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THE ROLE OF TOURISM IN THE URBAN REVITALIZATION OF NUCET AND VAȘCĂU TOWNS (BIHOR COUNTY, ROMANIA)

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Abstract: In Romania, the former mono-industrial small towns, at the same time with the cessation of the main industrial activity, mainly since the 90's, have undergone an increased economic and demographic decline. The revitalization of these towns remains a challenge for the territorial development policies. Under these circumstances, the inventory and the capitalization of their tourist potential can be a pillar of economic recovery, tourism being one of the activities that can support urban revitalization. The purpose of this paper is to identify the elements of the tourist potential of the towns of Nucet and Vașcău (located in South part of Bihor County) and the main forms of tourism that are the most suitable for these areas and that can be, beside other economic activities, an adjacent support for the local development. It is known that globally, more and more towns aim at strengthening their tourism sector, either for economic recovery, or to diversify their local development strategies. Moreover, this paper aims at providing an insight into the way in which the tourist activity of the towns is encouraged and supported by the higher territorial administrative structures.

Key words: small towns, urban revitalization, tourism potential, Nucet, Vașcău

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INTRODUCTION

The promotion of tourism and cultural use to regenerate declining urban areas is expanding within many cities, as a response to deindustrialisation (Bianchini, 1993; Evans and Dawson, 1994; Evans 2001) tourism being use as an urban regeneration tool, as a part of partnership approach. Inclusion of tourism activity in urban regeneration projects underlying a marketing strategy designed to sell the community to the outside world as a destination. (Sedakat et al., 2007) From economic development perspective the major benefits of tourism activity are the creation of employment for residents, increase and modernization of the infrastructure and a better access to services, all these being possible using the existing resources present within the community (Beshiri, 2005; Cox, 2004; Page et al., 1999; Wilson et al., 2001). According to the literature, many examples of successfully revitalization projects based on tourism were implemented especially in case of former industrial small towns from

UK. (McCarthy, 2007) Considering that in Romania for the small former mono-industrial cities, there are very few research about the role and impacts of the tourism sector in designing and managing regeneration schemes, this document aims to highlight the importance of tourism activity, as an alternative able to support the economic growth.

Although demographically, they are two of the smallest Romanian towns, with a population under 3000 inhabitants each, a feature of these small towns is represented by the large unincorporated area, specific to the majority of small towns appeared in the communist period (Ianos, 2004) when in their administration were introduced some neighboring villages as well. Their territorial display triggers a high degree of ruralization and also a varied tourist potential, which is currently very little capitalized, having a modest tourist infrastructure and a low offer of tourist products.

Nucet and Vascau towns, located in the southern part of Bihor county (Figure 1), appeared in 1956, as a result of forced industrialization. (Petrea et al., 2012). Location of these two towns in the western part of the country, in the mountains and in proximity of Apuseni Natural Park, can make them attractive from touristic point of view, at the same time for the population from surrounding areas but also for the foreign tourists, especially Hungarian population attracted by the mountain areas and their varied landscape.

In the studied area, the specific initiatives focused on tourism development are less present, although for these former monoindustrial towns, the tourist resources could turn into a possible "engine" of their economic revitalization.



Figure 1 Nucet and Vascau. Territorial context

OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

The material aims at the assessment of the existing tourist potential, the purpose being its higher capitalization. The target is the working-out of some development proposals for tourism development, complementary to the measures set out in the existing plans and strategies at local and regional level, based on the identification of appropriate forms of tourism and tourism infrastructure issues. The entire approach is meant to support the revitalization of the two neighboring towns that appeared in the same context and which are currently facing similar problems. The study was conducted mainly based on bibliographic documentation and field research. Also, by statistical data processing was performed an analysis of the current situation and were identified several types and forms of tourism suitable for this area, whose development can support the urban revitalization process. Using existing information, a schematic zoning of the tourist potential was compiled through GIS technology.

THE TOURIST POTENTIAL OF NUCET AND VAȘCĂU TOWNS

The economic changes occurred in the post-communist period after 1989, caused the cessation of industrial activity, which in the end led to their economic and demographic decline.

