable tourism in Slovakia. However, the development of ecotourism and ecotourism goes hand in hand with other topics such as unemployment, lack of financial resources in the region, weak support for self-employed people interested in ecotourism and agrotourism, as well as systemic support from the state.

In addition to commenting on National Strategies and the creation of regional policies, it is also necessary to harmonize other basic legislative documents, which are the laws of the Slovak Republic. According to the results of the survey from recent years, it is necessary to amend parts of some laws: Act no. 543/2002 Coll. On nature and landscape protection, Waste Act no. 79/2015 Coll., Water Act no. 364/2004 Coll., Act on Regional Development Support no. 539/2018 Coll., Act on the Promotion of Tourism 348/2018 Coll.. Because it is important that they comprehensively take into account natural areas and clearly define the rules and competencies for stakeholders and executives operating in the field of tourism development.

Equally important in the development of ecotourism and ecological tourism is the cooperation of all interest groups and micro-regions. In order to overcome challenges, cooperation with state subsidized organizations (Agency for Rural Development, Slovak Environment Agency, State Nature Protection), non-governmental organizations can provide a helping hand.

At the same time, there is a need to improve environmental education and training in kindergartens, primary and secondary schools and to increase the environmental awareness of the local population. One of the measures to protect the environment in the future may be the introduction of the entrance fee in order to regulate traffic, which would be, of course, a very bold but wise step.

Table 9: Summary of the policy recommendations for Slovakia

Priority topic	Recommendation	Description of status quo	Description of proposed recommendation	Date	Afected partners	Final recipients
1. Financial mechanism	Creating suitable and administratively simple financial mechanisms to support the development of tourism and ecotourism in all regions of Slovakia	The current financial mechanisms are insufficient, administratively demanding, the absorption of funds is low, the co-financing rate is high.	Simplify the administrative mechanisms for drawing EU resources, allocate higher amounts of financial resources to regional financial mechanisms (subsidy and grant schemes) - transfer funds from the state directly to the regions.	2020-2030	Ministry of Transport and Construction of the Slovak Republic Ministry of Investment Regional Development and Informatization of the Slovak Republic Associations and organizations operating in the tourism	Small and medium-sized enterprises Tourism organizations Non-profit organizations Municipalities Cities Legal entities and entrepreneurs

