

Research Article

Rural Tourism as An Opportunity to Revitalize Rural Areas in Republic of Croatia

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Citation: Zrakić M, Grgić I, Krznar S, Hadelan L (2017) Rural Tourism as An Opportunity to Revitalize Rural Areas in Republic of Croatia. J AgrAgri Aspect 2017: JAAA-112.

Received Date: 17 January, 2017; **Accepted Date:** 16 March, 2017; **Published Date:** 23 March, 2017

Abstract

Rural tourism is a specific type of tourism. Trends in tourism in general are focused more on intangible dimensions of touristic demand – experience. Consumer experience presents totality of supply. Croatia as primarily coastal touristic country in the last few decades strengthens the capacities in rural tourism. Since the rural areas in Croatia are facing with high rate of demographic problems, rural tourism (all its types) can be one way in solving problem – how to revitalize rural areas. The aim is to describe the development in past few years and to indicate the limitations and possibilities of rural tourism in the context of the overall rural development in Croatia. For the purposes of this article, secondary information research has been made, including the information available on the Internet and contemporary literature about rural areas. Rural tourism can contribute to economy diversification and make some new jobs, especially for young people. Because of the variety of climatic, environmental and regional conditions there are diversified manifestations of rural tourism in Croatia. That fact should not be perceived as problem but as opportunity that could be turned into comparative advantage.

Keywords: Rural Tourism; Regions; Development; Croatia

Introduction

Croatia (officially the Republic of Croatia) became a member of the European Union (EU) in 2013, which encompassed changes in the Croatian economy, including rural development. In addition to coastal tourism, which is extremely important for Croatian economy (the share of direct gross value added (GVA) of tourism in the total GVA in Croatia amounted about 8.5%), and according to which Croatian economy is oriented; in the last decades begins diversification of tourism products and development of new types of tourism such as rural, health, transit etc.



Figure 1: Croatia in Europe – geographical position

According to Skuras et al. (2006) as other forms of tourism that are becoming more available it means that it becomes more and more difficult for tourism based only on “sea and sun” to be able to satisfy the consumers.

Rural tourism is a specific type of tourism. Trends in tourism in general are focused more on intangible dimensions of touristic demand – experience. Consumer experience presents totality of supply (nature, food, accommodation, environment, hospitality, activities etc.). The concept of rural tourism includes various forms of tourism in rural areas (eco-tourism, agro-tourism, fishing and hunting, etc.). Rural tourism is a common term for activities and forms of tourism which exist in the rural area defined by the natural and cultural resources that are there (Svržnjak et al., 2014). According to WTO, rural tourism is a term used when “rural culture” is a key component of the product or service in rural tourism supply (Mihailović and Morić, 2012). Universal definition of rural tourism is still the subject of discussions without consensus (Pearce, 1989; Bramwell, 1994; Seaton et al., 1994). There are several reasons. For the first, rural areas are determined differently in different countries; all tourist activities in rural area cannot be unconditionally determined as rural (depends about context), there is a lot of types of rural tourism in rural area without common denominator (Štros et al., 2015). McGehee and Kim (2004) define rural tourism as tourism which takes place in a rural area. Accommodation (apartments, camps ...) may be different, as well as activities (hiking, walking, sports, visiting cultural heritage, cultural events, etc.).

About 93% of Croatian land area is marked as rural that inhabits one-fifth of the total population (Svržnjak et al., 2014). There is a great potential for the development of this type of tourism, which can be strong backing for economic and social development of rural areas. The rural tourism capacity in Croatia has a short history since 1998 when there were registered first rural tourism family farms - 32 of them, and is currently at unduly low only 447 registered rural households which are very unequally distributed by counties.

Orientation towards coastal tourism, long-term neglect of rural areas and family farms are the reasons of insufficient development of rural tourism in Croatia. The importance of rural tourism is reflected in the strong interaction between agricultural production, traditional products, presentation of tradition, traditional gastronomy and tourist services, and the use of existing resources. Structural changes in agricultural production have led to the weakening of the rural economy, what has imposed seeking additional income sources for farmers (Grgić et al., 2015a). For the further development of rural tourism are needed human resources, while at the same time Croatian rural area faces the problem of rural depopulation.

Earlier, migrations in rural areas were caused by wars and natural disasters, but in recent years rural exodus is caused by social and economic problems. According to Grgić et al. (2010)

the greatest difficulties of today life in the Croatian rural areas are economic; lack of employment, poor choice of occupations and lower wages versus jobs in the city. The biggest problem is that young people in particular leave rural areas because of lack of opportunities.

