

## LANDSCAPE ECOLOGY AND PRESERVATION – ON THE VIA TRANSILVANICA TRAIL

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### Abstract

Via Transilvanica is a 1,400 km long-distance trail route which is also called the "the road that unites". It crosses the country from Putna to Drobeta-Turnu Severin through ten counties. It is designed for hiking, cycling and horse riding, all of which are eco-friendly with the environment and highlighting the idea that the environment needs to be protected.

The objective of this study is to examine the impact of tourism on the landscapes of Via Transilvanica, focusing on both its benefits and threats. The landscapes along the route face challenges such as deforestation in the mountain regions, the gradual transformation of traditional villages due to the influences of modern society, and uncontrolled waste disposal. While the trail stimulates local economies by encouraging rural tourism and promoting traditional crafts, it also brings risks such as those already mentioned. Responsible tourism practices, landscape preservation, and the active involvement of local communities are key to ensuring that the route remains a place of both ecological and cultural significance.

**Key words:** protection, environment, risks, ecotourism, responsibility

### Introduction

The Via Transilvanica project was initiated in 2018, the year celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Great Union of all Romanian states into one nation at Alba Iulia. The initiative was launched by the NGO Tășuleasa Social in response to the need for a national project centered on unity. That's how the concept "the road that unites" was born. Via Transilvanica unites not only the ten counties it passes through, but also the ethnic, cultural, historical and geographical diversity of Transylvania and the whole country, and most importantly, all those who travel on this trail.

Via Transilvanica is a long-distance trail (1.400 km distance) inspired by the history of other such trails in Europe, North America and beyond. But above all, it is a social project, with a strong focus on community. The project aims to highlight places in the country, that have been largely depopulated due to economic limitations, and breathe them to life. This revival is made possible by backpackers who, after a long day on the trails, look forward to a warm welcome and a place to share stories. This is the essence of "the road that unites."

### Material and methods

The methodology of this study includes both qualitative and quantitative approaches, combining field observations, data analysis, literature reviews, and interviews with the locals and hikers who have completed the trail.

Data collection focused on environmental changes, community engagement in conservation, and the effectiveness of existing sustainable tourism initiatives along the trail.

#### Materials Used:

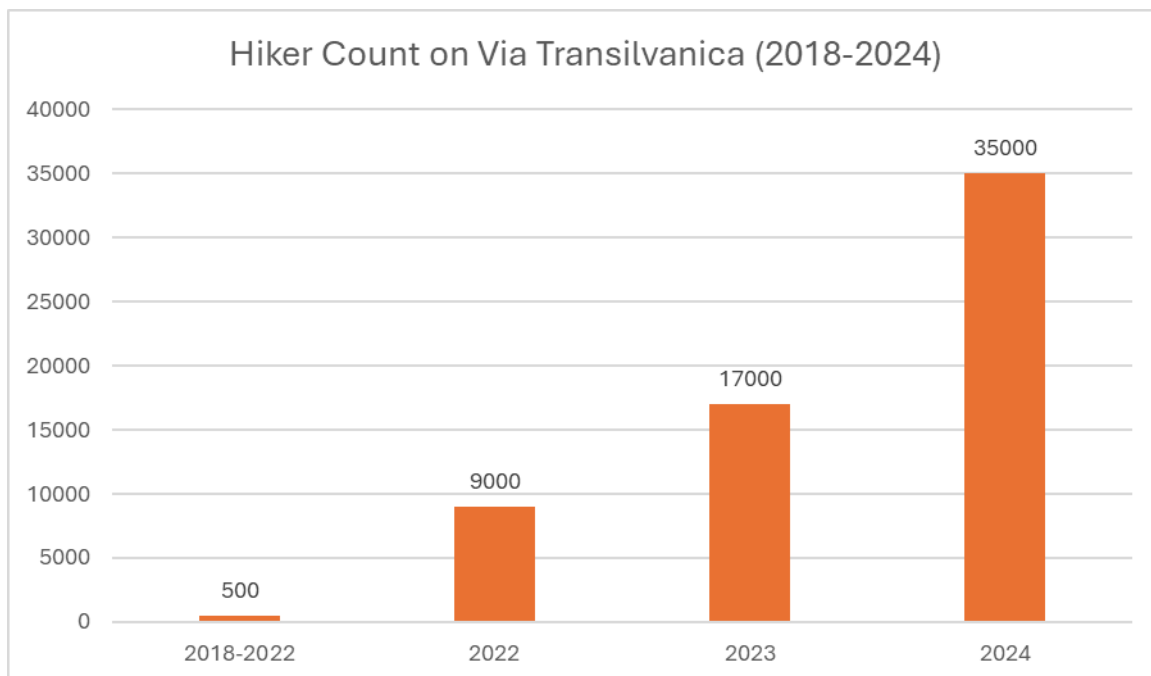
- **Online questionnaires** distributed to hikers, containing questions about landscape perception, biodiversity, the impact of human activity, and the sustainability of tourism infrastructure.
- **Semi-structured interviews** conducted with locals to identify community perceptions of landscape conservation and impact of tourism.
- **Direct observations** of the environment and trail infrastructure, to assess the ecosystem conditions and human intervention.
- **Photographs and visual documentation** to analyze landscape changes and identify vulnerable areas.
- **Specialized literature** and studies on landscape ecology and conservation strategies applied in similar areas.

### Methodology:

Over several months, data collection employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of tourism's impact on the Via Transilvanica trail.

- **Online Questionnaires:** These were distributed exclusively online, targeting hikers with different levels of experience (from occasional tourists to experienced adventurers). The responses were collected and statistically analyzed to identify general trends.
- **Online interviews with locals:** Conducted via digital platforms, aiming to gather authentic perspectives on perceived environmental changes and conservation strategies promoted at the local level.
- **Direct Observations:** Conducted during different seasons to capture seasonal variations in the landscape and document any degradation caused by tourism activity.
- Additionally, some statistical data and information were provided by the administrators of the Via Transilvanica trail.

