

EXPLORING THE CONTRIBUTION OF ACTIVE TOURISM AND ECOTOURISM IN FORESTS TO THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Ildiko Dosa^{1,2}, Csaba Bálint Illés¹, Péter Balogh²

¹Doctoral School of Management and Business Administration, John von Neumann University, Budapest, Hungary

²Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Debrecen, Debrecen, Hungary

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1 INTRODUCTION

Sustainable forest management and regional development are inextricably linked to the economic, social, and environmental well-being of local communities. Active forestry and ecotourism play a prominent role in this process, providing opportunities for the sustainable use of natural assets while contributing to the diversification of local economies and the empowerment of communities. Ecotourism actually embodies the principles of sustainability by focusing on natural areas, contributing to the conservation of local natural and cultural values, minimizing the negative environmental, social, and cultural impacts of its participants (i.e., their ecological footprint), and enhancing the positive ones [2]. Therefore, it is more than just hiking, cycling, or other forms of active recreation, and it can be extended to tourism as a whole [5]. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how forest managers can support the sustainable development of local communities through active tourism and ecotourism in forests. Particular attention will be paid to the synergies between forest tourism and forest management, and to how these activities can support the economic development of local communities without negatively impacting the environment [7].

The solutions and examples presented will highlight how forest management and the growing demand for active ecotourism can be effectively combined to promote sustainable regional development [1]. By integrating these elements into regional development strategies and development plans of the villages and towns, new and continuous sources of income can be created for local communities [4].

2 MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study explores the relationship between regional development and forestry, with a particular focus on the role of active tourism and ecotourism in forest areas as a means of diversifying local economies. The analysis draws on previous research, statistical data, and case studies that highlight the connections between sustainable tourism and forest management. As keywords and key terms, I primarily used “ecotourism”, “forest tourism and forestry”, “forest management”, and “regional development and forest management” in academic search engines such as ResearchGate, Google Scholar, and the Hungarian Journal of Scientific

Works. The search typically yielded studies focusing on individual countries; however, some sources provided a broader, Europe-wide perspective as well [1, 6].

The aim is to identify both international and national examples where tourism has contributed to rural development, job creation, and the conservation of natural resources.

Special attention is given to the factors that influence the development of active tourism, such as the condition of forest infrastructure, the regulatory environment, and opportunities for cooperation between public and private forest managers. The latter is of particular importance, as the infrastructure of ecotourism, the major part of the network of forest hiking trails and rest areas is mainly maintained by forestry companies (In Hungary: state forestry companies) [5].

The main objective is to formulate key guidelines to support local communities and forest managers in developing sustainable tourism initiatives.

3 RESULTS

The study highlights that in regions where forest management is consciously linked to tourism, there is a measurable increase in local economic performance and the area's ability to retain its population [2, 4]. Well-developed forest infrastructure—such as educational trails, routes for trail running and hiking, lookout towers, and rest areas—along with the expansion of tourism services, contributes to a growing number of visitors and the emergence of new sources of income [3, 5]. This process is significantly enhanced when a wide range of local forest managers are involved.

The challenge for the ecotourism professionals of forestry companies in the near future will be to operate the infrastructure created more efficiently and to reduce the losses of ecotourism activities, even though the increasing number of forest visits will increase the operational tasks and costs. Models whereby forest management income is used to finance ecotourism services will not be sustainable. It is therefore important to separate free public welfare activities from commercial ecotourism and to attract new sources of revenue to make forest ecotourism sustainable. In addition, cooperation with local governments and civil society organizations plays a key role in the implementation of sustainable projects [2].

By harnessing the synergies between tourism and forestry, not only economic but also social and environmental benefits can be achieved.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The study emphasizes that active and ecotourism in forest areas offers significant opportunities for promoting the sustainable development of local communities, particularly in regions where forestry is guided by a long-term perspective [2]. International best practices demonstrate that conscious, community-based approaches support the long-term sustainability of tourism initiatives [1, 6].

It is evident that, in the future, it will be important to reconsider legal and financial incentives at both national and EU levels to make tourism development opportunities more accessible to a wider range of forest managers. In addition, awareness-raising, knowledge transfer, and networking among local stakeholders can play a crucial role, and effective communication is essential to facilitate cooperation in all of these areas [1].

Integrating sustainable forestry and tourism into regional development strategies can provide a stable foundation for the long-term strengthening of rural areas and for retaining local populations. Future policy decisions should take into account the complex social, economic, and environmental benefits of forest-based tourism [4].

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Contact information

Corresponding author's e-mail: dosaildiko@gmail.com