

Rural tourism, a new alternative for the south of Albania

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Abstract

Structural changes in economies are causing severe stress in many rural areas especially for those with a high dependence on agriculture. Such areas exist in most countries in Europe here farm revenue is decreasing. Policy makers and local leaders are searching to find innovative ways in order to resolve the economic problems of these areas. The EU in an effort to resolve the problems that the rural areas are facing, has developed a framework of support of rural integrated development. By doing so it promotes policies that enforces the development of new economic activities in rural areas, among which agritourism occupies an important position.

The article analyse in principe rural tourism and agritourism role and the new opportunities for agriculture. In the context of the need for new solutions to the environmental crisis and the global crisis on development, new social demands on rural spaces have inevitably conduced to the design of new policies that modify the rural status by means of territorial control, environmental impact assessment, conservation strategies, management plans etc.

This article proposes to look at how agritourism and rural tourism can contribute to the development of the countryside. More precisely the article focuses on three main aspects:

- (a) Rural tourism through its functions as a mean of local development,
- (b) Agritourism through its functions as a mean of local development and
- (c) The Antigone actual situations of agritourism and rural tourism in specific.

Key words: Agritourism, rural tourism, tourism, Antigonea, SWOT analysis, local development, National Park.

Introduction

Rural society and traditional communities as it is our country are facing with very important transforming processes as the result of globalization that has its effects and impacts in the economical world of present days. Farmers from different areas of our country are exposed directly toward negative consequences of this outside factor but also as the result of interior speculations; meanwhile they buy inputs or sell outputs.

A new trend in tourism field as it is rural tourism and agro tourism is showed as a facing way and redirection of revitalization of rural areas and farms in the whole world.

In countries like USA agro tourism is representing a key possibility of many farmers and agro businesses. This new economic direction generate to them extra incomes bigger than those they got while they operated only with agriculture. In such developed countries since when agriculture collaborates with tourism have turned agro tourism in one of the most developed segments of tourism. One of the aims of our article is to make evident advantages of Antigonea area not only from agricultural point of view but also to the alternative resources such are: (water assets, flora, fauna, natural monuments, folk traditions etc) From the observations done till now is noticed an increase of foreigner tourist's number interested to visit the South of Albania. In this context can be mentioned the fact that South region possesses huge tourism potentials and is seeing rural tourism as a premise for its economic development. But while we refer to actual situation we notice that rural tourism is not well developed in our country, and have big problems with infrastructure and other services offered to tourists. The aim of this article is to make known potentials of rural tourism development concentrated specifically at Antigonea area describing its problems and its principal perspectives.

Materials and methods

As the principal purpose of this article is going to be treated conceptually and methodologically agro tourism and rural tourism as a special point of integrated development or rural areas in general and as a possibility to improve the life of inhabitants in Antigonea area.

Specific aims of the topic are:

- Treating of agro tourism and rural tourism functions in rural areas
- Identifying of actual situations and alternative potentials of Antigone area
- Analyzing of big socio- economic possibilities and a better use of agriculture through a developed agro tourism and rural tourism

To realize our research we have used these methods:

- Discussions and interviews, with interested organizations, for the development of tourism, and with key persons in these organizations
- Data from interviews and group discussions;
- Conclusions and achievements of researches and analyses done by different authors
- Published materials that has to do with agro tourism and rural tourism
- SWOT analyses of Antigone.

Rezults and discussions

Goods that are benefited by the development of rural tourism can be divided in 2 groups:

(a) Goods for the farms of rural tourism.

Increase of added value of incomes – improvement of economical situation of farm families;

Possibilities of direct sales for agricultural products (extend the variety of agricultural products, improve their production, and improve the food);

Useful use of existed human resources of agricultural farms and encouraging of employments in rural areas;

Useful use of existing houses (resident ones);

Improvement of the use of other resources (farm buildings etc)

Improvement of life standard through investments done to the whole farm
Improvement of different professional abilities (including alternative trainings learning of foreigner languages etc)

Contact with different people belonging to different cultures, improvement of life standards of farm families.

(b) Goods for the whole rural society.

Diversification of basic economy of the rural region

Increase of income resources fro the whole rural community.

Multiplied regional economical effects can be used as investments in rural areas

More employment possibilities fro the whole rural community where is developed agro tourism

More positive perceptions for the rural tourism which encourage new ideas and initiatives for further development of this sector

Well keeping of rural areas and reducing of depopulation of rural areas.

Employment in agro tourism will encourage education and training programs that will make people stay in these rural areas due to the stability generated by this sector.

Improvement of whole technological infrastructure for the entire complexity of rural areas

Improvement of cultural and social background for whole community

Improvement of high quality food and ecological products

Complete improvement of rural areas image.

