

A MEASUREMENT OF RURAL TOURISM DESTINATIONS' COMPETITIVENESS

Article history: Received: February 27, 2023; Reviewed: March 20, 2023; Accepted: March 27, 2023; Available online: March 30, 2023; Available print: April 30, 2023.

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ABSTRACT. The trend of rural tourism is growing and is becoming increasingly significant for most nations. Rural tourism is believed to have the potential to revive traditional approaches and perspectives on tourism and provide new dimensions to sustainable growth. Romania is regarded as one of the main destinations with a high potential in sustainable tourism development, due to its beautiful, unspoiled rural landscapes, traditions, and rustic lifestyle.

Tourism, as a development tool, in rural communities, is one of the major concerns. The scarcity of case studies on rural tourist competitiveness, particularly in Romania, is what inspired the current research. This study attempts to investigate the factors that impact Romania's rural tourism's competitiveness and develop a conceptual framework for measuring it. In conducting our research, there were employed both exploratory and descriptive approaches. Secondary data from statistical and published research and studies were gathered, and it were collected primary data through surveys and personal interviews.

The objective of the current research was to introduce a distinct and exclusive method of evaluating tourism in rather small regions with unique characteristics and applied and test the proposed model to Maramures region.

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The paper concludes that measuring and understanding rural tourism competitiveness and dynamics is essential for supporting sustainable development in rural areas, and it is of great importance for practitioners, policy makers and researchers.

Keywords: tourism competitiveness, rural destination competitiveness model, rural tourism, rural destinations

JEL classification: L83, M31.

Recommended citation: Dumitru, I.M., Cosma, S.A., *A measurement of rural tourism destinations' competitiveness*, Studia UBB Negotia, vol. 68, issue 1 (March) 2023, pp. 81-97, doi: 10.24193/subbnegotia.2023.1.05

Introduction and literature review on understanding rural tourism

Present-day, the tourism industry is currently experiencing an active growth and remarkable resilience, after the global health crisis of Covid-19, which unexpectedly interrupted its development. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the direct contribution of tourism to global GDP increased from 10.2% in 2016, showing consistent progress of 10.4% in 2017, 10.6% in 2018 to 10.8% in 2019. These figures indicate that the tourism and travel industry was growing steadily before the pandemic, making it one of the most dynamic sectors. Based on the UNWTO barometer, the industry was a significant contributor to global trade and economy, creating jobs, both directly and indirectly, and income.

Experts in the tourism industry, such as the UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization) and WTTC, along with most analysts, consider that with this expected recovery, rural tourism has the potential to be among the first sectors that show growth again. This potential is mainly due to the shifting behavior of tourists. Whatever the reason, by choice or limitation, over the next few years it is expected that more people will redirect their interest towards destinations less visited, closer to nature, but also closer to their places of origin (Marti, 2022).

Therefore, tourism development represents a significant opportunity to generate economic activities and employment opportunities in rural regions.

UNWTO considers “tourism is a leading economic sector in many rural areas, which contributes to the income and employment of the local residents in a significant manner”. To improve the quality and sustainability of rural tourism destinations, it is crucial to measure their competitiveness and identify areas for improvement. This information is essential for developing effective strategies to enhance rural tourism destinations (UNWTO, 2020a).

Rural tourism encompasses a large variety of tourism-related activities that take place in rural **places**. It also refers to leisure activities that occur in rural settings but are not necessarily linked to agriculture. These activities may include engaging in sports, cycling, hiking, exploring natural and cultural heritage sites, visiting traditional markets, participating in cultural events and festivals, and more. UNWTO (2020a) understands rural tourism as being “a type of tourism activity in which the experience of tourists is connected with a wide range of products linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/ culture and sightseeing”.