The main feature of the local tourist resources is diversity, given by the large extension of the administrative areas of these towns. They have both natural resources, given by the diversity of landforms and the presence of large areas covered by forests and pastures, and anthropic ones (old churches, rustic technical installations), a real support for the development of tourist activity.

Most natural tourist resources are found in the mountain area, respectively in the hilly areas of the two towns, areas developed as stripes, represented in the case of the Administrative Territorial Unit (ATU) Vașcău by Momei Hills and Codru Moma Mountains, and in the case of the ATU Nucet by Bihorului Hills and Bihorului Mountains. Unlike the natural resources, the anthropic ones are concentrated in the depression area, along the Crișul Negru Valley and its tributaries. (Filimon, 2007).

In the category of tourist resources of the landscape, as elements that give the landscape personality (Cocean, 2010), the most important are: the karstic area corresponding to Vașcău Plateau, which includes a wide range of shapes of exo-karst and endo-karst like: Câmpeneasca Cave, Câmpeneasca Pothole (Figure 2), sinkholes located on both sides of the road Vașcău - Câmp, intermittent spring at Călugări, Sforaș Spring, Boiu Spring – speo-karstic reservation.

Important tourist resources are also located in the upper part of Crișul Băiței Basin and on the common interfluvium with its right tributary (Sighiștelului Valley). There are numerous karst phenomena with over 36 caves, located on the Prislopu Ridge – Pietrele Negre - Peak Țapu (Berindei, 1977), and on the Nucet ATU territory there are three of these caves: Fânațe Cave, Secăturii Cave, Poștile Bihorului Cave. (www.welcometoromania.ro).

All these relief features constitute tourist resources of local and regional interest, which are currently unsuitable and difficult to access, because of the lack of signs and markings, the quality of the access roads also being precarious. They could be capitalized by creating an integrated circuit, both for cycling and hiking (Petrea et al., 2012), connected to the existing tourist circuits or by creating a joint tourism development strategy at intercommunal level, for the Ștei Zone Intercommunity Development Association.



Figure 2 Câmpeneasca Pothole



Figure 3 Lime-burning kiln (Camp Moti)

The tourist resources of hydrography are represented by springs, hydrographic arteries, but a significant tourist importance is given by the tarns specific to the karstic area of the ATU Vașcău, the most important of them are: Barna Tarn, Iezer Tarn, Ponor Lake (Câmp-Moți), Ghib Tarn (between Câmp and Izbuc), Colești Tarn, Țapului Tarn (Vașcău), (Țucra, 2000), to which is added the anthropic lake at Marmura (the biggest lake in Vașcău area). Some of them are important for the fishery development due to the presence of fish. Streams, currently undeveloped, can also be used for the practice of sports such as kayaking and rafting.

The climate tourist resources are closely linked to the sheltering topo-climate with curative effects. Also, an attractive climate element for the tourist activity is given by the persistence of the snow layer, which is abundant and lasts a long period of time - in the spring. The extreme duration of the last snow layer was until May 29 (Gaceu, 2005). This allows the practice of winter sports for a longer period of time, the best example being the development of Vârtop Holiday Village. (ATU Nucet).

The tourist resources of vegetation and fauna are varied due to the extended surface of the administrative areas of these towns: in the case of ATU Nucet forests cover 70% and pastures 21% of the total area, according to the LDP (Local Development Plan) and in the case of ATU Vașcău forests represent 32% and pastures 49%, according to the LDS (Local Development Strategy). The varied vegetation can constitute the basis for the development of camping sites, parks, sites of observation and research of flora and fauna, also vegetal associations provide a varied hunting fund, representing potential destinations for the hunting tourism.

The protected areas are numerous in the studied area and could be capitalized by practicing a sustainable tourism. They are divided into two categories: protected areas of community interest (Natura 2000) – Vașcău Plateau (14% of total ATU Vașcău surface) and protected areas of national interest (Câmpeneasca Pothole and Boiu Spring- natural speo-karst reservations). Noteworthy is the fact that 47.7% of the ATU Nucet belongs to the national protected area "The Apuseni Natural Park", as set out by the Order of the Ministry of Water, Forests and Environmental Protection nr.7/1990 (Figure 4).