Integration of rural society and improvement of local patriotism.

Commune of Antigone is situated in the region of Lunxheria 10 km away from the city of Gjirokastra, in the south of Albania. In north it is bordered with Commune of Lunxheria, in the south and southwest with Drino river, in east and south east with Commune "Qender Libohove"

The whole commune is situated between 2 main streams that started from Mountain of Lunxheria, as 2 branches of Drino river "Stream of Pesjak" and "Stream of Levendi". The maximal altitude over the sea level is 800 m at Saraqinishta village, while the lowest altitude is 150-200 m at Arshi Lengo village. The general surface of the commune is 2 800 hectares from which 771 hectares

are cultivated land, 1 739 hectares are pastures, 180 hectares are forests and the rest of 110 hectares of other types. About this area can be said that have many potentials for the agro tourism development in general. Is worthy to be mentioned here the possibility for bed and breakfast alternative in Park's villages. In Antigone the most possible tourist destinations are: Archeological Park of Antigone, Monastery of Spile, and Church of Shenkoll which is protected by the state and have the status of cultural monument. While other monuments that are under protection of the commune are: Church of Saint Oll, (1680) Church of Shendelli (1740) Church of Saint Gjergj (1880), Water spring of Lepushet (situated in Saraqinishta village, 1 km away in aerial line from the center of the commune. This is a picturesque place with a water spring that has curative elements well known for such values) Water spring of Tranoshishta (a picturesque place 500 m away in aerial line from the village with the same name. The Gate of Vaso Neti (situated in Saraqinisht village and which belong to the end of XIX century. That is the biggest of its kind in the region of Lunxheria, and has several carvings such are Lunxheria dancers, birds and animals of different kinds).

The most medieval water spring is situated in Saraqinishta village and it is identified like this because it has 2 big arches and 2 water springs. Old maple tree of Tranoshishta village (is situated in the center of the village and is a centurial tree, is damaged due to a big hole inside it which is caused by a big fire that happened years ago

Some of its branches have been fallen down by strong winds or due to the old age. Gjinofshati (an old village in this area actually abandoned from its inhabitants, its position flora and its microclimate made it a very attractive place and a visited area. Forest of Manastiri (with a surface of 80 hectares with a thick flora most of which are planted during the last years . This place is considered as an asset of tourism even for its rare qualities that it have, as well as for the fact that is situated in the territory of Spile's Monastery and of the church that is built in it. For more, Archeological National Park of Antigonea has been visited by more tourists during last years. Antigonea is one of the most important cities of

Albanian Antiquity that is situated at the right side of Drino Valley in front of Gjirokastra city close to Saraqinisht village of Antigone Commune.

This antique city is founded in the III century BC by Pirro of Epirus. It is called "Cultural Monument" since 1963 and has a surface over than 66 hectares. During its blooming time Antigonea was defended by a fortified wall 4 km long. Excavations at the ruins of Antigonea in 1970-1980, were done by Albanian archeologists of Albanian Archeological Institute of Tirana, and except the fortified walls in the interior part of the city have been found many dwelling places which still preserve a part of stone columns.

Within the Park area are excavated 3 churches of Palo Christian era and a very important mosaic of antiquity time that presents Saint Christopher with its martyrs' palm in one hand, one of the earliest time iconographies of global classification.

Many countries affected by social economic potentials of goods, have supported powerfully the development of Agro Tourism. Agro Tourism is seen as a strategy with good perspectives, because it helps people of rural area to stay in their villages, creates new job positions and as a final aim urge social economic developments of certain areas.

Even agro tourism and rural tourism are seen as a new way of developing rural areas with disadvantage even in the presence of potential sources. It is widely accepted that rural tourism opens new jobs, generates secondary sources, significantly reduce migration to urban areas, enables transferring of ideas from urban to rural areas. Mainly increases in a significant way the local economy, supporting existing local businesses and creates opportunities to attract other businesses and small industries.

Agro tourism contributes to the dynamism of cultural dimension and social infrastructure in rural areas. In our market there is indeed a paradoxical situation, we buy in the market kind of wool-type products, clothing, blankets, carpets, rug, artworks realized by craftsman, or by industry and surprisingly wool or livestock farming pollutes our environment, being dumped, or sold with the cheap price. Almost every town had once companies and workshops that employed many women and girls whom work out very fine craft that very sold in Western market.

