Certification standard for tourism in the Danube region

Mirela Mazilu, Elena Toma, Irina Lazăr

Abstract—Motto:"In Europe today, there are already over 4 million people working for eco-industries. And the green economy sector has been extremely resilient. In fact it has kept growing and creating new jobs through the economic crisis" In Europe today, there are already over 4 million people working for eco-industries.
And the green economy sector has been extremely resilient. In fact it has kept growing and creating new jobs through the economic crisis" Karmenu Vella, European Commissioner for Environment, Fisheries and Maritime Affairs.
The establishment and the management of a certification system, especially for a multi-national area like the Danube Region can be a challenge. In the benchmarking analysis, the aspects related to simplicity of the systems and their easiness to be transferred have been kept in high consideration.
The intensity of the challenge depends also on important initial choices that should be made and that are suitable to simplify/complicate the process.
The public/private nature of the system, the possible adoption of existing and ready-to-use standards, the possibility of choosing a second-level certification approach are all aspects to be taken into consideration.

Keywords—Certification,challenge, Danube Strategy, sustainable tourism, tourism.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE plan for a sustainable future is supported by the EU 2020 strategy (EC 2010), a ten-year scheme for growth and jobs.
One of its key objectives is to address the need for sustainable and inclusive growth through the promotion of a competitive and greener economy in the EU.[1]

By adopting this framework, the destinations that meet certain criteria may obtain the status of "ecotourism destinations" which will be included in the national tourism promotion campaigns by the Ministry, and thus lead to increased visibility in the domestic and foreign markets.

At the same time, building and promoting a network of quality ecotourism destinations will help increasing Romania's image as an attractive destination.

Through adopting this framework, destinations that fulfill certain criteria may obtain that statute of "eco-tourism

Mirela Mazilu, University of Craiova, Department of Geography, Romania, (e-mail: mirelamazilu2004@yahoo.com).
Elena Toma, University Hyperion of Bucharest, Department of Social Sciences and the Natural, Romania (e-mail: elena_tomag@yahoo.com).
Irina Lazăr, University Hyperion of Bucharest, Department of Social Sciences and the Natural,Romania (e-mail: ira_laz@yahoo.com).

destinations" that will be included in the national campaigns led by the ministry destined to promote tourism, thus supplying enhanced visibility on the internal and external markets.

At the same time, building and promoting a network of high quality eco-tourism destinations will boost the image of Romania as an attractive destination.

"Romania becomes the first country in Europe to have developed a recognition system for the eco-tourism destinations based on the criteria developed by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) and on the European Eco-Tourism Labelling Standard (EETLS), after the eco-tourism destinations and the criteria for their recognition were launched on Friday."[1]

The European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) is a community tool for macro-territorial cooperation, involving 14 EU states and Danube states.

We should not ignore the economic and financial aspect of the Danube Strategy implementation. European money is made available for the development of the Romanian eco destinations, and Danube Bend destination, especially for infrastructure improvement and tourism development.

Fig. 1 Romanian country, taking part in the EUSDR Strategy

II. THE NEED OF COMMON CERTIFICATION STANDARD FOR TOURISM IN THE DANUBE REGION AND ITS GENERAL PURPOSES.

1) The analysis has shown the existence of a multitude of certification systems for eco-tourism and sustainable tourism,

[1] http://newyork.mae.ro/en/romania-news/2218

with different geographical scope. Only within the Danube Region, 9 different national systems have been identified, in 8 countries.

2) Nonetheless, even in those countries where a national system is not in force, the analysis shows a certain level of access of tourist actors willing to be certified to the many certification systems available at international level.

In this scenario the creation of a new certification system should be based on a clear choice about its general purposes and its market position.

- *How strong is the need of establishing a new certification system for the Danube Region?*
- *What should be the general purpose of its establishment? Should it be seen as an instrument to complement the existing offer and better satisfy the demand of certification raising from the actors of the Region, covering the eco-tourism market niche? Or rather as an instrument of touristic promotion of the Region? Or as a tool for raising the environmental awareness of actors and local population?*

3) The Danube Region is a multinational territory, with a great diversity of cultures, levels of development, administrative systems, histories.