<p>2. Tourism infrastructure</p>	<p>To support the establishment of infrastructure and services suitable for the development of ecotourism in all regions of Slovakia</p>	<p>According to surveys, many visitors are dissatisfied with the services provided and there are regions where services are less developed, and despite the region's potential, it lacks quality infrastructure to build a tourist-attractive destination and the current influx of tourists does not cover their needs.</p>	<p>Building of tourist attractions with consideration to the natural environment, the use of ecological and local materials, is one of the ways to support the construction of infrastructure for the development of ecotourism. Cable cars, lookout towers, boat and bicycle rentals, building tourist shelters and small additional infrastructure in a natural environment will allow the visitor to get more experiences. The higher quality of the offered services is a guarantee of the visitor's satisfaction, his stay in the destination for a longer time as well as a possible return in the future.</p>	<p>2020-2030</p>	<p>Ministry of Transport and Construction of the Slovak Republic Ministry of Investment Regional Development and Informatization of the Slovak Republic Associations and organizations operating in the tourism</p>	<p>Small and medium-sized enterprises Tourism organizations Non-profit organizations Municipalities Cities Legal entities and entrepreneurs Local residents</p>
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<p>3. Monitoring</p>	<p>Introduction of a system for monitoring the impact of tourism on natural areas</p>	<p>A common problem for visitors in the natural environment is that they do not realize the importance of environmental protection. Mass and consumer tourism contributes to the devastation of the environment.</p>	<p>The introduction of a monitoring system will enable better management of natural areas, the systemic management of the tourist destination and the development of ecosystem services.</p>	<p>2020-2030</p>	<p>Ministry of the Environment State Nature Protection National Parks Administration Protected countryside area</p>	<p>Cities, municipalities Organizations operating in tourism National Parks Protected countryside area</p>
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<p>4. Information, Awareness raising, Environmental education</p>	<p>Raising environmental awareness, supporting formal and non-formal environmental education of the public</p>	<p>Lack of activities towards the promotion of ecotourism, existing tourism products such as eco-trips, attractions in the Protected countryside area (eg rock climbing, ferrata ...) Low public awareness of the importance of protection of natural resources and ecosystems, lack of educational enviro programs, accompanied by eco-shows for visitors of the destination.</p>	<p>Establishment and networking of eco-centers in order to provide appropriate activities and services in the field of ecotourism for the public, including e.g. special guide educational programs to selected natural areas, etc. Various educational activities promoting ecotourism, ecological travel, support for specially targeted marketing campaigns in national and regional media, information centers to raise awareness of ecotourism as well as the possibility of eco-trips, bird and animal watching or other products supporting ecotourism.</p>	<p>2020-2030</p>	<p>Ministry of the Environment State nature protection National Parks Protected countryside areas Administration Tourism organizations</p>	<p>Cities Municipalities Organizations operating in the tourism</p>
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<p>5. Employment</p>	<p>Support of creation of new work opportunities and employment in the area of tourism and ecotourism</p>	<p>At present, many regional centers, tourist clubs or other organizations operating in the tourism are struggling with the lack of available funds for the creation of new jobs, respectively to keep the current ones. Human resources are undersized and increasing them would fundamentally help the development of all services and the necessary capacities</p>	<p>New jobs and a skilled workforce = better service and a happier visitor</p>		<p>Ministry of Labor Social Affairs and Family Ministry of Investment Regional Development and Informatization of the Slovak Republic Associations and organizations operating in the field of tourism</p>	<p>Associations and organizations operating in the field of tourism Business entities Operators of accommodation Catering services, etc.</p>
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Sources: Štúdia rozvoja ekoturistiky a lesnej pedagogiky v regiónoch Krupina, Levie, Veľký Krtíš, Lučenec a Zvolen, Odomknutie endogénneho potenciálu cestovného ruchu národného parku Poloniny a okresu Snina, Stratégia rozvoja CR do roku 2020, Vízia a stratégia rozvoja Slovenska do roku 2030, Stratégia rozvoja ekoturizmu v Košickom kraji, Koncept prírodného turizmu v Slovenských podmienkach

4. Policy recommendations regarding ecotourism in the Danube region

In this chapter the results of the stakeholder interviews are presented, the seven main topics are analysed in detail.

4.1 Strategy development, strategic planning

Strategic planning is extremely important because external effects are common for tourism destinations and providers. Thorough planning is needed to counteract these. The national ecotourism strategies are in different stages (non-existing, not updated, updated) in the Danube region. It needs to be rethought in which form can the countries learn from each other most effectively. All experts agreed that it is important to get to know other national situations and there are possibilities for “*lessons learnt*” activities in frame of tender projects. Connecting, thinking together, even digitally is essential.

“Visiting each other is great but it is not enough, common planning for infrastructure, activities and interpretation is needed.” (Romania)

Getting personal experiences is the best way but looking for best practices on the internet is useful as well but it should be considered if they are adapted to local circumstances. It is valid for studying the national strategies as well, *“it would be useful to get all other national strategies and getting answers for the main questions: how to develop a strategy, how to implement it”*. (Bulgaria)

It is worth to launch internship programs for decisionmakers (ministries) and to work closely together in international organisations like the Carpathian Convention.

There are European countries, which could serve as good examples for a well-thought-out/well elaborated national ecotourism strategy. The interview partners named several countries: Romania (two mentions, it brings together in an innovative way the public and private sectors in a partnership for nature conservation and sustainable tourism development), Austria (two mentions), Germany. Outside the project area Slovenia was named by two experts and surprisingly the Philippines with its well-structured strategy containing great indicators and a good action plan.

