

Sustainable Practices in Small Accommodation Units

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Please cite this paper as:

Tanase M.O., Tala, M.L., Tigu, G. and Stoian, M., 2022. Sustainable Practices in Small Accommodation Units. In: R. Pamfilie, V. Dinu, C. Vasiliu, D. Pleșea, L. Tăchiciu eds. 2022. 8th BASIQ International Conference on New Trends in Sustainable Business and Consumption. Graz, Austria, 25-27 May 2022. Bucharest: ASE, pp.422-429.

DOI: 10.24818/BASIQ/2022/08/056

Abstract

Sustainable practices are becoming a necessity in a world that is depleting natural resources at an accelerated level. In tourism, the accommodation service is essential and can be a starting point for the implementation of these practices. The article aims to investigate the interest of managers/owners of boarding houses and agrotourism boarding houses in Romania for certain aspects related to sustainability: use of organic products, energy savings, selective collection, employee training, and marketing campaigns. The results reveal a high level of selective waste collection and a reduction in the use of toxic products, while the certification of sustainable practices is lower. However, based on the values obtained, we appreciate that managers' interest in sustainability is high, especially since we are talking about small organizations. The originality of the approach comes from the fact that no national coverage research has been carried out on these forms of accommodation on the topic of practices related to sustainability. The results can help managers to relate to the market average and decide what actions they need to take regarding sustainability practices. It also helps other stakeholders, such as customers or authorities, to see the level of implementation and interest in providing environmentally friendly services.

Keywords

Romania, sustainable practices, rural areas, agro-touristic boarding houses, tourism.

DOI: 10.24818/BASIQ/2022/08/056

Introduction

Sustainability, now a widespread concept, a reality of society (Diaconescu and Stănciulescu, 2015) has emerged as a result of human awareness of issues, such as: depletion of resources (Jhariya, Banerjee and Meena, 2022), deterioration of nature (Xie, Fan and Zhou, 2021), the danger of having nothing to leave for future generations (Shue, 2014).

The concerns for sustainable development are becoming consistent with The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm, 1972. Subsequently, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) wrote up the report, which has become famous as Brundtland. In this report, sustainable development was defined as “aims to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromise the ability to meet that of the future” (WCED, 1987). But the world needed another 20 years to sign the first serious sustainability statement. It happened in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro on the occasion of the Earth Summit, when it was concluded that sustainable development represents “an achievable goal for all peoples of the world” (United Nations, 2020).

A major current step towards sustainable development was taken in 2015 with the development of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), agreed by most countries around the world (193). The document named *The 2030 Agenda* is extremely ambitious and considered universal, transformative and civilized (Economic Commission for Latin America, 2022).

The 2030 Agenda is an expression in all economic areas. Tourism is no exception. Seen as a form of recreation, of restoring intellectual, moral, or physical capacities, or as a way of doing business, tourism must also become a cleaner and fairer market for all stakeholders, and, in fact, sustainable. The SDGs in which tourism plays an important role are assessed as follows. SDG 12 - responsible consumption and

production, SDG 8 - decent work and economic growth, and SDG 14 - life below water (Boluk and Rasoolimanesh, 2022).

The interest in sustainability is much more practical as there are now clear directions (through SDGs) and business is about to take these into current and future activities. This is why the authors considered it significant to investigate the interest in sustainability of managers/owners in Romanian tourism. The present analysis investigates Romanian touristic and agro-touristic boarding houses, facilities that own approximately 57% of the total number of approved accommodation spaces, followed by hotels with only 17% (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2022).

The paper provides a brief review of the literature on sustainability and sustainable tourism practices, a presentation of the methodology and results of the research related to sustainable practices in Romanian touristic and agro-touristic boarding houses. In the end, there is a short section of conclusions.

1. A short literature review

The strengthening of the concept of sustainable development at the World Summit of Rio de Janeiro in 1992 has led to increased interest and the development of an institutional framework for sustainable tourism (Torres-Delgado and López Palomeque, 2012). In 2012, the United Nations stated that well-designed and managed tourism can make a significant contribution to sustainable development (United Nations, 2012). Sustainable tourism is seen as a way to have products, services or business models that will attract eco-focused tourists (Paiano, Crovella and Lagioia, 2020), which are, obvious, more concerned about environment.

Tourism takes a variety of forms according to various criteria (Minciu, 2004). A common classification is that based on the administrative territory. Thus, we have rural tourism and urban tourism, two forms that complement each other and in which the elements of sustainability vary. Compared to urban areas, rural areas are closer to nature, cleaner and less modified. Therefore, it is even more important for this space to retain these characteristics as much as possible and to offer tourists experiences that meet their wishes related to the search for beautiful landscaping, the search for quiet, low noise and environmental pollution, the desire to learn more about nature (Streimikiene and Bilan, 2015).

