MOVING
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Policy Brief

SOUTHERN ROMANIAN CARPATHIAN MOUNTAINS
Certified ecotourism

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Certified ecotourism "Southern Romanian Carpathians"

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Summary

Certified ecotourism is a form of sustainable tourism where the main motivation of the tourist is to observe and enjoy both nature and traditional local customs regarding nature. Well-suited for the sustainable development of mountain areas, certified ecotourism is effectively implemented in Romania by the Association of Ecotourism Romania.

The Zărnești-Piatra Craiului eco destination resilience and sustainability is threatened by a series of socio-economic issues: depopulation of the mountain area, land and traditional agricultural practices abandonment and uncontrolled and chaotic building development.

Territorial and inter-institutional cooperation are crucial for a better connection between diverse mountain value chains, for stronger mountain communities and for more resilient and sustainable mountain areas.

Figure 1: Măgura village – the focal point for the certified ecotourism value chain in Southern Romanian Carpathians.

Key Policy Messages

- ☞ It is necessary to improve the connection between diverse, but complementary mountain value chains (e.g. certified ecotourism and the agri-food value chains).
- ☞ Fully operationalisation of the policy infrastructure is needed (i.e.: the Integrated Mountain Strategy, 9 Massifs Committees and the Mountain National Council).
- ☞ Supporting traditional agricultural practices and traditional local architecture is key for preserving the mosaic landscape.

1. *The first certified eco destination in Romania*

Southern Romanian Carpathians are one of the largest wilderness landscapes in Europe. Also known as the 'Transylvanian Alps', they host more than 1 million hectares of protected areas, and they have large areas of mosaic vegetation largely shaped by traditional farming and grazing practices.

The Piatra Craiului National Park is a high-quality tourist destination, characterised by a 25 km long limestone ridge (highest elevation 2.238 m) with deep gorges and caves, creating a unique mountain landscape highly appreciated nationally and internationally.

Traditional farming and grazing practices have been contributing to preserving the mosaic landscape, which together with the local traditional architecture, local agri-food

products and local cultural traditions represent the main natural, economic and cultural assets of the area. However, depopulation and abandonment of traditional land and traditional agricultural practices, as well as uncontrolled and chaotic building development, impose a serious threat upon the resilience and sustainability of the area.

Zărnești – Piatra Craiului is the first certified eco destination in Romania and one of the 10 national eco destinations promoted by the Association of Ecotourism Romania (AER) under the 'Discover ECO ROMANIA' brand. Within the Zărnești – Piatra Craiului eco destination, a range of ecotourism services are offered locally in partnership with local businesses that have been certified by AER and the Piatra Craiului National Park Administration (PCNPA). These services include eco-tours with experienced local guides for observing the local biodiversity (i.e. large carnivores and local flora), specialist hiking trips for nature photography, low-impact mountain bike trails and small-scale/low-impact accommodation.

2. Value chain contribution to resilience and sustainability

Certified ecotourism is a concept based on nature and local culture in areas located inside or near protected natural areas. The main motivation of the tourist is to observe and enjoy nature and local customs.

Certified ecotourism services have been contributing to the sustainability and resilience of Southern Romanian Carpathians for the last 18 years through the conservation and protection of the natural environment (including here the large carnivores, that have an important role in this value chain), encouraging the development of small-scale businesses and the use of local human resources and contributing to the well-being of the entire local community.

The emigration of the local population and the ageing mountain population are greatly contributing to the abandonment of the agricultural land and of the traditional agricultural practices that are an integral part of the tourist experience: either by creating the mosaic landscape which represents the main asset of the area, or by providing the agri-food products necessary for an authentic tourist experience, which includes the element of understanding the local gastronomy. Furthermore, the depopulation of the area is threatening the safeguarding of the local traditions and customs of the Zărnești – Piatra Craiului eco destination.

These issues are further triggering the uncontrolled and chaotic building development in the area, including both buildings for touristic activities or 'second-homes'.

3. Policy experiences

The area studied is a hotspot for mountain tourism in Romania. The traditional rural identity of the area is threatened by the 'urban-type' over-development, which began in the early 2000s, once with the Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development (SAPARD) programme financing of accommodation units in the area.

The Piatra Craiului National Park Administration was established in 1999 to protect and conserve the natural and traditional values of Piatra Craiului National Park. However, the establishment of

National Parks and their administrations was a top-down decision taken at the ministerial level, with little regard for the local communities' perceptions and/or understanding of the role of these administrations, which led to tense situations between the local community and the National Park administration. To address these conflicts, the PCNPA has been working with the local community for the last two decades to improve the relationship between the PCNPA and the local stakeholders through information, awareness, consultation and the development and implementation of an educational program for youth. Furthermore, PCNPA had a detrimental role in safeguarding the traditional local architecture, by developing and implementing a sustainable development guide that provides the regulations and standards that new buildings must comply with to ensure the perfect integration into the natural landscape. The guide is part of the Management Plan of the National Park, which recognises the important role of sustainable forms of tourism for the sustainability and resilience of the area.

4. *Recommendation for future policies*

Future policies for mountain areas should consider a better connection between the certified ecotourism value chain and the agri-food value chains, especially with the Mountain Product Optional Quality Term (OQT) and the Local Gastronomic Points concept.

The Mountain Product OQT is a quality scheme certifying the mountain origin of agri-food products (including both the production and processing stages). Romania has one of the highest numbers of registered products within this quality scheme, however, the scheme still needs to be better promoted among agri-food producers in more isolated and remote areas and among consumers, to ensure full benefits for both sides.

The Local Gastronomic Points (LGP) concept allows rural households to serve homemade dishes with ingredients from primary production, based on traditional recipes, to a number of 15 people per sitting. The concept provides an alternative stream of income for rural households and contributes to the safeguarding of traditional agricultural practices and local gastronomy while developing a stronger and more united rural community. As in the Mountain Product OQT, the LGP concept needs to be better promoted among rural areas that have tourism potential, as well as among national and international tourists.

These two specific actions should be an integral part of an integrated mountain strategy. Romania still has to effectively implement its Mountain Integrated Strategy and fully operationalise the 9 Massifs Committees and the Mountain National Council, that should coordinate the sustainable development of mountain areas in Romania.

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