Monitoring is one of the most neglected areas in ecotourism. It is essential because in some cases the nature aspects are neglected. *“Austria builds for example a lot of infrastructure in the mountains, due to which the landscape is damaged. The whole nature (air, water, etc.) must be*

monitored asking concrete questions, like do bears behave differently due to visitors or how much waste is produced.” (Austria)

Several data (e.g. data on transportation: how far do visitors travel, how do they come to the area) should be collected for more efficient (environmentally friendly) planning regarding the impacts of ecotourism on the natural environment.

The construction of the monitoring system should involve nature protection and tourism experts in various sectors, levels, areas and should be started with studying solutions on international level. The concept of European Ecotourism Labelling Standards has to be adopted, which offers a certification scheme for the destinations. A framework of ecological carrying capacities of the concerned area must be developed for collecting data and a set of indicators (depends on the area, what treasures have to be protected) has to be defined.

Only the type of infrastructural developments should be allowed, which do not destroy nature. Therefore, before the investments natural values have to be explored (listed), but very often there is no time for that. Therefore *“we do not know what natural values are getting lost.”* (Hungary)

Other statistics (e.g. number of tourists, length of stay, consumption (quantity and behaviour), density of accommodation) should be collected as well for planning regarding the ecotourist flows in the Danube region. Socioeconomic data of visitors is useful, and through automatic counting the temporary distribution of visitors can be monitored. Questionnaire surveys are useful tools as well, asking questions like Would you come if this area wouldn't be a national park? What are you interested in?

“The purpose of visit has to be identified because some activities harm more the nature. The task is complex, because in some activities 10 people can make more damage than 100.” (Romania)

Mapping the needs and expectations of tourists is cardinal, but status of conservation should be looked at the same time.

It is worth to look at the European tourism indicator system (e. g. percentage of enterprises which contribute to nature conservation) while setting up the monitoring system.

In the ecotourism destinations correct interpretation and reflecting on trends is essential, proper signage and qualified tour guides are important, but we shouldn't only inform tourists about the

bans, but also about the possibilities. We can conclude that statistics is not enough, working with management tools is essential.

4.2 Development of ecotourism infrastructure, products, and services

For developing cycling tourism in the Danube area, we have to consider the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The SWOT analysis is one of the oldest and most widely used methods of strategic planning, ready for the structure and evaluative summary of complex ideas. With the help of strategic directions, projects can be designated. The SWOT analysis was based on the interviewed experts' views.

Strengths:

- Wilderness areas
- Danube as asset
- Diverse and rich natural and cultural values, especially in the Pannonian biogeographic region
- The floodplain of the Danube is rich in biodiversity
- Hidden ecotourism treasures
- Several ecotourism initiatives, offers, best practices

Weaknesses:

- Regional disparities, tourism infrastructure is underdeveloped in the lower Danube
- Connectivity in public transport especially in rural areas, consistency is difficult to manage
- Different standards regarding attractions, infrastructure
- Different quantity and quality of tourist information
- Lack of coherent product system, infrastructure
- Not sufficient protection of national treasures
- Not efficient management of ecotourism services
- Attitude of tourists is not humble enough
- Sewage from several large cities (e.g. Belgrade) flows directly into the Danube
- Natural landscapes are not connected, lack of ecological corridors
- Barely left native forest
- Weak cooperation (e. g. lack of common packages)

- Weak national support for businesses
- Each country has a different approach, financing system

Opportunities:

- General economic development
- Outdoor activities are getting more popular partly due to the pandemic
- Change in touristic behaviour regarding the COVID-situation
- Sustainable cycling tourism
- Development of hiking equipment
- More environmentally conscious thinking among decisionmakers
- Declaration of new protected areas alongside Danube
- Projects rewinding to bring back natural processes
- Rehabilitation of natural habitats

Threats:

- Too competitive ecotourism service providers
- Losing biodiversity
- Potential cultural and natural values are not used properly
- Overuse of natural resources
- Agricultural intensification
- Detrimental effects of continuous construction
- Decrease in Danube water level and quality of soil
- Recreation is not considered as an issue in the Eastern part of the area
- Economic differences
- Lack of efficient financial mechanism (wasting money through projects)
- Lack of legislation
- No interest from side of the authorities

