

CONTEMPORARY RURAL TOURISM ON THE EXAMPLE OF CRISUL REPEDE VALLEY TERRITORIAL PLANNING UNIT (TPU)

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ABSTRACT - In the Crisul Repede Valley TPU, an area lying in the northern part of the Apuseni Mountains, alongside the attractions as regards the relief there are, beneficially, other natural attractions such as: a climate suitable for winter sports (a large amount of snow, for a long period of the year), thermal and mineral water sources, Karstic intermittent springs, numerous lakes and waterfalls; forests that are habitats for important game; unpolluted rivers, with a species-rich fish population etc.

The heavily inhabited feature of the area means that there is a wealth of man-made resources for tourism: forts, wooden churches, monasteries, museums, historical monuments; all this justifies the development and promotion of rural tourism. Equally importantly, the Romanian village falls into the category of the most generous and attractive human settlements in the context of European Rural tourism offer.

Therefore, it is imperative that the endeavor of implementing modernity should be assimilated without thwarting, altering or compromising these invaluable qualities.

At present, the economic, political, psycho-social and legal conditions have been summoned with a view to the development of tourism in the rural space in the area, and the local population has expressed availability for involvement in and commitment to administering their own resources, including that of supporting tourism.

The defining features of rural tourism are discernable in the space analyzed here: i.e. a wide, varied offer range that meets the requirement for authenticity, the originality and sheer quality of the physical environment, the specificity of the economic life-styles, mentalities, traditions etc.

Key words: rural tourism, the Crisul Repede Valley TPU, potential for tourism, development strategy.

THE CONTEXT FOR RESEARCH AND THE METHODOLOGY

The present study is part of the research project whose subject is “A Study of Territorial Planning designed for the reconversion and trimming of the TPU of the Crisu Repede Valley in the Context of Durable Development”, done by a research team working within the Centre for Territorial Study and Analysis, a research lab pertaining to the University of Oradea, that is underway over a period of three years (i.e. September 2007 – August 2010).

The TPU's in Romania are defined as clusters of administrative territories (villages, towns or cities), that share similar characteristics, cooperation relations and common interests, within which the local communities plan their development jointly, by proposing development projects, through a down-upwards approach, from the local, micro-regional level to county and regional level. The Crisul Repede Valley TPU is one of the 11 spaces of this type in Bihor County, geographically coterminous with some sub-units of the Apuseni Mountains: i.e. the Vad-Borod Depression, the Plopis Mountains and the Padurea Craiului Mountains.

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Administratively speaking, the territory under scrutiny here comprises 15 villages (Bulz, Borod, Bratca, Suncuius, Auseu, Vadu Crisului, Magesti, Astileu, Lugrasu de Jos, Tetchea, Virciorog, Tileagd, Sacadat, Copacel, Sinteu), polarized around an urban centre that plays the role of pole of development: Alesd.

Alesd, that is situated at a distance of 39 kilometers from Oradea, with a population of 10,705 inhabitants, is in an advantageous geographical position, in the Oradea-Borod strait, the main road and railway axis between western Romania and the Transylvania Depression.

The study consists of 2 parts. Part one highlights the current features of rural tourism in the space under scrutiny here and which consist of: *the identification of the factors that underpin the development of tourism, the identification of natural and anthropic conditions and the analysis of tourist infrastructure (the accommodation units), in Crisu Repede Valley TPU*. The second part of the study addresses the perspectives for the development of rural tourism, including *the SWOT analysis and the strategies proposed for the development of tourism in this area*.