The migration of the rural population can be prevented primarily by increasing employment and income and the creation of such physical and social infrastructure in rural areas that will significantly improve the living conditions of rural population. In fact, it can help the development of all forms of rural tourism which will boost other economic activities in rural areas considering that no activity is acting independently, but mutually complementary and reinforcing.

Materials and Methods

According to Petrić (1996) there are two groups of rural tourism definitions. The first group consists from definitions that defined rural tourism on the basis of total touristic income (e.g. rural tourism is one type of tourism in nature and agritourism is one type of rural tourism). Its second group defines tourism in rural area by different supply elements. Depending on the primary component of the product (e.g. rural culture, activity on farm etc.) expression used for definition like agro-tourism, green tourism, gastronomic tourism, social, nautical tourism, hunting, adventure, historical / cultural tourism and so on.

The aim is to describe the development of the rural tourism in past few years and to indicate the limitations and possibilities of its development in the context of the overall rural development in Croatia. For the purposes of this article, secondary information research has been made, including the information available on the Internet and contemporary literature about rural areas. In the paper we applied the method of qualitative analysis of secondary data and descriptive (reproductive) synthesis.

Results and Discussion

Sustainable development and rural tourism value

The terms “rural development” and “sustainable development” are complementary terms (Krznar, 2016). The concept of sustainable development was born out from the need to emphasize the necessity of conservation and protection, especially non-renewable resources, and to coordinate development with the environment. Croatian rural area throughout history developed slowly and thus left preserved environment and economic basis for future generations. Three key points determinate the concept of sustainable development: the protection of the ecosphere, stable economic development and the fair distribution of social opportunities. The

tourists' interest in recent times is increasingly focused on natural and cultural heritage, life in the countryside, and spending time in the wild and unspoiled nature. Local population often focuses on tourism for economic reasons and easier earnings and become dependent on tourist demands even threatening local identity. Rural tourism should be developed in a way to develop rural areas and should remain development in accordance with the environment. It should also put into use the existing facilities; engage local population and adapt rural tourism to the available space.

Rural areas visitors are most attracted by the natural environment and cultural and historical heritage. Considering the total area, Croatia stands out with a large number of protected and tourists attractive natural areas and by environmental biodiversity is in the European top. According to the Register of Protected Areas of the State Institute for Nature Protection in Croatia there are 409 protected areas in different categories. Protected areas now cover 8.56% of the Croatian area, or 12.24% of the continental territory and 1.94% of the territorial sea.

Culture which takes place in the rural area is the base of development of rural tourism and differentiates rural one place from another. Farmers' culture is based on local creation and social control, traditions and forms of collective action, and is influenced by various local environmental and other local cultures (Cifrić, 2012). Rural tourism based on culture and cultural attractions which include: cultural monuments, folk culture, habitation and food, ethnic folk practices, folk material culture of the old crafts, products, souvenirs, cultural institutions and events and entertainment, sports and commercial events. The cultural monuments are important factor in every attractive tourist destination (movable and immovable objects preserved from the past which point to a specific period of social development). An important role in rural area plays folk culture which is preserved in the folklore of the rural population, and includes dressing, dancing, singing, music, ancient traditions, crafts, and way of living.

Products and services supply in rural tourism

The goal of successful management of rural destination is to apply marketing principles and techniques in a way to enhanced attractiveness of destinations in terms of increasing competition. The process of a successful destination management is grouped into three areas: products, markets and consumers/users, and consists of resources, products, marketing strategies and measures, consumer/user and segmentation (Rainisto, 2003). For successful destination management is also an important part the destination reputation (perception). The destination gains the image quite difficult and it is long-term process, but once it gains it gets huge competitive advantage over other destinations. The image of a tourist destina-