The interview partners considered best practices in the Danube region with respect to ecotourism infrastructure, products, and services. One of them is the Bayerischer Wald National Park (Germany) regarding visitor guidance and marked hiking trails (two persons are employed for marking). The phenomenon of overtourism can be experienced since 2018, there are not enough parking places in the national park, cars are parking everywhere, ambulance and fire

department has difficulties. Therefore, guides teach visitors how to behave, digital tours (official tour tips) are offered, a bus system was built out to convince more people to use public transport. It is free for those who are sleeping in the area, the local administration co-finances the bus system.

Among the best practices was mentioned the network of mountaineering villages (Bergsteigerdörfer) in Austria. The participating settlements have to meet several criteria like the village has to be accessible by public transportation. This network of villages can teach us how to be close, but at the same time respectful to the nature.

The Golovec hill with its urban forest (Ljubljana, Slovenia) is a good example of conscious preservation. The rest areas are placed in the way that they do not disturb the view.

The initiative and competition promoting sustainable tourism development models across the EU is called EDEN (European Destinations of Excellence), which competitors can show several good practices.

Some interview partners named more general best practices, they appreciated the Austrian national parks for promoting local values, Austria and Hungary for dedicated infrastructure, and Romania and Bulgaria for great ecotourism products and services.

4.3 Conserving landscape and nature

The status of nature conservation and sustainable land use in the Danube region is different not only in the countries, but even in the regions. The greatest problems are in the Lower Danube due to sewage treatment.

The situation is “*globally quite good but it can be improved.*” (Austria) Conservation policy is difficult because it can stop people to do economic activities and generates a lot of emotions. It is often “*under pressure of economic interests.*” (Slovakia)

There are few natural areas, the cultural landscape is usually tailored by man. Cross-border projects are getting more popular, but sources are often missing. For Serbia it is a disadvantage for not being supported in frame of the LIFE project.

One of the most important and urgent tasks in this area in terms of nature conservation and the protection of the services nature provides is overtourism. It can be experienced in the Saxon Switzerland, at the North Sea, and the Baltic Sea.

Countries should be committed to dedicate larger areas for national parks and have more untouched areas. The conservation areas should be connected with each other based on the concept of stepstones, which would result that animals can migrate from one place to another. The behaviour should be improved: no illegal activities for service providers and generally enhanced awareness of values for tourists for better relationship with nature (stay on the track, pick up your trash). Changing of the thinking should be handled as a priority for holding the loss of biodiversity. *“Tourists are users of conservation currently with no contribution, payment for ecosystem services should be considered.”* (Austria)

The attitude formation in frame of environmental education would be important not only in case of the population but in the case of the investors and planners. The decisionmakers should prefer, if it is possible, brownfield investments and make assessment of wildlife values before investments.

The national ecotourism strategies contain all the targets, but it is questionable how they are implemented. In most strategies there is only economic point of view, the ecological one is often missing.

4.4 Creating financial support

Based on the opinion of the interview partners the available financial resources in ecotourism in the Danube region are only partly (Interreg projects - not promoted as ecotourism schemes - and LIFE-projects) efficiently used. By others, the long-term accountability is missing, only the trends are followed, although long-term goals should not be forgotten. The tenders are too bureaucratic, the NGOs are not involved properly, sometimes tenders are tailor-made for the applicants. Pre-financing is problematic as well, co-financing is often a problem, the own sources are not enough. Ecotourism attractions are not able to compete with these financial resources.

There is no systematic Danube region support. A further great problem by setting the goals is that *“instead of presenting nature, we always want to build. We take nature away so we can present it.”* (Hungary) The problems are different in the countries: In Bulgaria ski and sea resorts get the financial support, therefore there is not enough money for nature-based holiday, while in Germany federalism makes a problem, the collaboration between the authorities is problematic.