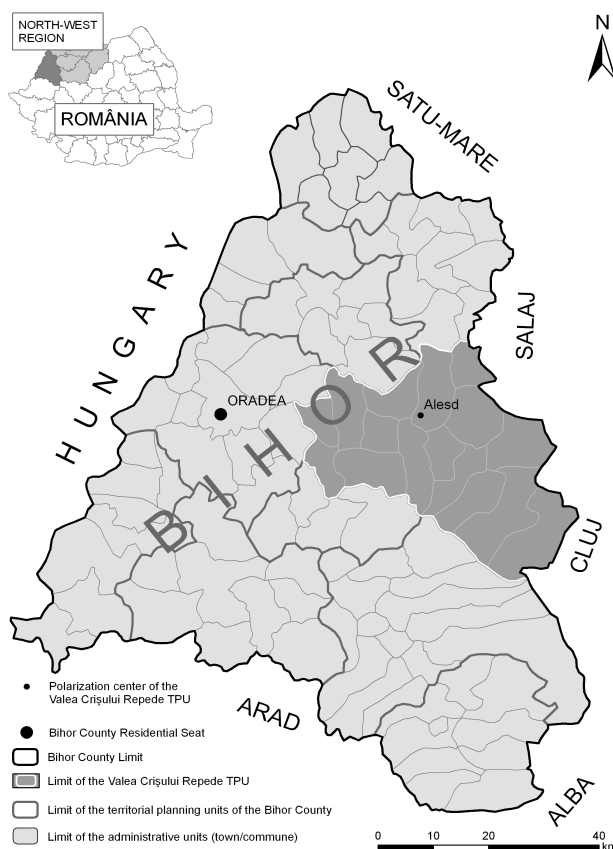


Figure 1. The TPU's Bihor County, (1, TPU Valea lui Mihai, 2, TPU Marghita, 3, TPU Sacueni, 4, TPU Salard, 5, The Metropolitan Zone Oradea, 6, TPU The Crisul Repede River, 7, TPU Ceica, 8, TPU Stei-Nucet-Vascau, 9, TPU Salonta, 10, TPU Tinca, 11, TPU The Beius County)

THE CURRENT SITUATION OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM IN THE CRISU REPEDE VALLEY TPU

The area boasts a rich tourist potential, both natural and anthropic. The natural tourist potential is rendered by the relief, hydrographic factors, the climate and the landscapes. The Padurea Craiului Mountains area is one of the most appealing mountain units in this area. A suspended plateau, with altitudes that here and there surpass 1000 meters, the presence of thick packages of karstifiable crags has resulted in the formation of a picturesque karstic relief, represented by the exokarst (5-to 60 meter doles, karstic depressions, a large number of karstic springs, valleys and karstic plateaus) and the endokarst (the swallow-holes, the deepest swallow-hole, Stanu Foncii, 339 meters deep, caves – the longest cave, Vantului Cave, 45 km long and subterranean draining canals).

CONTEMPORARY RURAL TOURISM ON THE EXAMPLE OF CRISUL REPEDE VALLEY
TERRITORIAL PLANNING UNIT (TPU)