An analysis of interest for the sustainability of tourism in rural areas was carried out by An and Alarcón (2020). They identified 76 articles written between 2009-2019. The main topics addressed are grouped into the following categories: holistic, environmental, social, economic, and customer. The article stated that many studies on sustainable rural tourism were written from a holistic sustainability perspective. They concluded by suggesting that researchers should pay attention to interactions in all aspects of the environment, economy, and society, and to analyse them overall.

Sustainable tourism practices often require a major change in existing practices (La Lopa and Day, 2011). The implementation of sustainable business practices depended on the philosophy of business managers. The reasons are mainly, the possibility of saving costs (Hitchcock and Willard, 2009; Landrum and Edwards 2009), the improvement of public relations or higher employee commitment and satisfaction (Baum, 2006; Hitchcock and Willard, 2009).

In the urban area, tourism produces more negative impact compared to the rural area. Lerario and Di Turi (2018) stated that tourist flows in these areas can avoid limiting if sustainable managerial practices are adopted together with changing consumer behaviour.

A study conducted by Essex and Hobson in 2001 having as respondents accommodation managers in a major British city revealed that implementing sustainability practices is often blocked by elements such as time, cost, and expertise. But compared to other industries, a more recent study developed in Australia reveals higher levels of performance for tourism businesses in terms of adopting environmental values (Moyle, et al., 2018).

Although it is extremely important for companies to be concerned about implementing sustainable practices (Annunziata, et al., 2018), there is scarce evidence that tourism practices contribute to sustainability (Agyeiwaah, 2019; Sørensen and Bærenholdt, 2020). This reality could lead managers to postpone the decision to change the mode of operation until more evidence is provided. However, other authors have shown that there is a link between sustainable business practices of tour operators and the results, suggesting the implementation of these approaches in tourism business in Malaysia (Hamid, Isa and Kiumarsi, 2020).

Among the components of the tourism industry, accommodation is more flexible and, consequently, more suitable for the adoption of practices such as the adaptation of energy systems, buying less polluting

products, reduction of energy consumption, water, and food losses (Popescu, et al., 2021). These are ecological practices, which occur most frequently (Çelik and Çevirgen, 2021). Other practices refer to economic and social dimensions (Raderbauer, 2011; Legrand, Sloan and Chen, 2016). Some examples are: educating tourists through marketing campaigns, training employees in environmental issues, or choosing methods of protection that are not profitable in the short term.

In general, studies are conducted on large organizations, where methods and practices are easier to identify, compare, and analyse. This is also the case for accommodation units (Radwan, Jones and Minoli, 2010; Memili, et al., 2018). For example, a practice called The Resource Hunt implemented in northern European countries at Scandic Hotels revealed a 20% reduction in energy and water consumption and a 30% reduction in the volume of unsorted waste over three years (Goodman, 2000). Another study shows that in Ghana the three top eco-friendly practices include the use of energy efficient light bulbs, the reuse of linen and towels by guests, and also the training of staff to be eco-friendly (Mensah, 2006; Tomaszewska, et al., 2021). Researchers like Font (2002), Han, Hsu and Lee (2009) or Han, Hsu and Sheu (2010) studied sustainability certification and green labelling among large accommodation enterprises. According to Iorgulescu (2020), officially certified green hotels represent less than 10% of the existing accommodation units worldwide.

In the case of Romania, a research conducted by Brătucu, et al. (2017) in accommodation units located in the Carpathian Mountains concluded that managers know little about voluntary sustainable development tools (EMAS, ISO 14001, or ETIS). On the other hand, they recognize the necessity of practices with respect to sustainability, although they apply only occasionally sustainable development measures. Sustainability is not a pregnant element in the management process. Regarding small accommodation units, Midgett, et al. (2019) stated that they had low levels of understanding of sustainable practices. These organisations must realize the relevance of sustainability and their role towards global sustainability. They must commit to these actions continuously in order to see the results and measure them.

In Romania, boarding houses or agro-touristic boarding houses are important forms of accommodation. Boarding houses have a maximum 15 rooms capacity, while agro-touristic boarding houses are smaller, with a maximum 8 rooms capacity (Ministerul Economiei, 2013). Regarding sustainable practices, Ispas, Untaru and Candrea (2019) found that owners/managers are aware of their importance. However, many barriers stand in the way of implementing them: insufficient money, time, or organizational resources.

2. Methodology and main findings

Our main focus was to investigate the interest of managers/owners of boarding houses and agrotourism boarding houses in Romania for certain aspects related to sustainability. We designed a structured questionnaire containing closed-ended questions and only one open question (for leisure facilities), which was self-applied in the fall of 2021 due to territorial distribution of accommodation units, distance and large number of units, costs, time, and scope of our research. We decided to use an Exponential Non-Discriminative Snowball Sampling method. The questionnaire was applied through an online survey. Recruitment was generated by posting the URL for the survey on the authors' social media network pages. Additionally, an email was sent to the ANTREC members. After two weeks, the authors re-posted the link and the emails were resent.