The concept of “rural tourism” is frequently associated with the terms „**agrotourism**” and „**ecotourism**”, but both are actually sub-components of tourism in rural areas. One speaks of agrotourism (or agritourism in English) when the purpose of the trip is to discover the agricultural feeling and sense of the place and, by extension, the culture, traditions, landscapes and gastronomy resulting from agricultural practices.

Agrotourism, according to Romania’s Ministry of Tourism, has to do with tourists staying in guesthouses and participate in traditional household activities or crafts and being offered meals that are prepared using mostly natural ingredients that come from the same household or farm or from other local farmers. During their stay, tourists participate in at least one activity that is related to agriculture, farming, harvesting or traditional crafting and the guesthouse owners, as hosts, will offer direct support and guidance throughout the traditional activities or crafts.

Ecotourism, on the other hand, is a form of tourism which has as the main tourist motivation, nature observation and nature related activities. According to the UNWTO's definition, "ecotourism refers to different tourism forms described by following features: all nature-based forms of tourism in which the observation, appreciation of nature and the traditional cultures especially from natural areas are the main tourists' motivations". It has educational aspects because it helps to minimize negative impacts on the natural and socio-cultural environment. Additionally, it promotes awareness about natural and cultural asset conservation among tourists and locals, while offering alternative income and employment opportunities for communities living in the area (UNWTO, 2020b). Fennell (1999) sees ecotourism as a "sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism, ethically managed to have low-impact, non-consumptive and locally-oriented (control, benefits, and scale)". As it usually takes place in natural environments, it has the responsibility to aid in the preservation and conservation of these areas. (Fennell, 1999). The specialists from the Global Ecotourism Network (GEN) believe that through the interpretation and education of visitors, staff and the visited destination, ecotourism is a form of "responsible travel that creates knowledge and understanding" (Global Ecotourism Network, 2016). The local community is often an integral part of the ecotourism product. Along these lines, ecotourism facilitates environmental and cultural understanding, recognition, awareness, and respect.

Many destinations have identified rural tourism as one of the most attractive segments for long term sustainable development. UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) and UNWTO (UNEP& UNWTO, 2005) consider **sustainable tourism** is that form of tourism that focuses on multidimensional impact (current and future economic, social and environmental), responding to the needs of all those involved: visitors, industry, environment, and host communities. For ensuring a long-term sustainability, it is essential to establish a suitable balance among these three aspects (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005). The development of sustainable tourism requires the collaborative input of all stakeholders, in addition to strong political guidance that guarantees comprehensive involvement and general agreement. Attaining sustainable tourism is an ongoing procedure that needs consistently evaluating impacts and implementing suitable preventative or corrective measures as needed. Sustainable tourism acts to

guarantee that visitors have a satisfactory and significant experience while also raising awareness regarding sustainability challenges and promoting among them sustainable tourism practices (UNWTO, 2020). Sustainable tourism deals with the use of sustainable methods within and by the tourism sector.

Responsible tourism, also known as responsible travel, refers to the actions and choices made by individual travelers who are committed to practicing sustainable tourism. *Participants at the Cape Town Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations, organized within the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in 2002, signed a Declaration on Responsible Tourism, stating that „responsible tourism is tourism that minimizes negative social, economic and environmental impact; generates greater economic benefits for the local population and improves the well-being of host communities; improve working conditions and industry access; involves residents in making decisions that affect their lives; leads to positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, stimulating diversity; provide enhanced experiences for tourists through interactions with locals and a better understanding of local cultural, social and environmental contexts; it provides access to people with physical disabilities and is culturally sensitive, encouraging respect between tourists and hosts and building local pride and confidence.”* (Goodwin, 2014).

Rural tourism has gained popularity in recent years as it has the potential to promote sustainable tourism development and supports the growth of local economies. Rural tourism is considered to be more sustainable and environmentally friendly than other types of tourism. To accomplish responsible and sustainable tourism, all the stakeholders involved, such as tourism companies, associations and local authorities, need to play a significant role. They must develop destination management strategies and guidelines that are designed to create better places for both host communities and tourists.

