



MOVING
MOUNTAIN VALORISATION THROUGH
INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND GREEN GROWTH

Policy Brief

SOUTHERN ROMANIAN CARPATHIAN MOUNTAINS | Certified Ecotourism



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Southern Romanian Carpathian Mountains: Certified Ecotourism

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Summary

The Piatra Craiului National Park is a high-quality tourist destination, which is widely considered as one of the “jewels in the crown” of the Southern Romanian Carpathians. Unfortunately, the National Park and surrounding area is under pressure from growing visitor numbers and inappropriate patterns of development. There is an urgent need to develop more sustainable, lower impact forms of tourism, whilst also maintaining the valuable income provided for the local community. Ecotourism is very well-suited to the sustainable development of the local economy of the National Park and the Zărnești – Piatra Craiului region is one of 10 ‘eco-destinations’ promoted by the Association of Ecotourism in Romania (AER). However, certified ecotourism cannot exist in isolation, it must be integrated into the strategic planning of rural/mountain tourism development at local, regional and national level.

Know more about the Southern Romanian Carpathian mountains Reference Region, its selected value chain and the regional multi-actor platform (MAP), [here](#).

Key policy messages

- Ecotourism is well-suited to the sustainable development of local economies in the mountain areas of Romania.
- Certification is essential for maintaining trust in the quality and integrity of ecotourism services.
- However, certified ecotourism cannot exist in isolation, it needs to be embedded into the strategic planning of rural/mountain tourism development at local, regional and national level.



1. The Mountain Reference Region (MRR)

This policy brief relates to the need to embed the principles and practice of ecotourism into local, regional and/or national strategies for sustainable tourism development. This is a key issue for popular tourist destinations in the Southern Romanian Carpathians, and more widely for other mountain areas at risk from the negative impacts of tourism.

The Piatra Craiului National Park is a high-quality tourist destination, which is widely considered as one of the “jewels in the crown” of the Southern Romanian Carpathians. Land use is a combination of traditional semi-subsistence pastoralism and deciduous forest, but the landscape is dominated by a 25 km long limestone ridge (highest elevation 2 238 m) with deep gorges and caves. This creates a unique mountain landscape that is highly appreciated nationally and internationally, but it is also a fragile landscape and vulnerable ecosystem that is under growing pressure. The National Park is only accessible by gravel roads and hiking trails, but attracts over 110 000 visitors per year and this is putting increasing pressure upon the local environment, including inappropriate “spill-over development” from the neighbouring villages of Bran and Moieciu. These pressures are likely to increase and there is an urgent need to develop more sustainable, lower impact forms of tourism, whilst also maintaining the valuable income provided for the local community. There are also specific challenges associated with climate change, notably the increasing vulnerability of the domestic water supply due to over-exploitation by tourism combined with the increasing frequency of drought.

2. Ecotourism for sustainable local development

Ecotourism is a form of tourism where the main motivation of the tourist is to observe and enjoy both nature and the traditional local customs regarding nature. This is a well-established concept in the international tourist market and has been very effectively adapted to the Romanian context by the [Association of Ecotourism in Romania \(AER\)](#). Ecotourism is well-suited to the sustainable development of the local economy of the Piatra Craiului National Park. The Zărnești – Piatra Craiului region is one of 10 ‘eco-destinations’ promoted by AER (under the ‘Discover ECO-ROMANIA’ brand) with a range of ecotourism services that are offered locally in partnership with the National Park Authority and local businesses that have been certified by AER. These services include ‘eco-tours’ with experienced local guides to see wolf, lynx and bear; specialist hiking trips for nature photography; low impact mountain biking trails; and small-scale/low-impact accommodation. AER operates an Ecotourism Certification System according to clearly defined international principles and a set of verifiable standards adapted to the Romanian context. This certification system is considered essential for maintaining trust in the quality and integrity of ecotourism services in Romania.



3. Barriers and opportunities

However, ecotourism is not the only form of tourism encountered in the Southern Romanian Carpathians. Mountain/rural tourism in the region is typically all-season with similar visitor numbers in both winter and summer. There is a wide variety of accommodation available (both catered and self-catering) and an increasingly diverse range of leisure pursuits available. The neighbouring villages of Bran and Moieciu especially have been one of several 'hotspots' for mountain tourism in Romania for many years and are typical of the low- to mid-range tourism experience offered in many regions, catering primarily for the Romanian market with some international visitors. Bran, for example, sits in a beautiful mountain landscape and is internationally famous for its supposed links with Vlad the Impaler who is widely regarded as the inspiration for Bram Stoker's Count Dracula. Consequently, Bran Castle is commonly known as 'Dracula's Castle' and is a very popular local tourist attraction. Bran is an easily accessible village with relatively good infrastructure and has developed as a multi-purpose recreational resource with some good accommodation/restaurants combined with a proliferation of rustic-styled "agro-touristic" farms and second homes (the majority of which are newly constructed). But the pattern of development during the last 30 years has come to threaten its future viability and sustainability as an attractive and profitable tourist destination.

The traditional rural identity of the area has been increasingly eroded by an 'urban-type' over-development which increasingly discourages more discerning foreign visitors whilst continuing to appeal to the domestic visitor. A major challenge now is how to manage continued development without risk of negative impacts upon its valuable assets.

4. Policy relevant considerations

Tourism is both a blessing and a curse for the Southern Romanian Carpathian Mountains – it is hugely important for local economic development, but if the current pattern of tourism development continues it is at risk of impacting negatively on the quality of the natural assets upon which it depends. Significant improvements in the strategic planning of tourism development are needed at local, regional and national level. Organisations such as the [National Association for Rural Tourism, Ecology and Culture \(ANTREC\)](#), which was originally set-up to channel EU pre-accession funds into the rural tourism sector, now need a substantial overhaul to update their vision, objectives and activities. A high-level strategy with a new brand image for rural and mountain tourism in Romania needs to be developed, and administered to take account of the considerable diversification of the market in recent years and the need to balance the contribution of tourism to economic development with its immense importance for the resilience and sustainability of the mountain regions.

Certified ecotourism should be a key component of the strategic planning and management of rural/mountain tourism at all levels – and needs to be actively promoted as such.



Acknowledgements

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References

Piatra Craiului National Park Authority: <https://www.pcrai.ro/>

The Association of Ecotourism in Romania (AER): <https://asociatiaaer.ro/en/>

Zărnești – Piatra Craiului Eco Destination: <https://www.eco-romania.ro/en/eco-destinations/zarnesti-piatra-craiului/>

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