The experts name several solutions what should be done to better explore and exploit funding opportunities of ecotourism in the Danube region. The language of EU-tenders and mechanism of tenders is complicated, they have to be simplified. Connected to monitoring, an evaluation

process should be integrated in the strategy, indicators are needed. An integrated (synergies with other sectors) and bottom-up approach (the mechanism should not be regulated by Brussels) is needed. *“Not big infrastructural projects, but small initiatives should be supported.”* (Slovakia)

4.5 Cooperation

The countries along the Danube could cooperate with each other regarding ecotourism in several areas. *“First step would be the co-operation of border regions. It would develop afterwards by itself.”* (Germany) It could contain developing hiking routes, cycling trails, unified signposting, common marketing activities (e.g. campaigns), education programs. In frame of tender projects best practices could be shared, species rescued (meadow eagle before extinction), ecological corridors could be built. *“Not only producing papers but developing standards and financial mechanism is necessary.”* (Romania) The interview partners name some successful examples of cross-border cooperation in ecotourism in the Danube region, like the Neusiedlersee Cultural Landscape.

For all these activities clear common objectives have to be defined. In the process sustainability should be the driver, which affects every economic activity. Nature should be the most important value (if we destroy the basis, we cannot step further), all other potential cooperation possibilities (e.g. *“becoming a trademark for ecotourism”*, Bulgaria) come afterwards.

The experts add different opinions regarding which organization should initiate and manage cooperation among the countries. Some interview partners named existing schemes and organisations (European Union, Danube Transnational Program; working groups of – not particularly tourism-oriented Carpathian Conventions and Alpine Conventions), some others meant that a new umbrella organization would be fine with civic and state partners or it has to be set up on governmental level (national tourism authorities would deal, because NGOs do not have the potential)

Our question was if it is worth promoting ecotourism jointly in the Danube region, if yes, who should coordinate and finance these campaigns and what should be the main message. Some experts saw a potential in it (*“If there is a joint product, then yes, but only in this case.”* Germany; *“Yes, showing that we are not only reacting, but acting, we have initiatives”* Romania; *“Yes. Danube is needed to support and can not be forgotten”* Bulgaria), some refused the idea (*“Normally bigger destinations are promoted, from business point of view it is not worth to ad directly to the consumers”*, Slovakia). Because of cost-effectiveness already existing organisations (e. g. Danube Competence Center) would work in common marketing

issues, promoting touristic packages with *“floodplain, birds, fishing, relation of people and nature.”* (Serbia)

4.6 Awareness-raising

Raising awareness is one of the most important tasks in each Danube country. We asked how the level of awareness, appreciation, and knowledge of ecological and cultural values could be increased and which are the most effective formal and non-formal environmental education methods.

The German interview partner presented a complete system of awareness-raising. The Bavarian forest National Park has an own Department of Environmental Education organising guided tours for families and groups. They invite kindergarten and nursery children to learn about trees and mushrooms. In their guesthouses they offer whole week programs for schools (wilderness camp, treehouse, campfire). The rangers work approximately 80% of their working time as guides and 20% they act as policemen. There are volunteers educated by the national park working as forest guides.

The interview partners agreed that awareness-raising has to start young in connection to the local community, someone can get first in touch with local biodiversity. Education should consist of real impression and experience for the young generation, not only from books, but excursions, guiding. TV and high-tech solutions are important as well.

National parks should play a bigger role, and civic organisations should be involved as well. They must teach the pupils, what is unique, what to appreciate, why to appreciate. Non-formal education is more efficient, to show the value, to learn about its importance: *“let us touch the nature, discover the wilderness”* (Romania).

The long-term sustainability of ecotourism offers can be guaranteed through visitor management for avoiding conflicts and giving experience. The products shouldn't be project-based, market research is needed (what do our tourists really want), linking the products with market niches (e. g. people with special needs cannot be forgotten) while having harmony between natural conditions and consumer needs.

Sustainability means quality products, effective destination management (more stakeholder involvement, better collaboration, networking, sharing good practices). In frame of financial sustainability, entrance fees are needed, *“because people appreciate only what they pay for”* (Hungary).