UNWTO designated 2020 as the Year of Tourism and Rural Development. For sustainable tourism in rural areas to be successful, it is essential to adopt and implement a comprehensive and inclusive planning strategy. This strategy should be based on a participatory approach involving multiple stakeholders and action plans.

Some rural areas possess such remarkable natural attractions like mountains, landscapes, caves, waterfalls, hiking paths or skiing slopes that can make up for other issues. This can motivate both the industry and tourists to overcome these challenges. However, developing rural tourism in many areas will require a combination of creating an appealing product and addressing issues like accessibility and training. Effective marketing and rapid transportation connectivity can transform a charming area into a popular destination for short or longer trips.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increasing of the number of tourists looking for new experiences in rural and natural settings, away from crowded locations. This trend aligns with the increasing desire for more authentic experiences enhancing connections with local communities, their habits and cultures, products, and environmentally sustainable travel options. As a result, opportunities for revitalizing rural areas through tourism have expanded exponentially, creating positive impacts on the economy, society, and the environment (UNWTO, 2020b).

However, measuring the competitiveness of rural tourism destinations can be a challenging task that requires a deep understanding of the socioeconomic and environmental factors that contribute to their success. Measuring the competitiveness of rural tourist destinations has not received much attention from researchers until now. The present study investigates relevant indicators and variables and propose and test a framework to reshape the assessment of the competitiveness of rural tourism destinations.

Research methodology for measuring rural tourism competitiveness

Measuring the competitiveness of rural tourism is a key element in promoting sustainable development of tourism in rural regions. This can be achieved by identifying and analyzing key factors and indicators. Stakeholder involvement is also crucial to ensure accuracy and relevance in the data collection process. In the first part of the research, a framework to measure the level of competitiveness of small, mainly rural destinations was developed. The main emphasis was on selecting relevant indicators for smaller tourist destinations. To determine the most and least advantageous

aspects, a model was developed for evaluating the competitiveness of tourist destinations. This model was tested on Maramures, a predominantly rural area, that is widely recognized and valued in Romania.

For this purpose, after an intensive literature review, analyzing the competitiveness models, both conceptual and empirical: Hassan (2000), Ritchie & Crouch (2003), Dwyer & Kim (2010), Heath (2003), Enright & Newton (2005), Gooroochurn & Sugiyarto (2005), Crouch (2011), Barbosa et al. (2010), Goffi (2022), Dwyer et al. (2004), WEF (2022) and many others, a set of key factors and indicators that best suit the rural tourism destination have been chosen. There designed a model for measuring the competitiveness at the micro level and it was tested among tourism stakeholders. Effective stakeholder participation in both data collection and analysis is essential for rural tourism. This is because rural tourism is more than just an industry; it represents a way of life for many individuals residing in rural communities. By incorporating the knowledge and input from local residents, it was ensure that the data collected is both accurate and relevant to those who live and work in these areas.

In conducting the present study, both exploratory and descriptive research were employed. Secondary data were gathered from statistical and published research and studies, and through extensive analysis of websites. Additionally, primary data were collected through surveys, personal interviews and comprehensive analysis. It also taken into account a standard destination that was assessed at an intermediate, moderate level.

To assess the competitiveness of rural tourism effectively, it is important to carefully evaluate multiple factors and indicators, that play an essential role in determining and measuring the competitiveness of a destination. The factors that contribute towards this assessment are: Tourism attractions, Tourism assistance, General infrastructure, Accessibility, Marketing, Public policies, Monitoring, Cultural aspects, Environment and Performance. These factors can be grouped under four main categories, namely: Resources, Infrastructure, Destination Management and Sustainability.