So, we can say that the studied administrative areas have a varied natural tourist potential of local (ATU Vașcău) and national (Vârtop Holiday Village, ATU Nucet) interest, which is suitable for various activities: winter sports, hiking, caving, paragliding and which, through an optimal and sustainable capitalization, can contribute to the revitalization of this area.

The anthropic tourist resources are currently very little valued. The most important anthropic elements of tourist interest are: the old churches made of wood and stone, the

oldest and the most important one is the wooden church at Colești (1752), as well as the churches at Vărzarii de Sus and Vărzarii de Jos; peasant technical facilities - lime-burning kilns (Câmp Moți)- Fig.3, water mill (Vașcău), traditional rural architecture, traditional crafts, traditional costumes and customs.

Among other anthropic tourist resources stand out: traditional crafts (chalk processing - Figure 3, marble carving, weaving); traditional costumes, dances and songs, traditional customs for wedding and funeral, also appropriate religious holidays of the year. Although local customs and traditions are becoming less transmitted to the younger generation it is possible and necessary to save them, because they all represent a great potential for the development of rural tourism.

The unique landscape of Beiuș Land itself is a tourist resource, to which are being added the local cultural and social events: fairs, festivals, pilgrimages and local celebrations. Apart from the traces left by the mining activities, the specific landscape, especially in the case of the localities belonging to Vașcău ATU, is an archaic one. Not the same thing can be said about Nucet town, where the urban character is more evident due to the prevalence of high buildings, land use and the effects of a polluting industry, the exploitation of uranium from Băița Plai. This case is a particular one because, after the definitive closure of the uranium exploitation in 2009, the industrial landscape continues to decay, a possible solution could be given by greening and the reconversion of the former industrial buildings, mainly turning them into possible points of tourist attractions like: mining museum or rare minerals (existing in Băița) museum.

In conclusion, one can say that Nucet and Vașcău ATUs have different and complementary resources, but poorly capitalized. Under these circumstances, it is necessary to develop an integrated strategy for sustainable tourism, meant to preserve the uniqueness of this area and also to be an important element in the local development process.

TOURISM INFRASTRUCTURE

Accommodation and catering facilities in recent years, there have developed more in the ATU Nucet, due to the development of Vârtope Holiday Village. A large number of guesthouses and tourist lodges appeared, many of them are still uncatalogued. Currently there are: 2 hotels, 13 boarding houses, 2 villas, 6 chalets, summing up a total of 652 accommodations, predominantly ranking 2 or 3 stars. In addition there are also about 50 completed holiday homes (www.turistinformatia.ro), and others are still under construction.

The main feature of the Vârtope Holiday Village is the winter sports, where the entire development is carried out around the new ski slope "Piatra Grăitoare", opened in 2011 and which is actually a complex of two ski slopes. The former is 1150 meters long, of which 500 meters are of high difficulty, and the latter is longer (1400 m) of average difficulty, equipped with a chairlift system with a capacity of 1,400 seats per hour. (www.adevarul.ro/locale/oradea). But the major problem of this holiday village is given by the seasonality of the tourist activity, during the warm seasons there are not so many possibilities to spend a holiday here.

On the territory of ATU Nucet, the most important accommodation units are located in the Vârtope Holiday Village, while in the town itself are only one motel and a guest house with low accommodation capacity.

In terms of accommodation establishments, the ATU Vașcău has a modest situation. According to the data obtained from the local authorities, this administrative unit doesn't have a catalogued accommodation infrastructure, there is only an old forest district (6 seats), which is currently out of use.

Access roads have a strong negative impact on tourism development, especially for the ATU Vașcău, where the connection between the town itself and the component villages situated in Vașcău Karst, is made by using the county roads DJ245 and DJ244 which are in a precarious situation. Although the karst area has a rich tourist potential, the lack of road infrastructure triggers a low potential capitalization.

