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# NATURAL RESOURCES AND RURAL TOURISM: EVALUATION OF SELECTED AREAS FROM NORTH MACEDONIA AND SERBIA

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the roles of natural resources in the development of rural tourism products, and in particular address the need for well-balanced use of local natural resources and existing cultural values in rural areas of North Macedonia and Serbia. As the rural tourism concept is overlapping with other tourism forms, being closely interlinked with nature and eco-tourism, adventure and recreation tourism, cultural tourism, sustainable tourism, responsible tourism, etc., it opens the question of general role of natural resources in the expansion of rural tourism niche. The aim of the investigation is to provide the perspective on the possibilities for symbiosis between nature protection and rural tourism development. The environmental aspect is outlined, while in addition, economic, cultural, infrastructural and social aspects are also discussed and evaluation of rural capital of selected areas is conducted in order to indicate the general role of nature based resources in tourism development process.

**KEY WORDS:** natural resources, rural tourism, environment, North Macedonia, Serbia

## INTRODUCTION

Demographic, social, and economic changes have influenced the need for reconsideration of the role of natural resources in many rural regions, with a shift from extractive, commodity values and instead placing a greater emphasis on amenity values as sources of population and economic growth in rural areas (Hammer, 2008). Natural amenity-rich communities take advantage of their natural endowments as latent primary factor inputs for tourism/recreation and overall economic and community development (Hammer, 2008; Schaeffer, & Dissart, 2018). In most developed societies there has been a change in fundamental values and reorientation to nature, due to *nostalgia for real or imagined past lifestyles and landscapes, and environmentalism* (Williams, & Hall, 2000:10), which eventually contributed to rural tourism growth. Therefore, together with a continuous trend of seeking of the untouched natural environment (extraordinary preserved nature as an get away from crowded urban space) and traditional values (experiencing different cultures and travel to the past in search for origins), peripheral but attractive rural areas became places of intensive tourist visitation. Natural resources are the base on which rural development rely upon, while such amenities have always represented attractive resource for tourism sector, recent statistics report rapid growth in nature-based tourism and rural tourism, especially within European scope, but also worldwide trend (Fredman and Tyrvaenen, 2010).

Within rural areas in particular, natural environment provides the valuable resources for the establishment of tourism business, that can serve as free resources of economic value for rural tourism development (Jaafar et al., 2013). Regardless whether the tourism activity is dependent, enhanced or just contextualized through natural environments (Fredman, Wall-Reinius & Grunden, 2012), these dimensions play an important role in creation of rural tourism products and establishment of small scale tourism enterprises in rural areas (Irvine and Anderson, 2004). The growth of tourism markets in rural regions allow diversification of activities in the rural economy, and may also stimulate support for the preservation of natural landscapes (Canoves, Villarino, Priestly and Blanco, 2004). Specific “quality of

rural environment” that makes certain rural areas suitable for a living and vacation, referred as “amenities” is related to favorable climate, biodiversity, topography, water resources, forests, protected nature, recreational facilities, infrastructure and cultural/historical heritage (Josipović, 2018). Tourism, especially in developing countries, depends on the richness of natural and cultural capital, and is considered a sustainable source of revenue for rural communities (Jaafar, Kayat, Tangit, & Firdous, 2013), which is also the case for North Macedonia and Serbia. Beside, rich natural amenities, the attractive aspect of rural areas for tourism development is also based on the existing offer of various recreation and cultural activities that may occur within rural space reflected in the McGranahan's (2011) concept of “outdoor amenities”, providing the possibility of engaging in various recreation activities in rural areas (Josipović, 2018). The greater quality of natural amenities increase attractiveness of rural areas bring the economic growth, increased tourist demand, but also increased pressure on natural environment. The article is based on the extensive research on rural tourism development in sparsely populated areas of North Macedonia and Serbia, focused to the environmental aspect of the tourism development process in rural areas, representing an addition to previous work (Dimitrov & Petrevska, 2012; Dimitrov, Terzić, and Petreska 2020, Petrevska & Dimitrov, 2013; Terzić et al., 2019).