A. Resources

- 1. *Attractions*
- 2. *Tourist assistance*

B. Infrastructure

- 3. *General infrastructure*
- 4. *Accessibility*

C. Destination Management

- 5. *Marketing*
- 6. *Public policies*
- 7. *Monitoring*

D. Sustainability

- 8. *Cultural aspects*
- 9. *Environment*
- 10. *Performance*

The model proposed consists of 4 main categories, which are further divided into 10 key determinants, that are further subdivided into 50 indicators and 14 sub-indicators. The present research was centered on recognizing the factors that contribute to a successful rural destination. Utilizing a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from very poor to excellent (1-5), these indicators were included in a survey, that was accessible via an online platform (formplus.us) and was distributed to more than 350 stakeholders.

The second part of the study dealt with collecting data from the tourist supply side, with a total of 111 responses received from accommodation owners, stakeholders, restaurants, tourism associations, travel guides, travel agencies, tourism attractions managers, tourist information centers, tourism authorities, museums, universities.

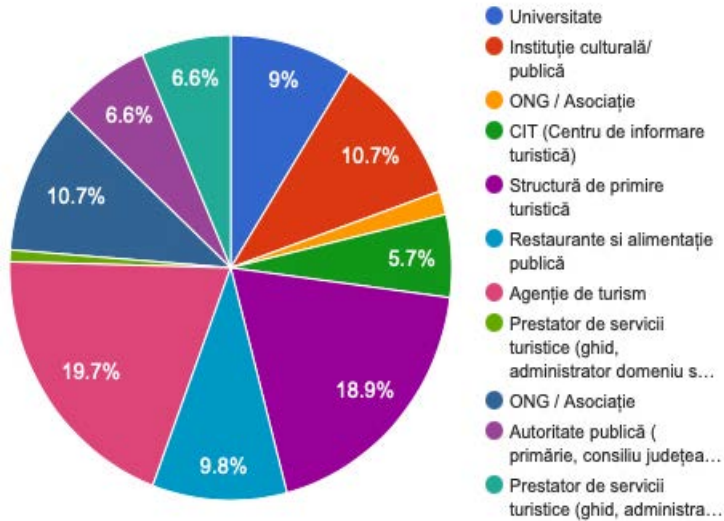


Figure 1 – Distribution of respondents

Source: authors' elaboration

Results and discussions

The objective of the current research was to identify the most important factors influencing the success of tourism destination, and to determine the criteria used to evaluate the competitiveness and performance of rural destinations.

The proposed model was applied to Maramures, a region in North-West of Romania that encompasses 2,64 % of Romania's territory and is ranked 15th out of 41 counties in terms of land surface. Nearly 39% of Maramures is designated as protected areas, with the county having the second biggest surface of protected areas in Romania after the Danube Delta. As per the 2022 statistics, Maramures has a populacion of 452,475 residents, with 56% of them living in urban areas and 44% residing in the rural parts.

Maramures, one of the most notorious Romanian tourist destinations, is famous for its customs, traditions, wooden churches or unique attractions and museums, rural lifestyle and gastronomy, handicrafts and leisure

activities. The variety of tourism options available include cultural, rural, religious, ecotourism, active tourism, winter sports, wellness and business tourism.

According to the Ministry of Tourism of Romania (2022), there are 888 accommodation units, with a total of 14.032 beds. Out of these units, 60% are classified as having a medium level of comfort, with a 3-star rating. Furthermore, 70% of these accommodation units are guesthouses situated in rural areas, such as villages or small towns. In terms of arrivals, overnights, and length of stay, counting 276.064 arrivals in 2019 and 518.696 overnights, Maramures ranks third in the North-West region. However, when it comes to the net occupancy rate of accommodation capacity, it is placed fourth out of six in the region (based on Tempo online provided by the National Institute of Statistics). In 2019, the average length of stay in Maramures was 1,88 days, which is slightly less than the national average of 2,2 days in Romania. Additionally, the net occupancy rate of accommodation capacity in Maramures in 2019 was 22,3%. The year 2019 was used as a point of reference due to the pandemic's impact on tourism in the subsequent years.