Of 9,146 accommodation units, 5205 are touristic boarding houses or agrotouristic boarding houses. Except for the ANTREC data base, no other national data base with rural accommodation units was available. Furthermore, of the 5205 units, some were probably closed due to a low number of tourists and restrictions in place at that time. The large number of units, geographical distribution and available contact information made almost impossible the task to reach every unit even by email.

In a comparative analysis, Shih and Fan (2009) found that for business-to-business surveys the response rates are lower than for other collectivities. It is known that mail surveys are half as effective as telephone surveys or personal interviews (Cycyota and Harrison, 2002). In addition, online questionnaires are replacing paper due to time and cost savings. But response rates continue to fall (Sjetne, et al., 2019). For the industry-wide survey, response rates of 1.52% were obtained (Upland, 2022).

In total, we obtained 102 valid responses. If we compared it with the number of registered units we obtained a 1,96% response rate. To analyse the collected data, we used univariate analysis to determine the frequencies, mean, median, skewness, and kurtosis. The design of the questionnaire included 2 main parts: (1) information about the company, (2) sustainable aspects of the business - ten items.

In terms of the geographical distribution of the respondents, we obtained one similar to the national distribution (see Figure 1). On the first part we obtained the following results:

- 79.4% of the boarding houses have less than 5 employees, 14.7% have between 5 and 10 employees, and 5.9% between 11 and 25 employees;
- 70.6% of the businesses were started more than 5 years ago and 29.4% were started less than 5 years ago;
- In terms of number of rooms, 23.5% have less than 5 rooms, 52.9% between 5 and 10 rooms, 11.8% between 11 and 15 rooms, 5.9% between 16 and 20 rooms and 5.9% more than 20 rooms;
- The owner provided the responses in 88.2% of the cases and the employee in 11.8%;
- 14.6% of the units do not provide any Food&Beverage (F&B) services; 33.3% offer tourists the opportunity to prepare their own food; 22.9% offer only breakfast and 27.1% offer complete F&B services; This was a multiple-choice question;
- For another multiple-choice question, activities that better describe the businesses of the respondents were: nature-based activities (72 responses), tour of touristic sites (33 responses), ecotourism (30 responses), rural patrimony (27 responses), culture and traditional way of life (24 responses), agriculture (18 responses);
- Only 21 of the respondents are members of alliances or associations - 19 ANTREC members and 2 in other associations: Pro-Straja and Bran-Moeciu-Fundata Association;
- Only 4 of 102 boarding houses have an independent certification for environment or quality like Rocert, Ecoinspect, ISO.

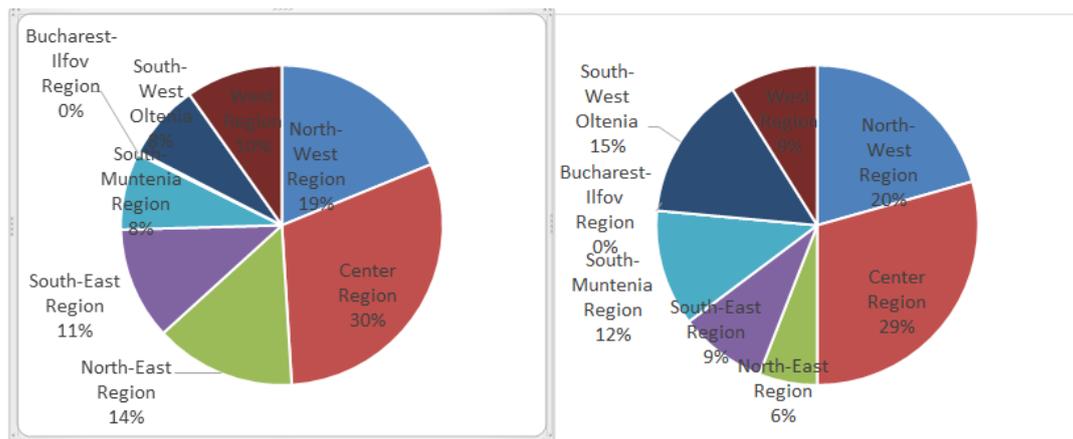


Figure no. 1. National territorial distribution of guest houses compared to territorial distribution of respondents

Source: made by the authors on the basis of NIS and their own data.

In terms of classification, due to national regulations, touristic boarding houses are classified on stars (from 1 to 5) and agroturistic boarding houses on flowers (1 to 5). Considering that we considered both types of units, we will present the data with star classification. A comparative image between the national distribution of tourist and agroturistic boarding houses can be seen in Table 1.