- *To which extent this diversity might affect the establishment of a common certification system?*
- *To which extent they can be, on the contrary, considered as a stimulation factor to improve together towards a better developed and sustainable tourism?*

Starting from the **thematic focus**, the following table shows how the 23 systems can be distributed among three categories:

- **Systems aiming to certify sustainable tourism oriented entities, irrespective of their location (urban, rural or natural areas).**

  These systems are very much oriented towards sustainability, according to the "triple bottom line approach", and they give more or less the same level of attention to environmental, economic and social features of the entity to be certified;
- **Systems aiming to certify the environmental features** of the tourism entities, irrespective of their location (urban, rural or natural areas).
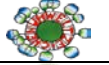
These systems, mainly composed by the eco-labels systems, are almost exclusively oriented on environmental aspects. In most of the cases, they are general certification systems interesting tourism besides many other economic sectors.

- **Systems aiming to certify eco-tourist entities,** located in natural and/or rural areas, according to the stricter definition of ecotourism in the WTO definition.

These systems focus especially on nature-related environmental aspects, but not only, as in several of them also cultural and social aspects may be considered for certification.

The distribution of the systems among these three categories is made based on the analyses of their history, their criteria and their results in terms of kinds of entities which have been certified until now.

Table no 1.   Distribution of the certification system according to their Thematic Focus

		Country	System	Thematic Focus		
				Sustainable tourism wherever	Environmental friendly tourism wherever	Ecotourism in natural/rural areas
National systems within the Danube Region	1	Austria	The Austrian Ecolabel		√	
	2	Bulgaria	Green Lodge			√
	3	Czech Republic	Ekologicky setrna sluzba		√	
	4	Croatia	Prijatelj okoliša		√	
	5	Germany	TourCert CSR	√		
	6	Germany	Viabono		√	
	7	Romania	Eco Romania			√
	8	Slovenia	Slovenia green		√	
	9	Ukraine	Green Crane		√	
International system active in the Danube	10	Multinational	Blaue Schwalbe			√
	11	International	EarthCheck	√		
	12	International	ECEAT			√
	13	International	EU Ecolabel		√	
	14	International	Green Globe	√		
	15	International	Green Key		√	
	16	International	Green Destinations	√		
Good pratices from the rest of Europe/World	17	UK	Green Tourism B.S.		√	
	18	Ireland	Ecotourism Ireland			√
	19	Multinational	Nordic Swan Ecolabel		√	
	20	International	Biosphere Responsible Tourism	√		
	21	USA	Sustainable Tourism Education Program	√		
	22	Australia	Eco Certification Program			√
	23	South Africa	Fair Trade Tourism	√		

As it can be seen, the relative majority (10) of the analyzed systems belong to the second group, while respectively 7 and 6 systems can be introduced respectively in the first and in the third group.

Looking only at the systems within the Danube Region, the prevalence of the second group is confirmed (6 systems), while there are only 2 systems which can be considered eco-tourism oriented and one sustainable-tourism oriented.

If the strategic purpose of the Danube Region is confirmed, the common system to be created should focus on eco-tourism; for this reason, and in relation to this specific aspect, systems like Eco-Romania and the Bulgarian Green-lodge label (however a national replica of the ECEAT label) should be seen as interesting internal examples.

From outside the Danube Region, the Blaue Schwalbe multinational system, as well as ECEAT and the Irish and Australian labels are also examples of eco-tourism oriented systems.

The **World Tourism Organization**, in a study published in 2002, identified over **60 sustainable and ecotourism certification programmes around the world.** A few programmes operate worldwide, some are regional, and most are national or local.

By 2007, **80 programmes** existed or were under development, although many smaller programmes have ceased to certify new businesses.

These and many other generally accepted guidelines and definitions for how to certify, are based on guidelines established by consensus among the members of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), based in Switzerland.