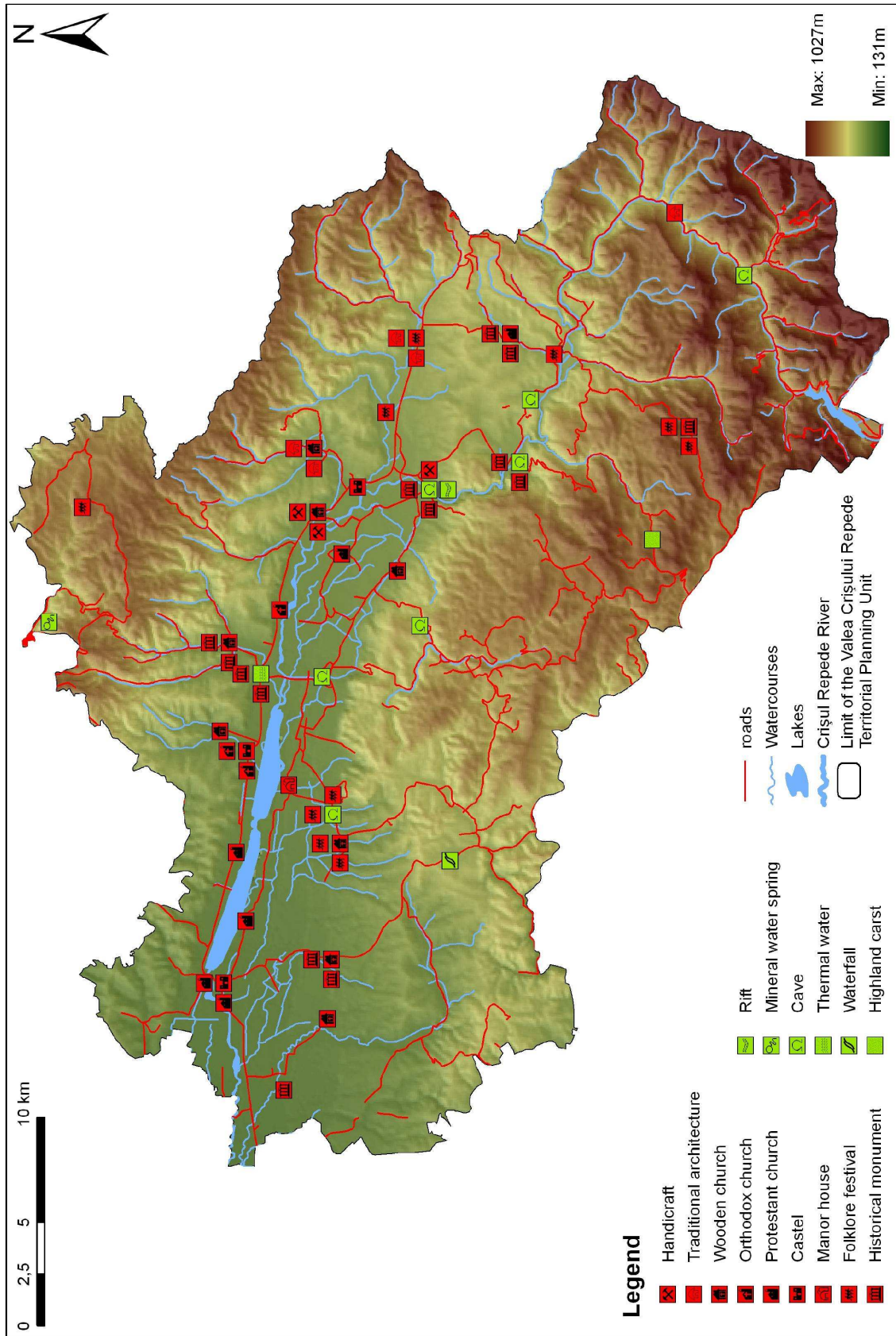


Figure 2. The tourist potential of the TPU Crisul Repede.

A major element of appeal is by valleys that drain the Padurea Craiului Mountains, the Plopiș Mountains, the Vad Borod hills and depression. These are generally deep and narrow, forming small straits sectors, with steep walls and waterfalls. Among these, the famous Iadei Valley with the Lesu Dam and the Saritoarea Iedutului Waterfall, Boiului Valley with Boiu Waterfall, the Bratcuta Valley, the Misid Valley with Lesianei Straits, the Izbandis Valley with Izbandis karstic spring and the Medes Valley. The climate of this area, conditioned by the geographical position and the orography, allows for the development of several forms and types of tourism. The annual temperature averages range between 7-8 degrees Centigrade in the higher areas of the mountain space and rise up to 8-9 degrees Centigrade in the Vad-Borod Depression, whilst the rainfall rise from 700 mm/per annum in the west, up to 1,000 mm/per annum in the east.

Under these climactic circumstances, the mixed wood forests have developed: i.e. the beech-tree, the evergreen-oak, the hornbeam etc. The forests that preserve an unaltered character, constitute the framework for a diffuse tourist frequenting, and the promenade forests benefit from the facilities meant to allow for the tourists' access: access roads, stationing facilities and other facilities per se. Apart from all this, the forests have important fauna, and the main cynegetic species are: the stag, the sanglier (wild boar) and the deer. The mountain streams are excellent fishing domains, populated with: trout and umber or grayling (Petrea Rodica, 2004). The area is also renown for endemic plants, among which the Romanian lilac on the Iada Valley. The area occupied by this species has been declared a nature reserve and expands over a surface of 94.7 ha. (Pop,I; 1968).