Another weak point for the tourism development in the area is the lack of direct routes between the villages belonging to the ATU Vașcău and the neighboring localities. (Figure 4) For instance the development of the access roads between Vărzarii de Sus and Nucet, or between Izbuc village (located south of the ATU Vașcău, on whose territory is the intermittent spring Călugări) and Cămp village, or between Colești and Șuștiu (north of the ATU Vașcău) would be appropriate. Also important for the tourist activity is the modernization of the road between Șuștiu and Moneasa, over Pădurea Craiului Mountains, so the tourists could combine curative tourism offered by Moneasa resort with cultural and recreational tourism corresponding to the villages in Vașcău Karst, or specific to the mountain area of ATU Nucet (Bihor Mountains).

APPROACH OF TOURISM IN PLANS AND STRATEGIES OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

According to the evaluation made by the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism (MRDT) in 2009, an assessment of the tourist potential was carried out for each administrative territorial unit in which were analyzed several elements of tourist potential: natural tourism potential, cultural heritage, general infrastructure, tourism infrastructure and environmental quality. According to the score of this assessment, the analyzed areas have an average potential for tourism development of 27.07 points - ATU Nucet and 39 points - ATU Vașcău of the maximum of 100 points (Table 1), even though these rates are quite low, however, they are situated above the average rate obtained for Bihor county (24 points). It should be noted that, although the score for general infrastructure and transport is higher for Vașcău town, Nucet has a superior quality of road infrastructure.

Table 1. Scores obtained from the assessment of tourist potential, 2009

| | Natural resources (points) | Heritage (points) | General infrastructure (points) | Tourism infrastructure (points) | Total score for tourism development potential (points) |
|------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|--|--|---|
| ATU Nucet | 14.5 (max 25) | 0 (max25) | 12.5 (max 30) | 0.07 (max 20) | 27.07 (max 100) |
| ATU Vașcău | 11 (max 25) | 8 (max 25) | 20 (max 30) | 0 (max 20) | 39 (max 100) |

Data source: MDTR

From this evaluation results the poor situation of these two small towns in terms of tourism infrastructure, general infrastructure shortages and the modest representation of the anthropic resources of regional and national importance.

At regional level, within the tourism development strategy of the North West Region (2007-2013), the ATU Nucet is part of the Apuseni Mountains Territorial Development, which provides the integrated development of several mountain resorts, including Vârtop,

and creating corridors linking the tourist areas, including Vârtop - Arieșeni. It is a goal reflected in the Strategic Plan for Sustainable Development of Nucet as well, where the tourist activity is considered an important pillar of local development and is focused on the development of mountain tourism (winter sports), the priority being to complete the general infrastructure of Vârtop Holiday Village.

The regional sector programs for the studied towns are the sector program B – proposing the development of circuit tourism (mining road, pilgrimages, tours of natural and anthropic sights) and the sector program C that encourages the development of theme and amusement parks. The overall objective of the regional tourism sector is to increase the competitiveness of the tourist sector by modernizing and developing the infrastructure and services, including investments in creating new attractions.

The local plan of development for the ATU Vașcău, 2007-2013, has also some priorities for tourism development: supporting the agro-tourism activity, promoting the local tourist potential through media, association with neighboring localities to develop common tourism programs and initiation of joint training for agro-tourism promoters.

Locally the most important touristic project implemented is the realization of ski slopes from Vartop for which Nucet Hall, in collaboration with Bihor County Government through investments in tourism infrastructure program, subprogram "Skiing in Romania", received a grant of 6 million euros from the MDRT (Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism). Thus, from 2011 the town has a ski slope, an annex building with parking, chair lift to transport visitors and slope maintenance equipment. As a consequence 10% of the active occupied population of Nucet operates in touristic sector, in majority of the cases the tourism workforce being retrained from other economic domains. Entrepreneurs and local investors build hostels and chalets in the Vartop holiday village, many of them being made by accessing European funds.

Opposed to Nucet to Vascau were not implemented major tourism projects.

In the context of modest financial contributions from local and regional budgets, for both towns the greatest potential in terms of funding sources, which can be accessed for development of tourist activity, is held by the EU's financial contribution through structural instruments according to Axis 5 of Regional Operational Programme (Sustainable Development and Tourism).

So we can see that, at national and regional level, between 2007-2013, tourism is an economic priority, a fact reflected in the regional and local strategies, but the positive effects of tourism in revitalisation of the analyzed small towns are not visible yet.