Currently there are over **100 ecocertification programmes.**

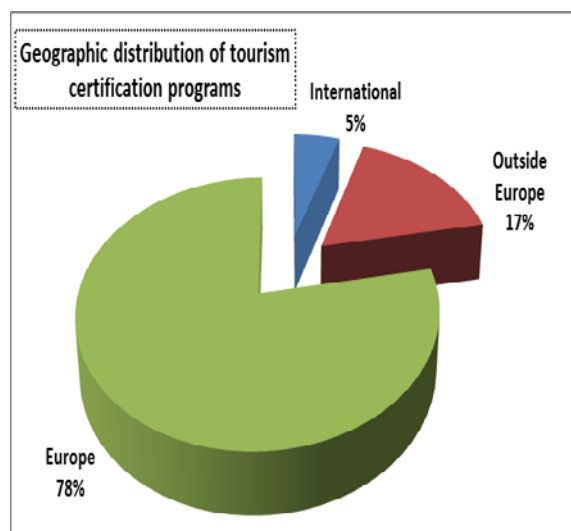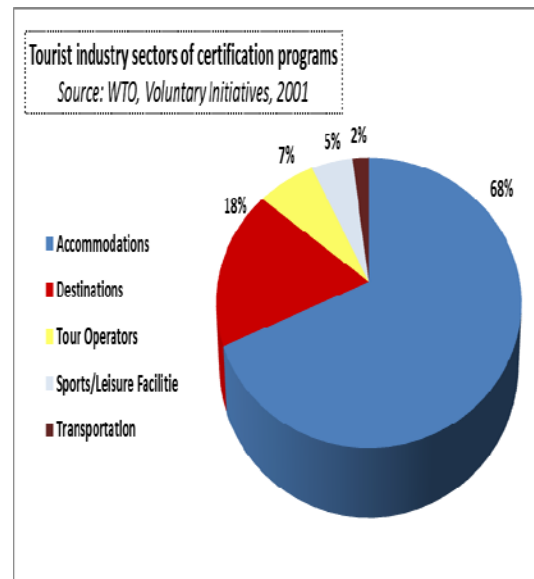**Figure no 1. The Geographic distribution of tourism certification programmes in 2016**

Fig. 2 Tourist industry sectors of certifications programs

The existence of a large number of ecotourism certification systems and certificates shows a wide variety of geographical areas and criteria and, in most of the cases reflect the local needs and challenges.

Therefore it is better to have various sub-national, national, European and international certifications. But they should reflect unanimous and unitary, equally, the global principles, resulted from good and bad practice, applicable to all destinations and easy recognizable by the tourists.

Also, the global proliferation of over 100 different certification tools for logos and labels raises problems to the tourists who do not understand exactly what is the subject of certification. Consequently, in tourism there has been a growing international consensus that sustainable tourism certification systems should incorporate elements of both process and performance, but emphasizing performance.

The need to fight "greenwashing" – the practice of overestimate and overpromote the sustainability and environmental approach of an operator, has increased in the last years the practice of certification, in order to protect those tourist businesses, products and destination which approach seriously sustainability and environment.

However, together with the benefits of the functioning certification systems, some challenges have also arise:

- Tourism companies are sometimes disappointed in noticing a scarce effect of certification on sales and turnover;
- Generally, the absence of monitoring and evaluation tools affects the possibility to correctly estimate the economic impact of certification on local development, but also, confirming the point before, on certified companies;
- The "label jungle" phenomenon caused by the proliferation of labels and certified systems (some of which have stayed on the market for only a short

time), starts to bother the consumer who starts being skeptical and suspicious about labels, in lack of specific information campaign about certification.
- The scope of the concept of certification is sine qua non in the process of sustainable development of ecotourism.

- Therefore there is the need to develop a practical tool that can measure the level of impact in tourism and the changes of the socio-economic status through certification criteria and indicators as part of a sustainable strategy.

- Their development is not an aim in itself but is a continuous process which includes the level of responsibility of the society to provide a sustainable way of life based on ecotourism, with a minimal negative impact on the environment and on the cultural values.