The *anthropic potential* is manifest in the archaic peasant architecture, the crafts, the folk wear, the traditions and customs of the area. On the Crisu Repede Valley, an essential tourist potential is also represented by the wooden churches.

The crafts are traditional in the area, and among them we can mention wood carving (Damis, Ponoara, Remeti), animal hind crafts (Delureni), pottery (Vadu Crisului), lime crafts (Cacuciu and Astileu).

Among the popular technical installations there are the water mills (Borod, Borozel, Bulz) and the laundry dams (Bulz), and the weaving and needlework are still a preoccupation of women in the villages of this area. The folk wear displays elements that define the specificity of the area, but moreover the ethnic specificity of the people living in these villages. (Romanians, Magyars, Slovak)

ACCOMMODATION

The scarcity of accommodation in the area and the rural tourism revenue on a constant rise have meant, over recent years, that several rural B&B's have cropped up. In some situations, a clustering of the above might be aimed at in the future, thus achieving real "micro-resorts for rural tourism: Vadu Crisului, Suncuius, Bratca, Remeti, Zece Hotare, Piatra Craiului. However, the accommodation coverage in the rural area of the Crisu Repede Valley is still incipient. There has been no major investment and neither has there been a consistent support, through programmes or projects, which explains the slow development of the B&B's. Nor have the legislative facilities been able to stimulate the development of tourism.

Legally speaking, the rural accommodation spaces of the TPU fall mainly into the category of tourist and agro-tourist pensions/B&B's, with a traditional specificity. There are, however, accommodation possibilities in camping sites, motels and hotels. The B'&B's in the rural area are mainly tourist structures with a capacity of up to 20 rooms, functioning in the peasants' dwellings or in specially designed buildings, independent of these, that ensure accommodation and meal serving space. These B&B's ensure accommodation space and a segment of the food for tourists from their own fresh produce.

The current modest stage of the development of rural tourism is due to the set up of the ANTREC branch as late as the year 2000, much later than in contiguous counties, to the reticence of both the local authorities and of the locals, their precarious briefing on the issues, etc. However, a perusal of the development of rural tourism in this area, reveals a speeding-up of its development.

CONTEMPORARY RURAL TOURISM ON THE EXAMPLE OF CRISUL REPEDE VALLEY
TERRITORIAL PLANNING UNIT (TPU)

The number of accommodation units is at present 24 B&B's, 4 camping sites, 4 hotels and 4 motels. Most of the B&B's are of medium size, which proves that this particular tourist activity is not in an advanced stage of development, and, for the time being, only provides complementary income to the inhabitants of the area. Very few B&B's obtain income from this activity solely.

The four hotels existent in the TPU are rated as follows: a 1-star hotel, a 2-star and two 3-star ones. Hence, the number of hotels rated one-star represents 29.47% of the number of places in hotels, the number of accommodation rated as 2-star stands for 10.4%, and the number of accommodation rated as 3-star represents 60,11% of the number of places existent in hotels.

The motels, 4 in number, are also rated on a 1, 2 o3 –star scale. The number of 1-star rated places represents 41.5% of the number of accommodation in motels, the number of 2-star places represents 39.29%, whereas the number of 3-star places represents 19.64%.

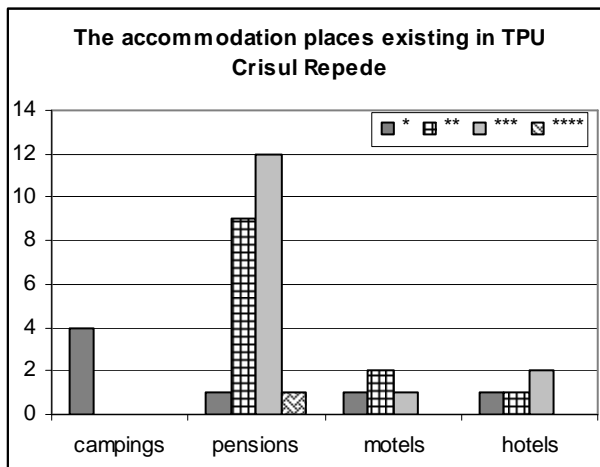


Figure 3. The accommodation places existing in TPU Crişul Repede.