tion is the totality of impressions, beliefs, ideas, expectations and feelings about the place collected over time (Kesić and Jakeljić, 2012). Some counties, regions, places or cities use their prominent urban historical symbols (fortress in Đurđevac city) because they serve as the easiest and quickest association with a place and are a powerful visual symbol, which symbolizes and reinforces the image of a particular place (Svržnjak et al., 2014). Important supply item is considered to be the environment which includes social, cultural, economic and political features with the usual characteristics such as soil, climate and food supply. From the perspective of potential tourists, rural tourism product is perceived and consumed as a compound or combination of attributes that will satisfy his desire and need (Kotler, 2001). When assessing rural tourism attributes are essential (Canoves et al., 2005): direct connection of nature and landscape, peace and tranquility, price-quality ratio, the ratio of tourism products bidders to tourists, tourism activities, content and timetable of the tourism residence object, direct contact with nature, additional services with basic tourist service, ease of attractions availability, architectural (traditional) characteristics of tourist facilities, sports activities etc. According to Grgić et al. (2011) at the Zagreb County, agritourism services providers have to be ambitious (37.3% of respondents think so), kind (19.3%), hardworking (13.3%), resourceful (8.4%), educated (6.0%) and other (15.7%). According to the same research, the main reason for doing agritourism is better sales of agricultural products (57.1%), while other reasons are better sales of non-agricultural products and a love for countryside and agriculture. Consequently it comes to agricultural production and rural areas preserving and products are sold at minimum cost and maximum sales prices. The diverse rural tourism supply certainly contributes to the development of the local community. It includes preservation and sufficiently pure landscape, rich natural and cultural heritage (churches, fortresses, and castles), environmentally preserved area with numerous natural resources, environmentally friendly production, indigenous and traditional products, many natural, cultural and historical attractions and traditional production. In similar research (Grgić et al., 2015c) potential rural-tourism farmers in one micro-region in Croatia have positive attitude towards tourism activity in rural area, but only 3.3% of them is interested in agritourism. The need for major investments and administration are the biggest problem they emphasized.

Products and services demand in rural tourism

Consumers themselves (tourists) have the greatest influence on the development of tourism activities. They are motivated with new priorities, are environmentally conscious and are looking for new experiences and activities during the trip. They also require more attention, better services quality and interesting stories about

the place they are visiting and the food consumed. Recently, interesting stories or legends (linked to total experience) about the place kept increasing demand in rural areas. One distinctive characteristics of tourist demand is its elasticity, which may be primary and secondary. In the primary elasticity the focus is on income sensitivity or prices, and in the secondary on the volatility of tourism demand to changes in supply (Dobre, 2005). Tourist demand can be influenced by numerous factors: prices, consumer attitudes, political environment, etc., but mainly disposable income and prices play a decisive role in defining the tourism demand (Song et al., 2010). According to Grgić et al. (2011) in Zagreb County, the majority of respondents answered that the biggest impact in demand for agritourism services has nature/environment, hospitality and food supplied. To younger population essential is sporting events supply, cultural events and other interesting content. Also, according to the same survey, respondents expect improvement of agrotourism supplies through advertising, services quality increasing and lower prices. Demand for rural tourism in Croatia is characterized by a significant increase in recent times and because of greater awareness of tourists, environmental concerns, and availability of cultural heritage, the need for rest, adventure, excitement and enogastronomic experience. Majority of rural tourists come from urban areas; belong to middle and upper middle class who, despite the crisis have increasing disposable income. Except that rural tourism means a lever for greater returns, it encourages the revitalization of agriculture and repopulation of rural areas and keeping young people in the area. One of the most important factors of demand is seasonality, and the most attractive time to consumers is spring because then nature is awakening and becoming more attractive. Other similar research (Grgić et al, 2015b) in other part of Croatia showed that major part of respondent would spend holidays on touristic family farms during summer or spring.

Seasonality of tourism combines temporal and spatial variations in tourism demand, since the ultimate manifestation of the seasonality of tourism palpable and visible in time and in space (Kozić, 2013).

Rural tourism in Croatia

Rural tourism in Croatia began to develop after the War for

Independence (1991-1995); firstly in the context of promoting the development of continental tourism, and later as an essential factor in the development of rural areas and the village renovation. It developed unevenly, depending on the goals and programs of individual country regions. It started to develop in Istria as an integral part of the destination product of coastal tourist destinations and in other regions in order to raise the quality of life in rural areas and the acquisition of additional income. There have been undertaken great actions for tourism development on family farms from reputable institutions (Croatian Chamber of Economy, Ministry of tourism, different associations of producers and consumers etc.), but the effects of those actions were not consistent with their efforts. The biggest problem was the rural farms size in Croatia, which was average 2.8 hectares of agricultural land per farm in 1991 (then further fragmented in average of 5 particles). On such small farms it was quite hard to organize the tourism supply. Systematic development of rural tourism in Croatia can be divided into two important periods (Šarić, 2016):

- From 1995 to 1999 - the Croatian government adopted the National program of development of small and medium enterprises in the tourism industry with an emphasis on sustainable tourism development in rural areas; and
- In 2004 - when the new Croatian government began seriously to care about rural areas and economic activities in the rural areas.