POSSIBILITIES TO EXPLOIT THE TOURIST POTENTIAL FOR THE REVITALIZATION OF THE STUDIED TOWNS

Currently, for Nucet ATU the sports tourism stands out, mainly winter sports specific to Vârtop Holiday Village. But an important aspect to be taken into account is the seasonal specific of the tourist activity in Vârtop, a situation that requires the need for planning other touristic elements like adventure parks, events etc. designed to attract tourists throughout the entire year, the aim being to create a dynamic tourist activity. Although Vașcău ATU has a significant tourist potential, currently it has a very low tourist activity, only isolated types of weekend tourism.

In the future, the tourist potential of the two administrative units could successfully support other types of tourism. Thus, since Vașcău ATU is a component of the folk subarea of Crișul Negru Valley (Butură, 1978), it is suitable for practicing some types of rural tourism, especially agro-tourism. This would allow the exploitation of peasant household availability for accommodation, adequately prepared to receive guests, providing dining services and

other complementary activities, dependent on the local specific (Petrea, 2004). It is necessary to preserve traditions and crafts like: pottery (red ceramics) across localities Săliște de Vașcău and Criștioru de Jos, near Vașcău ATU, traditions and crafts that could be capitalized by tourism. A very specific activity for Vașcău is carving in stone and marble, and also lime processing (artisanal production of lime) specific to the Vașcău component village of Câmp Moși. Although the rural tourism is particularly suitable for Vașcău, because of the urban status of this settlement, it cannot be included in the development programs for rural tourism and cannot benefit from the advantages of the rural areas. Under these circumstances, if rural tourism proves to be beneficial and important enough to revitalize Vașcău ATU, it could become a serious reason to start the process of dropping out its current urban status. Based on the dominant karst topography, speleology can develop in Vașcău Karst Area. Unlike Vașcău, the northern part of ATU Nucet coincides with the Apuseni Natural Park, and is mainly suitable for ecotourism.

Thus, in the analyzed area are outlined two complementary tourist areas: Vașcău Tourist Area and Apuseni Natural Park Tourist Area, covering the northern part of ATU Nucet (Figure 4).