### **PROTECTED NATURE AND RURAL TOURISM IN NORTH MACEDONIA AND SERBIA**

The Republic of Macedonia covers an area of 25,713 km<sup>2</sup> with about 40% of its territory being described as forest land, 51% is agricultural land. According to the spatial planning of the Republic of Macedonia for the period 2002-2020, the network under protected area includes 74 objects with an area of 187,770 ha, representing 7.3% of total area of the Republic of Macedonia (Mihajlov, Trajkova, Zlatkovski and Hristova, 2011) with a plan to increase on 11.6% (Official gazette of The Republic of Macedonia, 39/04). In 2018, the National Strategy for Nature Protection (2017-2027) and the National Strategy for Biological Diversity (2018-2023). The protection system includes 86 areas, occupying a turnover of 230,083 hectares or about 8.9% of the territory of the RNM, most (67 areas) belong to natural monuments, followed by the nature parks (12 areas), then 3 national parks, 2 strict nature reserves, 1 protected area and 1 multi-purpose area (National Strategy for Nature Protection, Action Plan, 2017-2027, Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning, 2018).

Considering the development of nature-based and related rural tourism (such as eco-tourism) among prosperous areas rich in natural amenities are destinations such as Ohrid Lake, Markovi Kuli, Cave Slatinski Izvor (World Heritage Sites), Prespa Lake, Dojran Lake (Ramsar Wetland Areas), but also national parks Mavrovo, Pelister and Galicica and Tikvesh (Strict Nature Reserve), while tourism activities may also be developed within the areas surrounding natural monuments such as Ezerani, Dojransko Ezero, Klisura Demir Kapija, Orlovo Brdo, Matka Canyon, Smolarski vodopad, Markovi Kuli and some other high quality natural resources: Bogoslovets, Alshar, Bansko—Monositovo, Belchyshko Blato and Sharr Planina. The development of rural tourism in these sensitive areas is foreseen as a prosperous tourist activity with relatively low impact to the natural environment. The importance of tourism for rural development is identified in the Republic of Macedonia, and therefore the main attention is put not only on rural development (Law on Agriculture and Rural development, 2012) but also on rural tourism development (National Strategy for rural tourism, 2012-2017) (Nestorska, Marinovski, Risteski, 2016; Dimitrov, Petrevska, 2012). Possession of unique and well-preserved natural resources, large number of traditional rural households and supplementary potentials, imposes great future challenges towards rural tourism development, supported with the fact of noting around thirty rural tourism development zones, twenty rural tourist centers and over two-hundred rural tourism settlements in North Macedonia (Dimitrov, Petrevska, 2012). In the Republic of North Macedonia there are examples where local governments are designated for protected area management. These are: Municipality of Resen, managing the Nature Park - Ezerani and the Natural Monument of Lake Prespa; Municipality of Dojran with the Dojran Lake; Municipality of Kratovo with the Ploce Litotelmi and Kuklica; Novo Selo manages the area of Smolare Waterfall; Vevcani municipality of Vevchanski Izvori; Prilep's authorities are responsible for Lokvi Golemo Konjare, while Makedonski Brod manages the Cave Slatinski Izvor, etc. (National Strategy for Nature Protection with Action Plan (2017-2027). For almost all these places, plans for selective type of tourism were made and information tourist boards established, pedestrian paths and resting areas marked. The best examples of practicing

rural tourism in conjunction with nature are the villages of Vevcani, Mavrovo, Lesново, Brajcino, Zrnovci, Smolare, etc.