Regarding the evaluated destination, the study revealed that out of the four main components of the model, Resources got the highest score of 3,3 followed by Infrastructure and Sustainability, both with a score of 3,1. However, Destination Management scored the lowest, which was even below the standard average of 3, obtaining a score of 2,8 as shown in Figure 2 – Tourism Competitiveness Index.

The total Competitiveness Index for Maramures was 3,1. The obtained result was compared with the standard average. After careful analysis of the results obtained for Maramures, one can conclude that as the overall score for Maramures surpasses the average score, considered as average, it is considered an advanced destination in terms of competitiveness. The model highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the destination and provides suggestions on enhancing tourism competitiveness and performance. On the other hand, if the total score falls below the standard score, it implies that the destination is not performing well in tourism.

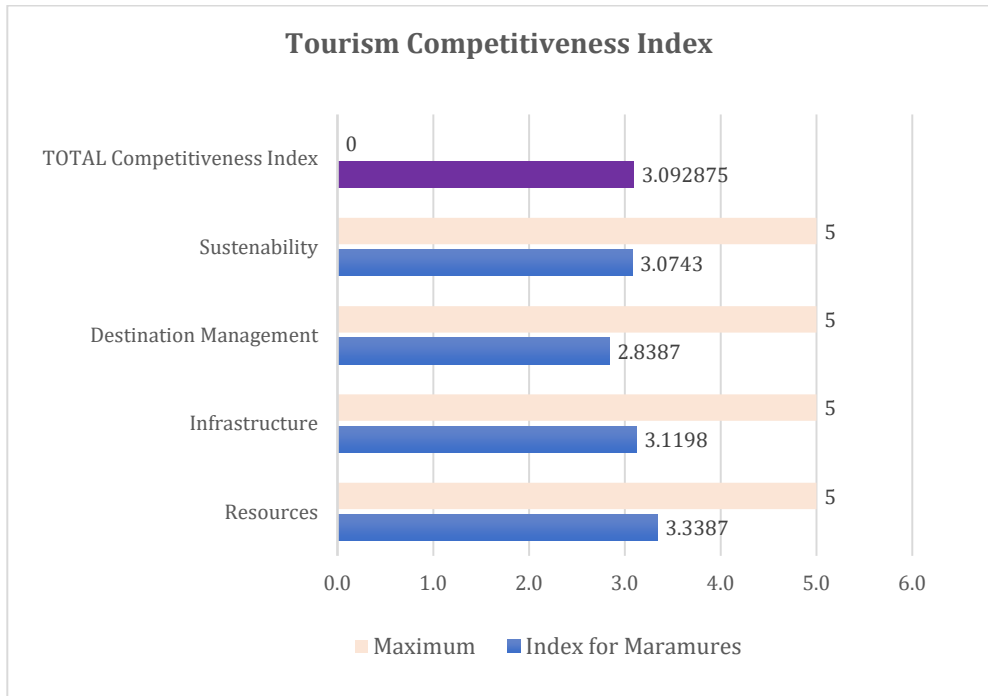


Figure 2 – Tourism Competitiveness Index

Source: authors' elaboration

The mean score obtained by Maramures is 3,1, indicating a small positive difference, however, it is only slightly above the standard. There are 10 key determinants, and four of them received a score higher than the average standard, as shown in Figure 3. Attractions received the highest score of 3,6 points, followed by General Infrastructure with 3,4 points, Cultural Aspects scoring 3,3 points, and Tourist Assistance at 3,1 points. Marketing, Monitoring and Performance each scored 3 points, which is equal to the standard average. Accessibility had a score of 2,9 points, while Environment and Public Policies received scores of 2,8 and 2,6 points, respectively. These last three determinants were below the standard average, indicating that they are the least competitive aspects. As a result, tourism representatives and public authorities responsible for tourism development need to analyse the reasons behind these scores, develop strategies and policies, and take actions to boost the level of competitiveness.