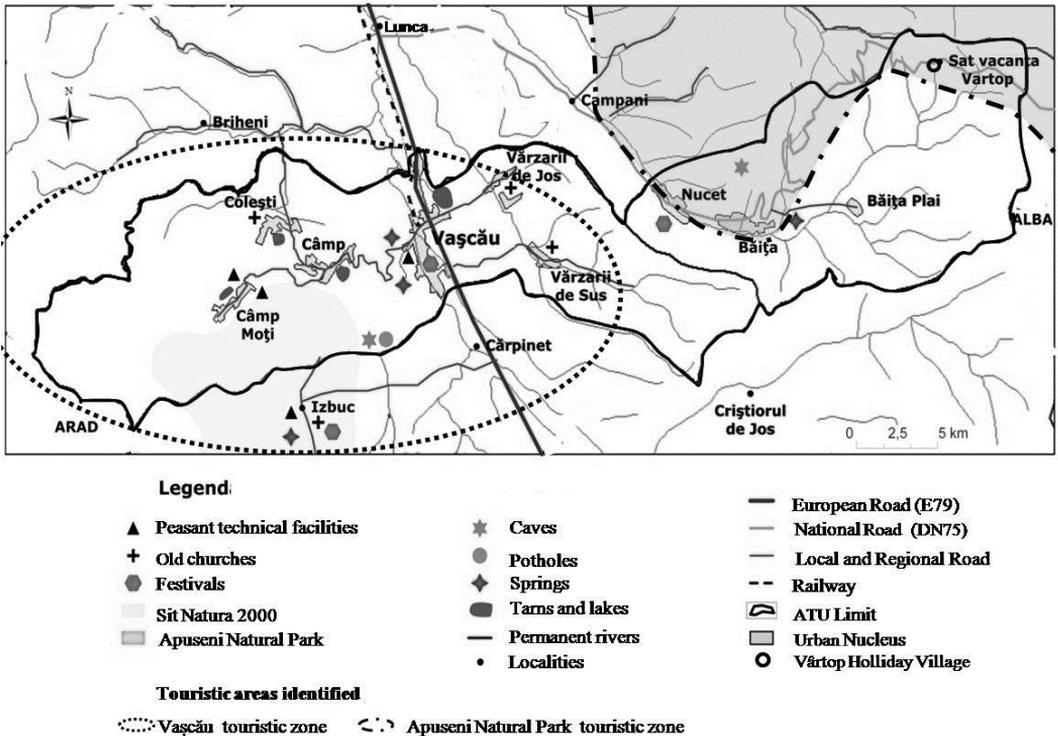


Figure 4 Tourist layout of the ATU Nucet and Vașcău

Both identified areas are adequate for relaxation and leisure tourism. This form of tourism can be developed within both towns, supported by the landscape and relief diversity (large area of hilly and mountainous areas), as well as stimulating climate conditions for relaxation and recreation (Ciangă, 2006).

Tourist resources of these areas can also sustain tourist activities like: hunting and fishing, extreme and adventure tourism, rafting and canyoning, horse riding tourism, cycling, speo-tourism, climbing etc.

The development of tourism can lead to the development of other economic sectors, and is important for the local economy because it is based on the capitalization of the internal potential. Thus, agro-tourism can be a solution to revitalize the agricultural sector by increasing the demand for fresh agricultural products produced locally, mainly in the case of ATU Vașcău. The setting up and promotion of tourism programs based on traditional cuisine by using ecological agricultural products, pilgrimages and observation of the community lifestyles, in communities which still maintain and practice traditions and natural medicine, would provide a greater number of tourists.

Tourists from nearby cities of the studied area and those foreigners, especially Hungarian tourists prefer to visit this area for practicing winter sports and mountain tourism (climbing, hiking). Certainly diversifying tourist activity (through practicing rural tourism in Vascau) would lead to complementary tourist activities, which ultimately would attract even greater numbers of tourists. Even if for small towns tourist activity is developed in accordance with the local specific, the introduction of some additional new elements (off-road tours, adventure parks, museums etc.) would increase their attractiveness.

An important factor in the development of tourism is marketing accompanied by "branding", the promotion of branded products, with regional and national recognition. The experience of tourism traditional areas shows that once created a brand, it causes a chain development, increasing the attractiveness of these small towns for new investors in tourism and beyond. (Evans, 2009). For example in the studied area branding could be based on ecotourism and agrotourism.

Touristic promotion of studied area is modest being provided by travel agencies, but only for the ski slope from Vartop (ski packages), while others tourist attractions from Apuseni Natural Park appear only mentioned on the website of some local NGOs (Beius Land, Ecological Club Transylvania - I love Apuseni), but without being included in itineraries and tours. So a better promotion of the area would be appropriate.

Even if the local community has the necessary means (human resources, potential for rural and sports tourism) and is interested in the possibility of developing tourism, the absence of promotion of local objectives and the lack of integrated tourism circuits, reduce the chance to achieve a successful tourism. Tourism activity will have an important contribution to economic revitalization of studied towns in the conditions in which at national level we will have a mass tourism and at local level will be realised integrated touristic circuits with a good promotion provided by the local authorities and the tourism agencies.

CONCLUSION

Tourist resources of the two neighboring towns, although not spectacular, by complementarity, can ensure the development of various types and forms of tourism.

The main feature of the local tourist resources is the diversity, given by the large extension of the administrative areas of both towns.

Another feature that influences tourism development in the studied areas is the strong rural character of the administrative areas of both towns, which have both types of resources: natural (given by the diversity of landforms and the presence of large areas covered by forests and pastures) and anthropic (old churches, peasant technical installations etc.).

There were identified two areas of tourist interest (Figure 4): Apuseni Natural Park Tourist Area, suitable for practicing ecotourism and winter sports and Vașcău Tourist Area suitable for rural tourism and tourism for leisure and recreation.

Properly capitalized, through a joint strategy for tourism development, the tourist potential of the studied area can provide an important role in the revitalization of the two towns, being a viable alternative for their development.

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