Republic of Serbia covers an area of 77,474 km<sup>2</sup>, with 85% of Serbia's territory is defined as being rural, with about 29% of Serbia being covered by forests, with about 44-55% of its population living in rural areas (Erdelji, Gaigć, Jovičić and Medić, 2013). Currently, based on the applied measures of institutional nature protection, the total area of protected nature covers 677,950 ha, a 7.66% of state territory. Under protection is 469 protected areas: 5 national parks, 18 nature parks, 21 outstanding natural landscapes, 69 nature reserves, 6 protected habitats, 314 monuments of nature, 36 sites of cultural and historical importance. In addition, there are 1783 strictly protected wild species and 860 protected wild species of plants, animals and fungi (Institute for nature conservation of Serbia, 2020). Considering the categories of protected natural areas in Serbia, nature parks Stara planina, Golija, Zlatibor and Radan take the largest part of the total protected area, followed by national parks Đerdap, Tara, Kopaonik, Šar planina and Fruška Gora (Dragišić, 2018). These preserved areas of exceptional natural beauty are also recognized as areas of great potential for rural tourism development based on the Strategy of rural tourism development in Serbia (2012). Among natural factors with greatest rural tourism development potentials we outline biosphere reserve Golija (UNESCO MAB), Nature park Stara planina, National park Šar-planina, Nature reserve Gornje Podunavlje, Special reserve Delibato, Vlasina Lake, Valjevo Mts., Nature reserve Uvac, Swamp areas on the Ramsar List (Obedska bara, Ludaško Jezero, Stari Begej-Carska bara, Zasavica, Vlasina, Peštersko polje), Prokletije - Mokra Gora, Kučaj Mts and Beljanica in Eastern Serbia, etc. (Strategy of rural tourism development in Serbia, 2012). There are examples of successful rural tourism development within protected national parks and reserves, but there is an indication that rural tourism development in Serbia is centralized, with highest concentration of rural tourism destination in the western and central parts of the country, especially in Zlatibor district, around Valjevo, Gornji Milanovac and Kosjerić. Sustainable rural tourism development is expected to take the main role in the protection and preservation of natural environment in Serbia, while integrated sustainable management of protected nature parks may become the mechanism for support and increase of awareness and capacities of local rural communities towards practicing rural tourism that currently have marginal role (Beronja, Owen, Petrović and Petrović, 2012).

## METHODOLOGY

In order to assess the general role of natural capital in the process of rural tourism development process, the evaluation of selected rural areas in North Macedonia and Serbia, based on the model of rural capital evaluation proposed by Bogdanov and Janković (2013) was applied. The model includes the extended list of indicators assessing issues of Human capital and entrepreneurial potential; Economic capital – the extent and quality of resources and sources of income; Cultural capital; Natural capital (environmental capital) and Social capital (community organizational capacities) (Dimitrov, Terzić, Petrevska, 2020). Based on the field-research (2018 and 2019) examination of total 51 villages in North Macedonia and 50 villages in Serbia with a focus on underdeveloped small villages settled in attractive natural setting, having certain tourism development potentials. With a scope to outline the role of natural (environmental) capital in the total rural territorial capital of selected rural areas we applied regional approach. The evaluation was based on the selected villages in each region: Severoistočen planski region, Jugoistočen planski region, Pelagoniski planski region, Pološki and Jugozapaden planski region and Vardarski planski region in North Macedonia, and within Republic of Serbia in Vojvodina region, Šumadija and West Serbia region, South and East Serbia, and Belgrade region (which was excluded from further examination as predominantly urban region with limited number of natural resources).

## RESULTS

The extensive field research enabled us to analyze all aspects of rural capital in the defined regions in North Macedonia and Serbia. Also, with a focus on the high quality natural landscape, present in all defined areas, allowed us the possibility to recognize diverse tourist activities and development paths in selected rural areas. Most attractive natural amenities are found to be located in predominantly mountainous areas, while all selected villages were settled within exceptional ambiance and possess

certain authenticity and distinctiveness. Here, natural and cultural resources, in terms of the general role in tourism development are interlinked and occur in certain symbiosis. Still, as these rural areas are economically oriented to simple agriculture and cattle breeding, rather low diversification levels are present, while tourist activities are gradually introduced quite recently. Such areas are offering a variety of recreational activities in preserved natural environment, while additionally possessing a variety of cultural resources (monasteries, monuments, traditional architecture, local traditions, events, festivities) which are considered an added value. Development of rural tourism products in both countries are seen as a strategic goal on national and regional levels, while tourism is seen as activity with a potential for starting of the diversification process in rural areas and a base for its economic and developmental prosperity in the future.