Trainings should be organized for locals, not only for people in the tourism sector. If locals become official guides, they earn money and raise the acceptance of the ecotourism attraction. In Germany junior rangers (10-11 years) are actively accompanying a ranger during summer holiday for one week. The events must be open for the local population (explore your own region); they have to get to know what the service providers promote.

4.7 Education of staff and employment

The creation of new jobs can be supported in the field ecotourism in the Danube region if the needed services (guide, rental shop, repair shop) are defined. Environmentally friendly investments help creating new jobs by habitat restoration, extermination of invasive species and introduction of native species. Small-scale developments are needed, with involvement of local people.

The cooperation among partners is important: travel agencies should for instance collaborate with Destination Management Organisations. The German interview partner presented a good working cooperation system (National Park Partner Project): 70 service providers come every year twice to the national park to get to know the news and current research results. They give their knowledge to their guests and they can sharpen their profile while using the information in marketing.

The level of professional training for the staff involved in ecotourism activities has to be improved. Targeted financial funds help small farmers becoming foster guides and offering guided tours, which is useful because *“there are only few guides who are credible and knowledgeable in the field.”* (Serbia) Better qualification and expertise are needed for small businesses, local authorities should encourage the local population.

During ecotourism trainings the experts have to know the international standards and the regional specification and mix these two. Professional and motivated lecturers focus on knowledge and interpretation, both have to be improved. Individual approach is needed in teaching, flexible approach to consumers. The trainers must have a lot of experience and researchers have to be involved. The trainers have to show openness, empathy, have an interesting personality, have sense of humour, and notice if someone is saturated. Online training should be combined with site visits (practical part in nature is essential) and more shorter courses should be offered in specific topics.

Even the information flow has to be set up within an organisation: how the research department gives results to the staff that at the end someone at the information centre can answer the question whether wolves are coming back.

5. Conclusions

The project partners overviewed the current situation of their own countries using desk research and formulated national policy recommendations. They revealed that there are nine areas to improve regarding ecotourism: 1. strategy development, strategic planning; 2. development of ecotourism infrastructure, products, and services; 3. conserving landscape and nature; 4. creating financial support; 5. cooperation; 6. awareness-raising; 7. education of staff and employment; 8. marketing; 9. monitoring. The summary of these recommendations can be found in Table 10.

Table 10: Summary of national policy recommendations

	Strategic development, strategic planning	Development of ecotourism infrastructure, products, and services	Conserving landscape and nature	Creating financial support	Cooperation	Awareness-raising	Education of staff, employment	Marketing	Monitoring
Austria			Reduction of further land consumption			Raising awareness for the long-term sustainability of touristic offers			
			Evaluate and respect the ecosystem limits of touristically used natural assets			Raising awareness on sustainability and preservation among tourists			
Bulgaria	Overview of the legal framework and strategy development				Encourage networking		Education and training of tourism businesses	Promotion of Bulgaria as ecotourism destination	Statistics and analytics

Germany (Bavaria)	Tourism strategy considering aspects of sustainable development				Tourism contributes to the economic well-being of the local population and stimulates local economic development	Tourism respects and promotes historical heritage as well as regional culture and traditions, strengthening the regional identity in the destination			
Hungary	Development of a national ecotourism strategy		Sustainable use of natural and cultural resources while developing ecotourism products		Cooperation and networking among service providers			Effective ecotourism marketing communication	