Table no. 1. Comparative analysis between the national and respondent distribution by comfort category

	Nation-wide distribution	Respondents distribution
5 stars	1.3%	5.9%
4 stars	11.8%	8.8%
3 stars	60.1%	67.6%
2 stars	24.9%	11.8%
1 star	1.9%	5.9%

Source: made by the authors on the basis of NIS and their own data.

For sustainable business we considered a number of 10 items ranging from knowing best practices in the field of sustainable accommodation or tourism, activities undertaken and using ecological aspects in current marketing activities. For the 10 items on sustainability, we have used a 7-point Likert scale where 1 – strongly agree and 7 – strongly disagree. The main results are shown in Table 2.

Table no. 2. Main centralized results for sustainability items

Item on Sustainability	Mean	Median	Standard deviation
It is useful to know the sustainability projects as a reference.	5.365	6.00	1.15
We reflect our commitment to sustainability through certifications.	5.06	5.50	1.65
The employees are trained in environmental issues.	5.47	6.00	1.54
With priority, we buy ecological products (biodegradable, recyclable, with recycled materials, without dangerous substances)	5.41	5.50	1.54
Ecological aspects are used in our marketing campaigns	5.50	6.00	1.579
We support the collaboration of customers in the field of environmental protection (voluntary change of towels and sheets, individual climate control)	5.88	6.00	1.12
We try to reduce the use of toxic and dangerous products	6.00	6.00	1.15
We apply energy saving measures such as: use of energy-efficient equipment and facilities, control of lighting and air conditioning.	5.82	6.00	1.678
We selectively collect waste: plastic, paper, glass, oils, batteries	6.00	7.00	1.688
We apply some environmental protection measures even if they are not economically profitable in the short term.	5.82	6.00	1.359

Source: Own elaboration based on the results

From the results obtained using SPSS software we can conclude that there is a commitment to sustainable business. There are differences in the implementation of actions to sustainable operations management. The highest median value (7) can be found for selective waste collection and the lowest value (5.5) for eco-certifications and buying ecological products.

Considered that selective waste collection became part of our daily life and is implemented in urban and rural areas in different modes, it is clear why this item scored the highest median value. More and more villages and rural areas started to collect waste in a selective way. On the contrary, eco-certifications and ecological products require time and money. In the last two years, tourism faced many restrictions and limitations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Small business-like boarding houses were equally affected by the decrease in tourist arrivals and overnights. In general, boarding houses saw a reduction in income and profit.

By mean value, the selective collection of waste and the actions undertaken by the boarding house to reduce the use of toxic and dangerous products score the highest (6). The lowest value (5.06) can be found again at ecocertifications. Other items that scored a higher value are: encouraging customers in the field of environmental protection, energy saving measures and other environmental protection measures.

From these results, we can conclude that agro/touristic boarding houses implement only the easiest measures. The ones that require time, money, and many actions to comply with the requirements of an ecocertification program are difficult to find in Romanian rural tourism. From previous results, only 4 businesses (of 102 respondents) have an eco-certification.

It is encouraging that rural businesses are addressing sustainability even if they implement only the easiest actions. In the light of these findings, we should underlie the importance of the other topics addressed in our research that score lower and could have a great importance in future business development: using ecological aspects in marketing campaigns and training employees in environmental issues.

The commitment to sustainability and ecology can be a differentiating element that can be transformed into a unique selling proposition. Furthermore, ecotourists are willing to pay more (Hultman, Kazemina and Ghasemi, 2015; Kazemina, Hultman and Mostaghel, 2016; Duong, et. al., 2021) for an eco-touristic product. This product should include all aspects of business sustainability that include ecocertification. The newest technical solutions that can save energy and water even if they have a higher investment cost will save money in the end. And these solutions can be implemented by any boarding house on a different scale to reduce operational costs and improve profitability.

Conclusions

The results are in line with previous studies (Mensah, 2006; Brătucu, et al., 2017; Tomaszewska, et al., 2021; Popescu, et al., 2021; Çelik and Çevirgen, 2021) showing that sustainable practices are often summarized in the easiest actions. Ecocertification is still a niche market due to the information required, the time and money, and the interest of the owners. A better understanding of eco-certification schemes and the advantages brought could lead to an extension of these types of accommodation. Our paper showed that the attitude of managers toward ecocertification had not changed over the years, although several studies (UNWTO, 2022; WTTC, 2021) shown that there is an increasing demand for sustainable tourism activities. A wide array of stakeholders (accommodation managers, destination managers, employees, consultancy companies) can benefit from the implementation of sustainable activities in a destination. In-depth qualitative research can offer a clear picture of the drawbacks of not implementing ecocertification.

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