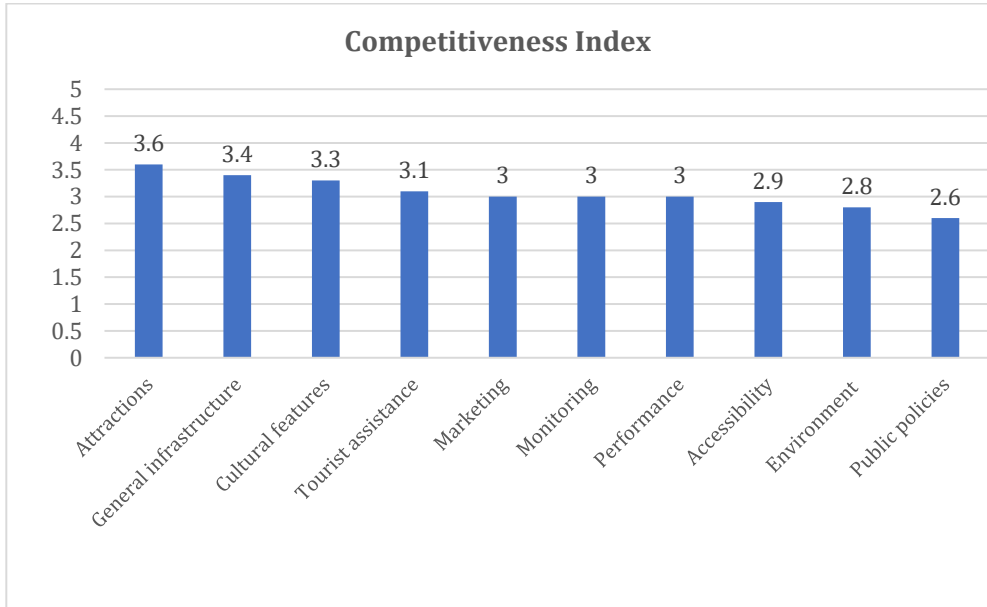


Figure 3 – Main competitiveness determinants

Source: authors' elaboration

One can conclude that Maramures obtained an upper score, but it is a minimum positive difference. There are 37 competitive positions and other points to improve (27 competitive indicators scored under the standard average).

The research findings highlighted some interesting observations that correlate with the unique characteristics of the rural location. The main reason to visit appears to be the Customs and traditions, as it achieved the highest score of 4,6 out of 5 points, followed closely by Natural resources with a score of 4,3 points while Hospitality and Crafts both score above 4 points, at 4.2 and 4.1, respectively. The other aspects to be considered are Gastronomy with 3,9 points, Museums and monuments with 3,8 points and the Heritage Quality with 3,8 points. These 5 elements rated above 4 points, 10 elements scored between 3,5 and 3,9 points, 14 indicators between 3,1 and 3,4 points and 8 indicators had an average rating of 3 points. 24 indicators scored less than the standard average, between 2,5 and 2,9 points. And the last 3 competitive aspects,

that received the lowest scores, were Strategic alliances with 2,4 points, Transport within destination with 2,3 points and the Transport to destination by train with 2,1 points. These aspects need to be considered with great attention and take necessary measures to enhance them.

Table 1 shows in-depth scores obtained by Maramures for each proposed indicator and sub-indicator in the model. The blue line indicates the relative positions of the elements when compared to the standard average.