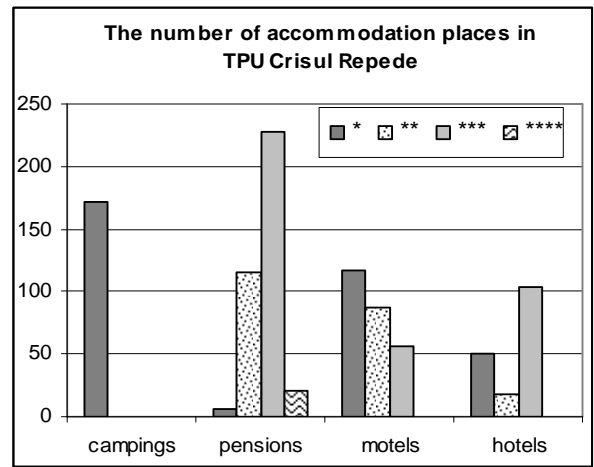


Figure 4. The number of accommodation places in TPU Crişul Repede.

Out of the existing B&B's, 18 are listed and 6 are not. In the ANTREC Catalogue two B&B's are listed at present, even though originally 13 of them were part of this organization. The evolution of the number of B&B's in ANTREC reveals the fact that several pensions originally listed in this network, have since abandoned. The majority of pensions, specially the agro-tourist ones, have met with a slow development, with no substantial support, and that is why they only have modest facilities. A lot of them have abandoned the formal network because of various reasons: the acquisition of a loyal and stable clientele, eluding taxes, the discontent towards the modest support from the formal networks etc. In many cases, the formal network was used mainly for the facilitating of classification/listing and for the opportunity to get launched. The majority of B&B's work as free-lancers.

Out of the 24 B&B's existent in TPU, 20 are tourist pensions, representing 83.3% of the total and only 4 are agro-tourist pensions, representing 16.6%. The B&B's are listed according to a 1, 2 o3 – daisy scale, out of which one is rated as a 4-daisy B&B, which stands for 4.16% of them all, 13 of them are rated 3-daisy, representing 54.16%, 9 as 2-daisy, representing 37.5% and one pension is rated as a 1-daisy, which stands for 4.16% of the total number of pensions. The small B&B's, up to 5 rooms represent 37.5%, the medium-sized ones with a number of rooms ranging from 6 to 10 rooms represent 45.83%, and the number of large ones, with over 10 rooms each, represent 12.5% of the total number of pensions.

The camping sites of the TPU, a total of 4, are listed as 1-daisy; out of these one has up to 25 places, 2 have a capacity for accommodation ranging between 25 and 50 places, and one of them has a capacity over 50 places.