Even today some women work with such crafts to provide a standard living form themselves and their families, continuing this tradition individually. But the individual craftsmanship is destined to fail because it difficult to find the market due to extremely low amounts of production. Only when women and girls can be collected together and produce large amounts of handicrafts, their products may find buyers at markets within and outside the country. It is important to say that agro tourism offers rural women the opportunity to assess their skills determining their productivity in managing the maintenance of houses for accommodation purposes or various craft works, said so this in the context of economic initiatives. As a good example in the commune of Antigonea we can mention the return to the Albanian tradition of artisan processing of wool in the village "Asim Zeneli", of Antigonea Commune. "Artisans of Antigone" is a revival of the craft project with loom processing of wool. Positive points of this project are several: are employed 20 women and girls of the village, increase in multiple ways the income of community due to the increase wool price collected from goats kept by the villagers, even from the sale of handicraft products in domestic market, and tourist places and foreign markets, avoiding so the tendency of migration of families without income, environment is cleaned from wool wastes, women are involved in this five-year project gain the right to work, meanwhile till now they have stayed all the time at home etc.

Rural tourism is fully recommended by specialists of local development to design structures of agro-environmental policies. Environment has an indigenous and essential value and this consists for a great support to rural tourism (Smeral, 1998).

Biodiversity of ecosystems, originality of landscapes affected by human hand and the quality of the natural environment are required and very appreciated by tourists.

Saying in other words, they should be seen and considered as a factor that should be preserved in order to get the expected benefits, so it will be regarded as sustainable development of agro tourism.

Rural tourism is often regarded as a justifiable tool to enable management of land and opening of rural areas of socio-economic positive externalities. Rural tourism can also be a key factor that will feed the principles of conservation and protection of natural resources and environmental quality in general.

Periodically this phenomenon stimulates and expresses the need to promote the initiatives of those involved in it, to learn about it and can be dictated a physical culture of landscape for example cleaning rivers, forests, for the avoidance of pollution etc.

Since 2005 the city of Antigone is turned in a National Park and is the only National Park in the district of Gjirokastra. It is surrounded by a diversified relief that is able to complete the diversity and strengthen the potential of species reviving by increasing habitat diversity and numerous surfaces. In this varied terrain are included: Plateaus where lie the ruins of ancient city, a territory that in its planning map has the shape of a fish narrow to the head and tail and wide in the central part it. Small Hills in the eastern part, southwestern and southern high mountains in the north, which favor diversity in flora and fauna and to urge the increase of wild animals and birds populations and sometimes even of threatened species such as eagles with a vaulted beak, wild rooster Hawk with yellow legs etc. The canyon of Spile with natural caves and fresh water on the northern coast of Antigone are very good nutritional basis for birds. One of the most strong points of tourism development is the presence of water in the area within the Park are 4 water sources and three antique springs.

Existing resources are located at distances such as to convince that they have been the main sources of drinkable water for residents of antiquity. For two of them (the Acropolis and Spring of Agora) where the original image is preserved even today, built with stones with the same technique as the walls of houses, there is no doubt that they have functioned in antiquity. Archaeological Park of Antigone is situated in a territory that lies between two major streams: Stream of Ladovishta in the northeast and stream of Tranoshishta in the northwestern part. These two streams have some ramifications of other streams; such are stream of Monastery, stream of Gjinofshat, stream of Saraqinishta, stream of Kalogre etc. Antigone doesn't have any natural lake, but its landscape

included three artificial lakes, such are: Doftia Reservoir in the south, Suha Reservoir in the east and Çini reservoir in the western part of the park.

Forests Archaeological Park of Antigone around, especially in the northwestern part of it near Tranoshishta source and near the Gjinofshat is dominated by germander, wild pear trees, elm trees, ashes trees, heathery, polecat, and dozens of colorful shrubs.

In the north-west hills of Antigone around the Acropolis, are situated oaks forests and some high-oaks are distributed throughout the territory of the park. On both sides of the road that leads to Antigona and spaces around the park there are several dozen private gardens owned by local people where there are dozens of types of fruit trees in the area of Lunxheria, nuts, almonds, hazelnuts, quinces, figs, apples, pomegranates, grape vine, dates, pears, plums, even citrus trees. Antigonea is known for its rich and qualitative pastures on the valley of Drino. Pastures are most associated with colorful flowers in the spring during period of time March to June, turning so the environment back into colorful "carpets". Pastures dominated by trefoils, oily plants, aromatic plant, varied types of shrubs, such as strawberries, lilies, Oregon, sage, chamomile, thistle, wild cabbage, bee plant, mountain tea, laurel, mushrooms etc. Areas of forests, shrubs and pastures, are important habitats for a variety of wild animal species including; marten, rabbit, fox, wild rooster, wild cats, turtle, the field mouse species, wolves, jackal, weasel, hedgehog etc In bird species that find a shelter in the area of varied landscape of Antigone such are wild rooster that lives is housed at Spile Monastery, partridges, bat of the night, wild dove, eagle, hawk, sparrow, lumberjack, redwing, goldfinch, nightingale, mountain, woodpecker etc.