Based on the evaluation of the tourism attractive factors in Serbia, based on FAS methodology (total 23 relevant factors) in the Strategy of rural tourism development in Serbia (2012) natural factors were outlined as a factor of greatest importance, with average score (3.6), significantly higher compared to score related to human resources (2.5) and capital investments potential (2.2), which indicates the greatest role of the nature-based attractions in the development process of rural tourism in Serbia. Similar results were found in the case of some regions in North Macedonia (Nestoroska, Marinovski, & Risteski, 2016). Such results are in line with our findings, as the results we received by application of method of rural territorial capital evaluation presented in the Table 1 also indicate the greatest possible influence of natural capital to the development perspectives of rural areas.

Source: Author's Calculations

Figure 1. Evaluation of rural territorial capital of North Macedonia and Serbia (regional level)

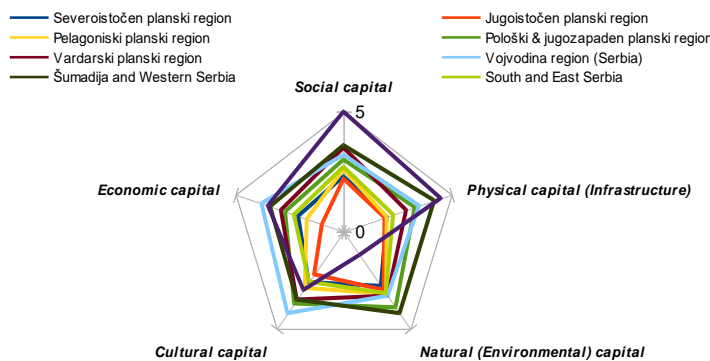


Figure 1. shows different distributions of strategic capital in various regions in North Macedonia and Serbia, indicating that different approaches need to be defined in the process of rural development in these regions. Both countries have similar average scores in terms of rural territorial capital

considering defined factors, having in mind that in the focus of the study were rural areas that are recently introducing tourism activities. Also, great similarities in the development process were noticed, as the governmental support is considered greatest precondition of rural tourism development in such rural areas (predominantly mountainous areas). However, the greatest potentials are seen in high quality natural (environmental) capital, in both countries, with slightly greater average score evidenced in Serbia (3.6) compared to North Macedonia (3.3), where the basis of rural development is seen in a specific mix of natural and cultural capital.

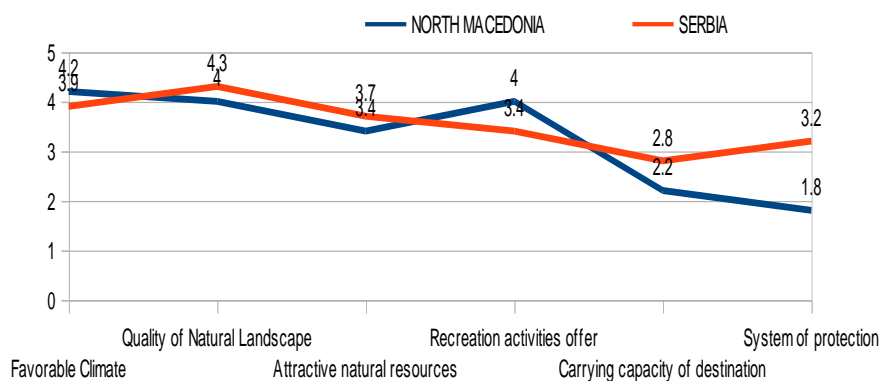
Table 1. Rural territorial capital of underdeveloped rural areas in North Macedonia and Serbia

| RURAL TERRITORIAL CAPITAL         | NORTH MACEDONIA | SERBIA*    |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|------------|
| Social capital                    | 3.5             | 3.2        |
| Economic capital                  | 2.9             | 3.2        |
| Cultural capital                  | 3.5             | 3.4        |
| Natural (Environmental) capital   | <b>3.3</b>      | <b>3.6</b> |
| Physical capital (Infrastructure) | 2.9             | 3.3        |
| AVERAGE                           | 3.22            | 3.28       |

\* Belgrade region excluded as predominantly urban area with extreme population density.