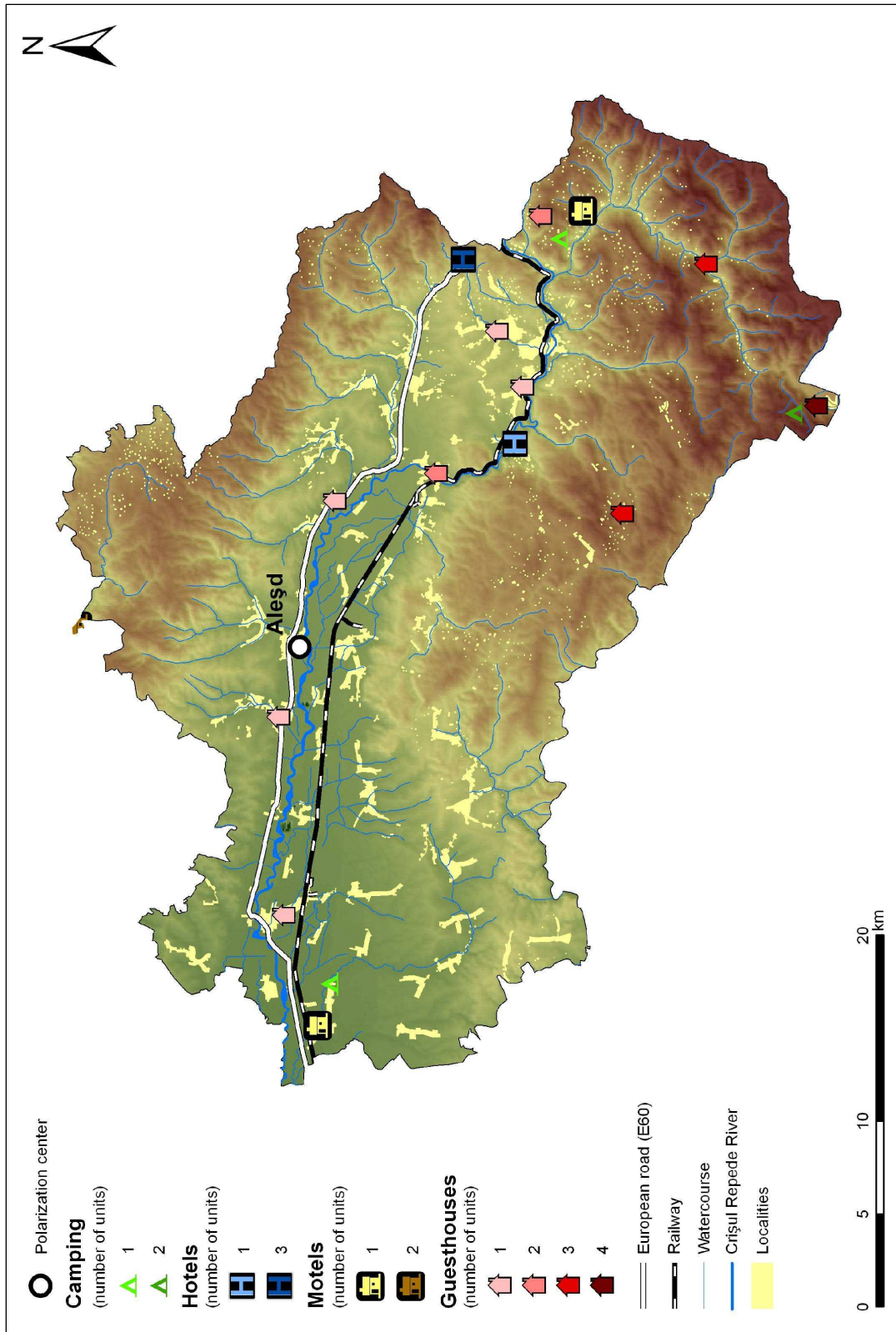


Figure 5. The repartition of the accommodation units in TPU Crișul Repede.

CONTEMPORARY RURAL TOURISM ON THE EXAMPLE OF CRISUL REPEDE VALLEY TERRITORIAL PLANNING UNIT (TPU)

The majority of B&B's and camping sites lie in the renown tourist areas: the Crisu Repede Starit (Vadu Crisului – 2 B&B's, Suncuius – 2 B&B's and 1 hotel, Bratca – 2 B&B's, Balnaca – 1 B&B, Delureni – 1 B&B), Iada Valley (Remeti – 3 B&B's and 1 motel, Bulz – 2 B&B's and 1 camping site), the Coada Lacului holiday village – 4 B&B's and 1 camping site, the Padurea Neagra holiday village – 1 B&B and 2 motels, the karstic plateau of Zece Hotare – 3 pensions and the tourist halt of Pietra Craiului – 3 hotels.

Apart from the hotels and motels existent in the TPU with a medium or high degree of comfort, that mainly accommodate traffic tourism, the B&B's provide accommodation in farmers households and a broad range of activities: walks, cultural tourism, fishing, hunting, horseback riding, winter sports, cycling tourism.