To these challenges, **the certification sectors** has started to react, mainly with the following measures:

- Starting a demand for a rationalization process among the existing standards/labels, especially by adopting reference global and European standards (GSTC and EETLS respectively);
- Studying new marketing strategies, as the consumers needs new reasons and incentives to be Eco tourists;
- Starting to design monitoring and evaluation tools to be associated with the certification system in order for them to be accountable for their results;
- Ecotourism should be integrated into the local development plans of localities under the ecotourism destinations, in parallel with the development of ecotourism certification systems redefined in terms of space, quality and especially according to the trends registered in the evolution of the ecotourism market;
- Studying the image of destinations having the resources needed to become ecotourism destinations is vital to their repositioning or to integrating ecotourism activities in the current positions;
- **Ecotourism** can occur not only as a new type of tourism which generates added value for the tourism activity in the area, but also as a powerful regulator between all systems overlapping at the level of a destination, included certification criteria;
- **It is necessary** to organize its broader action range in the sense of developing tourism products based on consumer characteristics and the specificity of the area to develop methods and procedures, an important starting point in customer satisfaction;
- **The marketers** are the ones that permanently determine the elements that contribute to the certification ecotourism criteria improvement of the touristic experience.
  By identifying this attributes, the marketers have the possibility to determinate the elements that mark both

the consumer's decision and the level of satisfaction felt by those in ecotourism destinations.[2]

- **The goal of achieving sustainable tourism** should be subordinated to national and regional plans of economic and social development.

Actions may cover for economic goals (income growth, diversification and integration of activities, certification criteria, control, development potentiating and zoning), social goals (poverty and income distribution inequality improvement, indigenous socio-cultural heritage protection, participation and involvement of local communities) or environmental goals (protection of ecotourism's functions, conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity)[3].

A second aspect of comparison is related to the **scope** of the certification.

Traditionally, certifications are mainly addressing accommodation structures, like hotels and camping sites.

But several systems have a larger scope, addressing themselves also to tour operators, tour packages, tours and so on. Few systems address destinations.

The scope of the systems is indeed very varied.

The following table shows how each system is respectively open to certify three categories of subjects:

- **Accommodation structures**, of any kind: from hotels, to camping sites, alpine huts, lodges, rural family based structures etc. For the purpose of simplicity, even restaurants and conference facilities have been considered under this category;
- **Tour operators, tours, tourist packages and other tourist products**, different form accommodation and destination.
- **Destinations,** intended as specific territories, towns, villages that wish to be certified as such.
  This definition does not include "tourist attractions", like museums, monuments, natural parks, sport and leisure facilities, when these are managed by an individual and well identified entity, which have been considered under the "other tourism products" category.

The analysis has been made based on the rules of access to each system, as published, especially on the certification criteria.

III. CONCLUSION

The analysis has shown a great variety of procedural and technical features among the existing systems. For examples, some systems are strongly based on a so called third-party assessment, with an independent auditor verifying on-site the

[2] Mazilu Mirela,Sabina Gheorgheci *Promoting a tourist destination-a means to attract tourists,*15th International Multidisciplinary Scientific GeoConference SGEM 2015, Conference Proceedings, 2015, Book5 Vol. 1, pp 693-700.
[3] Mirela Mazilu, Adrian Nedelcu, Sabina Gheorgheci, The Perception of Romania as a Tourist Destination into Sustainable Development, WULFENIA Journal, Volume 22, No.6, Jun 2015, 20 , p. 271 - 295,2015

features of the entity to be certified. Some systems choose an easier approach based on self-assessment.

Some systems adopt a large number of performance-based criteria, meaning that the criteria are accomplished only if a specific performance value is reached by the entity, especially in relationship with environmental aspects.

Some other systems prefer to rely on process-based criteria, measuring the entity's efforts towards its own improvement, irrespective from its absolute performances.

Moreover, some systems adopt a classification approach, where the certified entities is eventually ranked in a system of levels; some systems adopt a simpler "pass/fail" approach, where certification is simply achieved or not, without a classification system.

All these technical choices, of course resulting in a higher/lower complexity of the system and its related management costs, are in the end related to the system's general purpose, to its spirit: for systems aiming to a large and spread participation, the most flexible options are to be chosen; for systems rather aiming to select an elite of entities, the approach chosen will be the more rigid one.

United Nations declares 2017 the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development[4].

The UN General Assembly has approved the adoption of 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. *"The declaration by the UN of 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development is a unique opportunity to advance the contribution of the tourism sector to the three pillars of sustainability - economic, social and environmental, while raising awareness of the true dimensions of a sector which is often undervalued" UNWTO Secretary General, Taleb Rifai."*[5].

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[5]   http://media.unwto.org/press-release/2015-12-07/united-nations-declares-2017-international-year-sustainable-tourism-develop