Source: Author's Calculations

The research confirmed that strategic strengths in underdeveloped rural areas may be seen in favorable geographical position and natural resources, and as well in richness of cultural and social capital, while lacking in economic capital, infrastructure and governmental support. Furthermore, we may note the following general weaknesses affecting most of the peripheral rural areas in these countries: decrease in rural population; emigration, unfavorable age structure; small and old households; unfavorable educational structure; lethargy; lack of awareness; unemployment, lack of finance; small diversification levels, low entrepreneurship levels among local populations, environmental pollution, low investment levels, lack in tourism facilities and infrastructure, undeveloped tourist products oriented to domestic short-vacations, etc. However, regional aspects needs to be considered in the development process, due to great differences in terms of existing rural capital. Therefore, all sampled regions and villages seem to be heavily dependent on natural and cultural resources, while their development is strongly dependent to the existing physical capacities and human resources (Dimitrov et al., 2020).



Source: Author's Calculations

Figure 2. Indicators of Natural (Environmental) Capital

Based on the data presented in Figure 2, we may conclude that considering the natural (environmental) capital as the main resource on which rural tourism development depends on is based on favorable climate and high quality of natural landscape and existing variety of attractive natural resources in both countries, while the greatest potential threat is foreseen in the lack of adequate protection system and low carrying capacities of rural destinations in these areas. However, the rural tourism development process in North Macedonia and Serbia is in its initial phase, characterized with relatively low demand levels and traditionally oriented towards domestic market (with share over 90% of all overnight stays in rural areas). Therefore, introducing the integrative sustainable rural development approach may provide adequate solutions and prevent defined threats lying in the uncontrolled tourism development process.

## CONCLUSION

The preserved natural environment, rich landscape, the possibility for outdoor recreation, slower and calmer lifestyles, lower expenses, cultural closeness and other factors are recognized as favorable aspects of rural areas, which are the qualities highly valued by specific tourist segments. However, areas that possess natural resources of high values, tend to lack in infrastructural and human based capacities, therefore the rural development in such areas is on the starting point. Factors of rural amenities are consisted of three types of resources: natural amenities (favorable climate, preserved natural environment, topography, water and wood resources and biodiversity), built resources (offer of tourist and recreational activities, availability of public services, transport and communal infrastructure, accommodation facilities, etc), and cultural historical amenities (cultural heritage, tradition and festivals), which have the great role in rural economic development and growth (Josipović, 2018).

Current situation in North Macedonia and Serbia indicates that, rural tourism finds itself in its initial stage of development, while highly dependent on governmental support, especially in peripheral mountainous regions. As already outlined in Dimitrov and Petrovska (2012), further development in



rural tourism in North Macedonia and Serbia depends on: public policies directed towards specific investments which is tailored according to the needs of specific region; efforts to increase tourist accommodation capacity and occupancy rate, significant efforts to increase rural tourism income for local communities as a precondition for regions' tourism development and continuous governmental support. Further, it is not enough simply to have excellent natural surroundings, firm catering resources and steady accommodation capacities in attractive rural areas if continuous institutional support is missing, which is the main precondition in sustainable rural tourism development in both countries. Considering that the basis of rural tourism development potentials are represented in exceptional natural environment and high concentration of valuable natural resources, with greatest potentials foreseen for the villages located within the high quality authentic ambiance, mostly within protected natural parks, the strict policies and monitoring procedures need to be applied in the tourism development process, preventing negative environmental and social impacts.

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