Also quite saliently, the tourist and agro-tourist pensions of Suncuius, Vadu Crisului, Bratca, Balnaca, Delureni and Zece Hotare are situated in the underprivileged mining area of Borod – Suncuius – Vadu Crisului and are the beneficiary of some facilities that, inter alia, are an advantage as regards rural tourism, over a period of 10 years starting with 1999, the most important one being the tax exemption.

Not all the rural pensions in the TPU benefit from a privileged position. Most are clustered in areas with numerous tourist objectives that are diverse and easily-accessible. Generally speaking, what matters is not the distance per se but the time necessary to reach there, which heavily depends on the quality of the roads. In this respect, some there are some boarding houses that have modernized access roads: Vadu Crisului, Suncuius, Balnaca, Delureni, Bulz, Remeti, Padurea Neagra, whereas some others, the access to which is made by county or country roads that are poorly maintained, are at a disadvantage: Coada Lacului Lesu, Zece Hotare.

The B&B's are rather sought after for the weekend (Remeti, Bulz, Suncuius, Bratca, Balnaca, Delureni, Vadu Crisului, Padurea Neagra) and for transit tourism (Popasul Pietra Craiului, Auseu, Lugasu de Jos, Sacadat, Tileagd) and less for spending a whole holiday in the open (Coada Lacului Lesu). Places that are remote, but benefit from privileged features of the natural environment (mountains, forests, mineral springs etc) are appropriate for the development of accommodation facilities for longer periods of time (Coada Lacului, Remeti, Bratca, Suncuius, Padurea Neagra).

SWOT Analysis

Strengths

- the diversity of natural tourist and anthropic resources, easily accessible and harmoniously distributed across the TPU;
- a temperate-continental climate that favors tourism throughout the year; high-quality drinking water; natural factors and mineral resources recommended in balneal treatment Alesd and Padurea Neagra; rich fauna and flora, with varied species and eco-systems;
- non-existent or low pollution in most rural places;
- the cultural heritage – historical and architectural, that falls into the category of attractive tourist attractions; the variety of folklore and of the heritage that are well-preserved and a everyday practice; a full calendar of folk events throughout the year and across the country;
- traditional cuisine and regional specialties; the diversity of organic produce, at very low prices;

Weaknesses

- the weak perception of a “durable development of tourism and implicitly of the importance of environment protect
- the rapid decay of the architectural endowment through the depopulation of rural places;
- info and signaling systems insufficiently developed; the lack of local info centres and the lack of support from the central public administration as regards the promotion of these places at national and international tourism fairs;
- an offer of tourist services very poorly varied and incongruous with the prices and quality of the tourist services;
- income level that are poor incentives for appealing and motivating the rural population to stay in the country;

Opportunities

- the rapid and durable re-launch of rural tourism with special emphasis on the position of tourism in the local economy;
- the development and promotion of programs as regards rural tourism (traditional cuisine based on organic produce, pilgrimages, specialized eco-tourism – speleological tourism, rare fauna and flora, communities that preserve an practice old ethno - folkloric traditions etc.);
- the design and sustainability of projects that highlight elements of national, cultural, historical, typically-rural architecture, cultural-spiritual objectives and events;
- the diversification of the tourist offer by the promotion of micro-programs that cater for current types of leisure and active-holidaying e.g. cycling tourism circuits, mountain-biking, motor-biking, gliding, rafting, horseback riding circuits etc;
- launching large-scale promotion action through the inclusion of the Romanian tourism offer into the catalogues of well-known tour-operators;
- the introduction of the quality management system in the rural tourism.