By combining these methods, the study successfully provides a detailed perspective on the relationship between tourism activity and landscape conservation along the Via Transilvanica trail, contributing to the development of future environmental protection strategies.



### Results

The results of the study indicate that while Via Transilvanica has successfully revitalized local economies through tourism, it also poses environmental risks. In addition to highlighting the value of community involvement in conservation, the study provides examples of successful ecotourism initiatives that support environmental and economic sustainability.

#### Threats:

##### 1. Vandalism of Trail Markers

In Hunedoara County, a trail marker was destroyed, hindering navigation and affecting the trail's integrity. Malicious individuals may damage or even steal the trail markers. Also, in Lupeni region the trail is unmarked and difficult to follow the path.

##### 2. Encounters with Aggressive Shepherd Dogs

Hikers have expressed concerns about the risks of encountering aggressive shepherd dogs or stray dogs along the road, also some hikers reported being attacked.

##### 3. Presence of Bears

There have been reports of bear sightings on certain sections of the trail, posing potential dangers to hikers.

##### 4. Installation of Electric Fences

Usually, those installations are made without proper signage, posing a potential danger to hikers.

#### **5. Use of Motorize Vehicles**

Despite the fact that motorized vehicles are prohibited on Via Transilvanica in some sections those are used (ATV's, motocross bikes, buggies etc.) and can cause damages to the trail.

#### **6. Approval of Sheepfolds Directly on the Trail**

Sometimes the sheepfolds are not the main problem but how are they managed by the owners can cause lots of damages to the trail.

#### **7. Infrastructure modifications and dense vegetation** can cause deterioration or disappearance of trail markers.

#### **8. Sewage and waste disposal** left by locals in the suburbs, along with the trash left by travelers, are significant concerns. Both interviewed hikers and locals, have expressed worries about the increasing amount of garbage along the trail.

### **Benefits:**

#### **1. Job opportunities for locals**

Via Transilvanica fosters job creation, particularly in rural areas with limited employment opportunities. Locals find work in tourism, hospitality, guiding services, and traditional crafts.

The increasing number of visitors generates demand for accommodation, food, and other services, creating jobs for people who might otherwise need to migrate to urban areas.

#### **2. Development of hospitality infrastructure**

Tourist infrastructure along the trail is expanding, providing visitors with better conditions for overnight stays and services. For example, in Micăsasa village in Sibiu County, local authorities are planning to build dedicated places where trailers can stay overnight.

#### **3. International promotion and increased tourist flow**

Via Transilvanica has gained global recognition, after being included in TIME magazine's list of the top 100 most beautiful places to visit worldwide. Additionally, National Geographic has recommended Via Transilvanica as a must-visit destination for 2025.

#### **4. Networking and business opportunities**

Being featured on platforms like TripAdvisor in spring 2025 has provided a huge boost to visibility. Travelers worldwide can now discover the trail and plan their journey more easily. This also benefits local businesses, as guesthouse owners and service providers can connect with a broader audience.

#### **5. Preservation and revival of handcrafts and traditions**

The trail has encouraged the revival of traditional crafts, as visitors are eager to buy authentic handmade souvenirs.

#### **6. Official guide and mobile app**

One of the key elements that enhance the Via Transilvanica experience in the official guidebook and mobile app, designed to help travelers navigate the trail efficiently and discover hidden gems along the way. Whether you're a seasoned hiker or a first-time explorer, these tools offer invaluable assistance, ensuring a smooth and enriching journey.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study highlight the dual impact of tourism on the landscapes of Via Transilvanica, emphasizing both its economic and cultural benefits as well as the environmental challenges it faces. While the trail promotes rural development, job creation, and the preservation of local traditions, it also brings concerns such as waste disposal, deforestation, and human-wildlife conflicts.

To mitigate these issues, responsible tourism management is essential. Stricter policies on waste disposal, better trail maintenance, and increased educational initiatives for both tourists and locals can help preserve the landscape.

Additionally, hikers have suggested repurposing non-functional train stations along the route to improve accessibility and promote sustainable transportation, making the trail more accessible while minimizing environmental disruption.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the research highlights the importance of responsible tourism practices, well-managed infrastructure, and robust conservation policies to guarantee the enduring sustainability of the Via Transilvanica.

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## Souhrn

Via Transilvanica je dálková stezka, která spojuje deset rumunských okresů a nabízí ekologické, kulturní a ekonomické výhody. Tato studie zkoumá dopad stezky a zdůrazňuje její úlohu při vytváření pracovních míst, oživení venkova a zachování tradičních řemesel. Je však třeba řešit problémy, jako je likvidace odpadu, odlesňování a konflikty mezi divokou zvěří nebo zvířaty a lidmi.

Metody výzkumu zahrnovaly pozorování v terénu, rozhovory a průzkumy, které odhalily potřebu strategií udržitelného cestovního ruchu. Pro zachování ekologické integrity stezky jsou zásadní politiky odpovědného cestovního ruchu, lepší nakládání s odpady a posílení ochranných opatření. Zapojení komunity a spolupráce mezi nevládními organizacemi a místními úřady hrají zásadní roli při hledání rovnováhy mezi turistickým ruchem a ochranou životního prostředí.

Dalším doporučením je oživení nefunkčních vlakových stanic na trase, aby se zlepšil přístup turistů. Tím by se zlepšilo propojení podporující ekologická dopravní řešení. V konečném důsledku může dobře spravovaná Via Transilvanica i nadále sloužit jako model pro udržitelný cestovní ruch a ochranu krajiny v Rumunsku.

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