According to the Institute for Tourism (2015) the vision for the rural tourism development in Croatia until 2020 is as follows. In 2020, rural tourism will be a competitive, commercially established and increasingly popular export product in Croatia. Except due to the high ambience feeling and ecological preservation of the environment, rural tourism in Croatia will attract domestic and international tourist demand most because of authentic atmosphere, “the warmth of home“ and distinctive “custom-made” supply tailored experiences customized to different consumer segments. The dynamic development of rural tourism in Croatia will be the result of a stimulating business environment, responsible destination management and high level of involvement and commitment of all holders of tourism policy at national and regional level. The goal of rural tourism development in Croatia till 2020 is to enhance its international competitiveness, desirability and recognition.

SWOT analysis of rural tourism in Croatia

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The beauty of nature • The diversity of landscape (mountains, rivers, forests) • High environmental preservation • Merger of villages and nature • The rural tradition/heritage • A diverse cultural heritage, especially intangible • The richness and variety of authentic cuisine • Traditional architectural heritage • The growing number of rural tradition events • Favorable geographical location (proximity to the emitting countries) • Improved transport links • An increasing number of recreational activities (biking, hiking/walking, trekking, horse riding ...) • A growing number of rural tourism households • Increasing of quality and diversity of supply • Several recognizable regional rural tourism clusters (Istria, Baranja, Konavle, Dalmatian Zagora, Central Croatia) • Recognize the importance of rural tourism in Strategy of Tourism by 2020 • The growing interest of the local population for rural tourism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The lack of environment arrangement • Insufficient valorization of the living and working culture in local areas • Insufficient knowledge of the executive authority about the rural tourism underdeveloped areas • Poor communal infrastructure • The quality of local roads • Deficient short-distance public transport services • Lack of accommodation • Insufficient supply • Availability of facilities is conditioned often by prior appointment only • Insufficient control of services quality • The lack of tourism intermediaries interest • Absence of “custom-made” complex tourism products • The lack of national vision for the development of rural tourism • The lack of development model for rural tourism • Legal inconsistency • Limited capacity of EU funds utilization • Inadequate national promotion • Lack of quality programs • Insufficient understanding of trends on the global tourism market • Poor awareness of potential entrepreneurs about the possibilities of EU programs use
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Favorable trends of the tourist demand • Growing interest of tourism policy holders for the development of continental areas • The availability of EU funds / programs • Application of good business practices from some neighboring countries in the region • Easily accessible Internet lifelong learning programs and/or education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing competition • Excessive commercialization of rural tourism supply (pap instead of authenticity) • Environment pollution • Continuation of depopulation in rural areas • Abandoning the production of typical products because of legal restrictions

Source: Ivandić and Kunst, 2015

Regions with the most developed rural tourism in Croatia

Rural area of Slavonia and Baranja (Figure 1) is rich in tourist attractions that have the potential for tourism development, such as thermal, healing waters, rivers, sanctuaries, wine routes, natural parks, cultural heritage, etc.

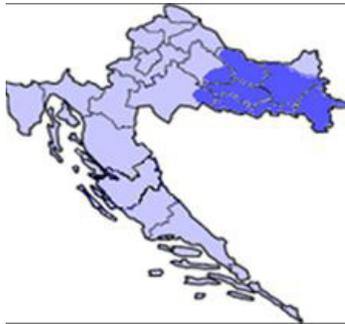


Figure 2: Slavonia and Baranja (Eastern part of Croatia)

This special rural area with unpolluted environment and sustainable development at the same time is rich in tradition, cuisine, famous Slavonian hospitality and what is very important with low prices of goods and services. Slavonia and Baranja are poor with newly created tourist attractions, and the problems of rural tourism development are reflected in a lack of entrepreneurial knowledge and skills, legislation, promotional activities etc. Slavonia as least developed tourist region of continental Croatian should better and more efficient use its tourist potentials, natural beauty, tradition and culture that have been neglected for long time, and branded itself to market as a tourist destination that supplies something new and distinctive. People live in the traditional way, but in the modern spirit. Starting points that give preference to Slavonia as a tourist destination according to Bolfek, Jakičić and Lončarić (2012) are:

- Preserved nature of the Pannonian Plain;
- Quiet and peaceful refuge from the urban lifestyle;
- Richness in history, architecture and unique urban complex;
- Place which respects traditional values and proud tradition known for the hospitality of local people who make the stay enjoyable;
- Romantic atmosphere that provide an authentic towns and castles which told numerous legends;
- Rich cuisine with the sounds of the autochthonous music instruments.