Currently, around Antigonea natural territory is not threatened by illegal construction, or the abuse of land for development projects, use for tourism purposes and for agricultural work. However, the scientific importance of natural resource for Antigonea is great, in terms of damages, and especially in terms of aesthetic damage to landscape by cutting trees, collecting medicinal plants, grazing goats and burning of pastures by shepherds, is evident risks and requires awareness of the local community.

Infrastructure is currently the most difficult issue to be resolved within the framework of legal and financial possibilities of Antigonea Archaeological Park itself and if the government would not intervene quickly to invest in the construction of South Street - Antigonea Park, 15 km long, anyway Antigonea perspective on a cultural tourism center will be remote.

Community-events Park should organize and expand annually community events that bring in the Park as Agricultural Products Fair livestock, horses and Raiders contest, Traditional Products Fair Day of pagan rituals, the shepherds Walking Day etc. should be necessarily returned in the permanent and annual events.

Bed & Breakfast Programs

Bed & breakfast programs, in the Park's villages, aim to encourage the maintenance of eco-tourism and to acquire tools and initiatives for tourists to stay in the Park.

Among the strong reasons why Antigonea should be visited are: you will find the adventure tourism and ecotourism. You will find a significant indigenous local community and active nature and culture values, life of the ancient ancestors is more evident than anywhere, you can walk on the boulevards and paved right of an ancient city without being tarnished of the dust and mud, there were even after nearly 23 centuries, the best channels operate underground water collection and disposal by the way, there where can be "touched" peace of local residents of the ancient invaders, under the ruins of burned city even today can be find tracks of black fire of that tragic night, in Antigona easier than anywhere else is evident exemplary citizenship, humanism, and great love of our ancestors to life in the community.

Table 1: SWOT analysis of the development of rural tourism and agro tourism in the area of Antigonea

STRONG POINTS	WEAK POINTS
<p>Marvelous and suitable nature for summer and winter agro tourism</p> <p>Being close to Greece (market possibilities)</p> <p>Have natural and cultural assets</p> <p>Awareness of the community about importance of rural tourism development</p> <p>Direct sale of traditional bio food</p> <p>Non expensive prices for guests and local people</p>	<p>Low level of education of local people</p> <p>Knowledge of foreign languages by a small part of community</p> <p>Lack of qualified medical care and of the shops</p> <p>Is difficult to find necessary information in this area</p>
POSSIBILITIES	THREATNINGS
<p>An increasing interest for an individual active tourism:</p> <p>Increasing number of traveling with urban population for agro tourism and rural tourism.</p> <p>An increasing interest for agro tourism during weekends</p> <p>Possibilities for the development of agriculture that is stimulated by direct sales of agricultural products especially bio- products.</p> <p>An increasing interest for natural agro tourism, cultural and ecological tourism.</p> <p>An increase of economical incomes as the result of new job positions and due to the development of the local</p>	<p>An increasing level of pollution of natural environment caused by waste of consumption materials</p> <p>Damaging of fauna species through illegal fishing and hunting</p> <p>Competition of other destinations which offered better conditions</p> <p>Lost of traditions, culture and traditional way of living of local community</p> <p>Increasing of the number of buildings</p>

<p>production market</p> <p>Experience sharing with people of other places</p>	
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Conclusions

Albania reality of rural tourism development must play a special role as part of rural development as a result of fragmenting of farms, the high number of unemployment and due to receiving insufficient income from agriculture or other economic activities in rural areas. The increasing demand for holidays in peaceful rural area, in recent years provides the opportunity to perform rural tourism and its importance in the development of integrated areas such as the Antigonea. Area of Antigone posses all natural resources to have a healthy supply agro tourism but significantly lack in sub-sectors of tourist activity leaders for support and leisure, also lack of the hotel capacity and tourist villages and therefore the accommodation standards are poor with limited uniformity in the decor and accessories. Emerging problems related to lack of infrastructure which may include, roads leading to tourist areas, electricity and drinking water for 24 hours, collecting and treating sewage and waste, forest damage. Tourism development in Antigona needs support, and a collaboration of interest groups, NGOs and government to develop strategic regional plans focused on the development of modern integrated agro tourism and providing a quality tourism product. Private business district must also create greater investments for infrastructure development and industry through concessions, loans and budget funds. This should be accompanied by drafting of a well-structured plan, and simplification and facilitation of investment procedures: Turning point for tourism in the area of Antigone should begin to facilitate the market in this sector, and building institutions to deal the design and coordination of policies and strategies for zonal marketing in the south of the country as normal and interesting destination for agro tourism. This it starts by increasing the state budget for tourism marketing, opening of representation offices abroad, and increasing

information offices within the country, as well as intensive presentations at international fairs. This campaign should be accompanied with more intensive presence in our country programs, with the most popular networking international media.

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