Romania		<p>Creating tools for the developing specific ecotourism infrastructure at destination level</p> <p>Development of ecotourism products offer made by the local communities within the ecotourism destinations</p>			<p>Creating the framework for inter-institutional cooperation to increase the number of partnerships in the field of ecotourism, at local, regional and national level</p>	<p>Increasing the level of awareness, appreciation and knowledge of natural and cultural values</p>	<p>Improving the level of professional training, as well as organizational, professional and career development for the staff involved in ecotourism activities</p>	<p>Intensification of market research and monitoring of tourist flows</p>
Serbia					Building partnerships		Development of an ecological	Providing information to

							approach and education on natural rarities for locals and visitors	tourists and launching national media campaigns	
Slovakia		Supporting establishment of infrastructure and services suitable for the development of ecotourism in all regions of Slovakia		Creating suitable and administratively simple financial mechanisms to support the development of tourism and ecotourism in all regions of Slovakia		Raising environmental awareness, supporting formal and non-formal environmental education of the public	Support for the creation of new jobs and employment in the field of tourism and ecotourism		Introduction of a system for monitoring the impacts of tourism on natural areas

Source: own research, 2020

Based on the national analyses, the Corvinus University of Budapest carried out a transnational empirical research, in the framework of which seven expert interviews took place (one per each of the project countries). Based on the interviews, regional policy recommendations were developed.

Findings of our qualitative study show that the concept of sustainable tourism is much more important and is a wider approach, ecotourism is only a part of that. During the Covid-19 pandemic it turned out that ecotourism is more resilient, because it is not as much dependent on international markets.

An integrated management plan is needed for investments that takes into account biodiversity, connectivity, implements the learning process with the involvement of stakeholders, while minimizing ecological conflicts and burdens. Preserving the ecosystem must be a priority. If they damage ecological resources, we will destroy the foundations of ecotourism.

According to experts, the most effective way to transfer experience and knowledge is to participate in site visits, but studying the design and implementation of useful and well-founded national ecotourism strategies is also an important element.

Several data regarding the impacts of ecotourism on the natural environment should be collected for environmentally friendly planning.

Mapping the needs and expectations of ecotourists is inevitable, but the state of nature conservation must also be constantly monitored. Nature conservation and tourism experts must work together to set up a monitoring system. Only ecotourism infrastructure developments that are not at the expense of natural habitats should be allowed. Investments need to explore the natural values of a given area, but there is often not enough time and resources to do so. This however need to be tackled to ensure enough time for assessing the potential impacts of investments.

Regarding development of ecotourism infrastructure, products, and services, we set up a SWOT-analysis for getting a clearer view. We identified as strengths the Danube as asset; the diverse area which is rich in natural and cultural values and the ecotourism initiatives. As weaknesses we named the regional disparities, the underdeveloped tourism infrastructure in the lower Danube, the low connectivity in public transport, the not efficient management of ecotourism services, the weak cooperation (e. g. lack of common packages). Opportunities are the general economic development, the more popular outdoor activities and change in touristic behaviour partly due to the pandemic and the more environmentally conscious thinking among

decisionmakers. To the threats belong the overuse of natural resources, the agricultural intensification, the lack of efficient financial mechanism and legislation.

The status of nature conservation and sustainable land use in the Danube region is different not only in the countries, but even in the regions. Among the detrimental effects of continuous construction, the decrease in Danube water level and quality of soil can be seen. The lack of interest from side of the authorities is experienced in some parts of the project area which should be changed. Countries need to commit to larger areas by naming national parks and have more wilderness areas. Nature reserves must be interconnected on the basis of the principle of stepstones, which results in animals being able to migrate from one place to another.

The long-term sustainability of ecotourism offerings needs an efficient visitor management for avoiding conflicts and increasing knowledge. It is important that tourism services are not only created for the duration of the tender project, but are also competitive on a market basis. This requires thorough market research. Sustainability means quality tourism products, efficient destination management with the involvement of several stakeholders, better cooperation, networking, sharing of good practices.

The behavior of service providers and tourists towards nature must be improved: service providers must be banned from engaging in illegal activities and tourists must protect nature. Changing mindsets must be a priority in order to preserve biodiversity.

Raising environmental awareness is one of the most important tasks in every country along the Danube. The appreciation and knowledge of ecological and cultural values can be best enhanced by non-formal environmental education methods. National parks need to play a greater role in this learning process and NGOs need to be involved, too. They need to teach tourists what is valuable and how to protect the environment.