In Slavonia and Baranja it is necessary to include the “economy experiences” and expand the supply through innovative adventure-sport tourism where is possible further diversification of the product with other socially useful activity.

The development of rural tourism in Međimurje County (Figure 3.) was positively affected by neighboring Republic of Slovenia, but also with the ideas and experiences of emigrants returning from Austria, Switzerland and Germany, where this form of tourism was develop many years ago (Mesarić-Žabčić, 2008).



Figure 3: Međimurje (North part of Croatia)

The development of rural tourism in this region was due to the possibility of creating extra income, enabling to increase the quality of life and to mitigate the depopulation of rural areas in Međimurje County. Rural tourism begins to use in planned way for the purpose of revitalization the rural areas. Additional incentives for individuals, but also for the County for this kind of investment and entrepreneurship are specific rural farms in that area, tradition presentation through the folk customs and traditional crafts, traditional products production and the fact that the preservation of the natural environment at a high level. Folk customs can be seen in the way they built “hiže” (traditional name for house), in national costumes, wedding ceremonies, Međimurje County traditional songs, music and dance. Međimurje County is the area with healthy climate, excellent conditions for recreation, leisure, good road links to the rest of the Croatia and the nearby neighbor countries as important elements for the further development of rural tourism in the area of Međimurje County (Mesarić-Žabčić, 2008). Historical monuments, national heritage (costumes, masks, customs, feasts and food), watercourses, vineyards and specific farms attract year after year more and more tourists. Tourists are delighted with the landscape beauty, the wine quality, a rich local cuisine, unique food specialties and hospitality. Important role in the promotion of rural tourism in Međimurje County takes local music, songs and dance. Renovation of old houses for rural tourism is a newer phenomenon in Međimurje County, and is related to the return of Međimurje County individuals from abroad. The advantages of rural tourism development in the area of Međimurje County are reflected in the expansion of the existing tourism, expansion of tourist business in the spring and autumn months, entering the line of Croatian counties and countries that follow the world trend of tourism, and the ability to generate higher revenues from tourism. At the same time it is encouraging the preservation of native customs, preservation of traditional crafts, socio-cultural features of the Međimurje region, and the traditional primary production and processing of agricultural products (Mesarić-Žabčić, 2008).



Figure 4: Istria (Western part of Croatia)

Rural-touristic goods and services extended the main touristic season from two months on almost whole year touristic season. Istria is known for the production of cheese, ham, olives, olive oil, asparagus, truffles, fine wine spirits and liqueurs. There is very wealth supply in every segment of touristic demand (from food to accommodation to different activities, tradition and specific nature). Istria generates the highest income from rural tourism in Croatia and is a good example for other regions. Improving rural tourism in Istria should be seemed trough the destination competitiveness increase, improving the existing supply, increasing the overall quality of rural areas, making travel clusters and with branding the rural tourism product (Zrakić et al., 2015). Rural tourism is also developed in the south part of country (rural parts of Dalmatia, Dubrovnik city region etc.).

For Croatia is quite interesting that despite the small total area or relatively small number of total population (4.2 mil inhabitants) there is such heterogeneity according nature, cultural or historical heritage, way of life and way of rural tourism. It is quite hard to find some common denominator for rural tourism in different Croatian regions. If we should do this it would be the wealth in heterogeneity and differences.

Such type of national rural tourism could be the comparative advantage of domestic tourism in whole. Rural tourism can have very good perspective in Croatia from natural to cultural precondition, but there are main demographic end financial/economic problems in rural areas.

Conclusions

Croatia is country in Europe (between Central Europe, Southeast Europe, and the Mediterranean). That geographical position makes the country very heterogenic in climate conditions, nature and cultural heritage. Croatian tourism sector is primarily known as coastal tourism supply in summer (sun and sea). The share of tourism activity in total GDP is about 8%. Thanks to continental part and significant rural areas (about 93% of total area) rural tourism

ism is becoming also important part of touristic supply in country. Rural tourism can be perceived as one way of solution for rural areas which are facing with depopulation (deagrarisation) and low income problems. Through rural tourism agricultural producers can sell their products and unused infrastructural and intangible potentials can be reused in those areas. Also it can contribute to economy diversification and make some new jobs, especially for young people. Regional deployment of rural tourism is uneven and rural-tourism supply is interregional different. That fact should not be perceived as problem but as opportunity that could be turned into comparative advantage.

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