Threats

- flouting the rules of “sustainable development” in the evolution of Romanian tourism;
- the quicker improvement of quality standards of the tourism offer of the neighboring country, Hungary, a direct competitor of Romania’s and the adjustment of the level of tariffs to the quality of services;
- the lack of minimal expertise in tourism management and quality management, in the field;
- the deferral of the setting up of institutional structures as regards the administration of tourism, at a local and social level;
- the decrease of the purchase power of the population, with a backwash effect on the evolution and demand for tourist services the influence of other activity sectors on tourism – consequential economic activity;
- the lack of technical and financial support for tourist promotion, on the part of the state, at least one of the level that competing neighboring countries have;
- the existence of under-sized household facilities, that are not adjusted to the development demands of rural tourism and as regards the local transport infrastructure, it is insufficiently developed and modernized;
- regional airports that are non-modernized and unfit for charter flights;

TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

Tourism, in its relief-informed facets, i.e. the relief of the Apuseni Mountains, can, in time, become an important source for income for numerous inhabitants. For this to happen, some essential elements are required. In short, we’ll just say that, first, an adequate infrastructure is required, i.e. good, accessible roads, all types of rural accommodation space, well signposted mountain paths etc. Then sustainable promotion is needed, professionally done and concerted on market segments. And, last but not least, varied related tourist services are needed, that are of high quality, consistent and professional, both at the level of accommodation space and of travel agencies.

Under the circumstances of alignment to the European legislation, and the quality of the services packages has to be on the rise, it is but natural to consider the human factor as well, that is decisive in quality assurance.

The support actions in this sector should develop along three directions:

Legislation: as Romanian tourism should be in conformity with the European legislation, and the quality of services should be increased, in February 2008 the denomination “agro-tourist boarding house/pension” has been legally enforced, for the first time after 1990, thus creating the necessary legal framework for the development of an authentic rural tourism.

Development: an important perspective for rural tourism between 2007 and 2013 is represented by structural funds, i.e. money that is allotted for the development of two operational programs of the Government of Romania. After Romania’s integration in the European Union, tourism

CONTEMPORARY RURAL TOURISM ON THE EXAMPLE OF CRISUL REPEDE VALLEY TERRITORIAL PLANNING UNIT (TPU)

has benefited from important non-returnable funding, in the form of structural funds; there are numerous possibilities for attracting European finances, be it in the form of direct investment in the infrastructure, in order to increase the quality of tourist services, or the training of the personnel in the field, or the development of leisure services, as well as the capitalization, protection and preservation of the natural heritage.

Getting structural funding is possible by designing rationalized projects and as a result of meeting strict requirements: the funds can only be accessed by SMEs (small and medium enterprises), and the party requiring has to detain 50% of the sum. There are, however, some facilities for obtaining larger sums, accessible to youth under the age of 35 and to women. At the same time, Exim Bank in Romania offers the guarantee of up to 80% of the credits with commercial banks for investment projects.

Education – training: The qualifications for the personnel in this sector are crucial, under the circumstances of the ever increasing number of Romanian and foreign tourists. In order to be able to meet requirements and exigencies of high quality tourism, to create customer loyalty, as well as for securing new market segments, the periodical organization of such training courses is required, as most of the staff working in the field is not primarily trained for this activity.

Promotion: At present, the issue of promotion is hampered by the absence of PR organizations at a regional and local level; this can be solved by setting up an info centre in the town of Alesd, destined primarily for foreign tourists. The promotion methods per se should be custom-tailored according to the needs of and requirements of the tourist that is ever more nature-bent, and ecologically-informed.

Original offer – the development of crafts: In this respect, the creation of a genuine rural tourist product is a must that should include leisure activities, but cultural tourism as well. Equally importantly, setting clear criteria as regards the specificity of products, the standard equipment and the quality of services is required.

CONCLUSIONS

In order for rural tourism to become a certainty in the Crisu Repede Valley TPU, and for it to be a complex, articulate activity, that should efficiently meet economic, social, cultural and spiritual requirements, it is necessary to pay heed to some aspects whose significance should be integrated in the long-term development perspective, as guarantee for efficiency and durability. This is all the more crucial as recent legislation has brought about facilities for the development of rural tourism.

The development of tourism would open up new perspectives for the local population, allowing the reduction of the seasonal character of employment, by offering jobs both in the tourism industry per se, and as regards the opportunities emerging from firms that offer services, through the increase of the number of visitors.

All in all, we believe that tourism can become one of the key-factors in the process of re-launching the economy in the TPU, taking into account the fact that the area has an important natural and anthropic potential, adequate for various types of tourism.

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