According to the interviewees, the financial resources used in ecotourism in the Danube region are only partially used efficiently. Several grant constructs and requirements of other financial support lack long-term accountability. Applications are often too bureaucratic, NGOs are not sufficiently involved, pre-financing and co-financing are often a problem and own resources are insufficient. As a result, ecotourism attractions are unable to compete with the financial resources available to them.

The Danube countries would be able to cooperate with each other in the field of ecotourism. The first step should be enhancing cooperation of border regions in the creation of hiking trails, bicycle paths, uniform signage, joint marketing activities, educational programs. In the

framework of tender projects, good practices could be shared and ecological corridors could be built.

Ecotourism in the Danube region can generate jobs, which requires an accurate assessment of the services required. Small-scale developments are also needed, with the intensive involvement of local people.

During ecotourism trainings, experts should also be familiar with international standards and regional specifications in order to be able to teach both. An individual approach to teaching is needed, with a flexible approach towards consumers. To do this, educators need to have a lot of experience and also involve researchers. Online training should be combined with site visits, as the practical part is essential. Due to the limited time of the participants, it is worth offering shorter courses on specific topics.

There are also some limitations to our study. First, some respondents possessed proper knowledge only about their own country and often even only about a smaller region within that country. Second, the too long interview guideline did not allow an in-depth discussion of every question. Finally, the number of respondents was limited to one expert per country. Despite the challenges of the qualitative study, the results provide a relevant insight into ecotourism of the project area.

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7. Appendix

Interview questions regarding ecotourism in the Danube region (Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria)

Strategy development, strategic planning

1. Strategic planning is essential, but the national ecotourism strategies are in different stages (non-existing, not updated, updated) in the Danube region. In what form could the countries learn from each other most effectively?
2. Which country could serve as a good example for a well-thought-out/well elaborated national ecotourism strategy? Which steps of the strategy making process are crucial to be followed?
3. Monitoring is one of the most neglected areas in ecotourism. What kind of data should be collected for more efficient (environmentally friendly) planning regarding the impacts of ecotourism on the natural environment?
4. Which statistics (e.g. number of tourists, time spent in the destination, consumption (quantity and behaviour) should be collected for planning regarding the ecotourist flows in the Danube region in order to avoid the volume of tourism harmful for the natural environment and for the local communities?

Development of ecotourism infrastructure, products, and services

5. What do you consider as strengths and weaknesses regarding ecotourism in the Danube region?
6. What are the opportunities and threats regarding ecotourism in the Danube region?
7. What do you consider to be best practices in the Danube region with respect to ecotourism infrastructure, products, and services?

Conserving landscape and nature

8. What is the status of nature conservation and sustainable land use in the Danube region?
9. What are the most important and urgent tasks in this area in terms of nature conservation and the protection of the services nature provides?
10. Do national strategies address these tasks? Does the "best example" in the Danube region tackle properly natural landscape protection, and the conservation of services nature provide?

Creating financial support

11. How efficiently are the available financial resources used in ecotourism in the Danube region?
12. What should be done to better explore and exploit funding opportunities of ecotourism in the Danube region?
13. What should be done financially to increase efficiency in ecotourism in the Danube region?

Cooperation

14. In which areas should the countries along the Danube cooperate with each other regarding ecotourism?
15. What common goals should they set?
16. Which organization should initiate and manage cooperation among the countries?
17. Do you know successful examples of cross-border cooperation in ecotourism in the Danube region?

Marketing

18. Is it worth promoting ecotourism jointly in the Danube region? If yes, who should coordinate and finance these campaigns? What should be the main message?

Awareness-raising

19. Raising awareness is one of the most important tasks in each Danube country. How could the level of awareness, appreciation, and knowledge of ecological and cultural values be increased? Which are the most effective formal and non-formal environmental education methods?
20. How should long-term sustainability of ecotourism offers be guaranteed?

Education, employment

21. In which way should the creation of new jobs be supported in the field ecotourism in the Danube region?
22. What is the most effective way to improve the level of professional training for the staff involved in ecotourism activities?