Table 1 – Competitiveness Index breakdown

Competitiveness indicators	Score					Competitiveness index
	1 Very poor	2 Poor	3 Average	4 Good	5 Very good	
A: RESOURCES						3,3
1. Attractions						3,6
1.1 Natural resources						4,3
1.2 Cultural and historic heritage						4,1
1.2.1 Customs and Traditions						4,6
1.2.2 Museums and monuments						3,8
1.2.3 Heritage Quality						3,8
1.3 Events						3
1.4 Leisure activities						3
1.5 Crafts and traditional products						3,5
1.5.1 Crafts						4,1
1.5.2 Souvenirs						2,9
1.6 Gastronomy						3,9
2. Tourist assistance						3,1
2.1 Tourist signage						2,9
2.2 Accommodation facilities						3,4
2.3 Quality of service						3,5
2.4 Human resources						2,8
2.5 Local communication and information						2,7
B: INFRASTRUCTURE						3,1
3. General infrastructure						3,4
3.1 Safety and security						3,6
3.2 Medical services						3
3.3 Financial and banking services						3,2
3.4 IT usage						3,4
3.5 Lodging						3,6
3.6 Food service						3,4
3.7 Sanitary conditions						3,5
4. Accessibility						2,9
4.1 Transport to destination						2,5
4.1.1 by air						2,5
4.1.2 by road						2,9
4.1.3 by train						2,1
4.2 Transport within destination						2,3
4.3 Transport infrastructure level						3
4.4 Proximity						3
4.5 Access to natural areas						3,5

Competitiveness indicators	Score					Competitiveness index
	1	2	3	4	5	
	Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very good	
C: DESTINATION MANAGEMENT						2,8
5. Marketing						3
5.1 Destination promotion			3			3,2
5.1.1 Tourism product promotion			3			3,1
5.1.2 Participation in tourism fairs			3			3,2
5.2 Marketing strategies		2	3			2,7
5.3 Brand image and awareness			3			3
5.4 Online promotion			3			3
5.4.1 Destination website			2			2,9
5.4.2 Social media			3			3,2
6. Public policies						2,6
6.1 Local tourism organisation		2				2,7
6.2 Development strategy and planning		2				2,6
6.3 Involvement, support and cooperation		2				2,6
6.4 Tourism projects/funding		2				2,6
6.5 Strategic alliances		2				2,4
7. Monitoring						3
7.1 Visitor management		2				2,5
7.2 Resource mapping			2			2,9
7.3 Impact of tourism			3			3,1
7.4 Satisfaction level				3		3,6
7.5 Length of stay			2			2,8
D: SUSTENABILITY						3,1
8. Cultural features						3,3
8.1 Hospitality				4		4,2
8.2 Architecture/ landscape conservation				3		3,3
8.3 Access to education		2				2,5
8.4 Local products and services				3		3,4
9. Environment						2,8
9.1 Environment protection measures		2				2,6
9.1.1 Waste management		2				2,6
9.1.2 Environment projects		2				2,6
9.2 Public utilities				3		3
9.3 Protected area conservation measures			2			2,9
10. Performance						3
10.1 Tourism income			3			2,8
10.2 Occupancy rate				3		3,2
10.3 Quality/ price ratio					3	3,2
10.4 Local entrepreneurship			2			2,9
10.5 Jobs generated by tourism			2			2,9
10.6 Prices					3	3,2
Total competitiveness index						3,1

Source: authors' elaboration

Conclusions

Assessing the competitiveness of a tourist destination is a multifaceted process. The different stages of development of tourism destinations can impede the achievement of accurate quantitative outcomes. Thus, it can be challenging to conduct comparative studies due to variations in statistical reporting. Additionally, certain qualitative methods can result in a subjective interpretation.

Experts and researchers believe that rural tourism has the potential to drive sustainable economic growth in many rural areas worldwide. Unfortunately, there is a lack of both theoretical models and practical tools for assessing and comparing the competitiveness of rural tourism. In light of this, this research introduces a tailored perspective on assessing the competitiveness of rural destinations.

The current study has introduced a distinct and an exclusive method of evaluating tourism in rather small regions with unique characteristics, where tourism is not seen as a driving force for economic growth, but rather as a means of enhancing the appeal of a place. It provides an overview of the different factors and indicators related to rural tourism competitiveness. The analysis provides an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses uncovered by these criteria with respect to tourism competitiveness. Understanding the development dynamics of the rural tourism is of great importance for practitioners, policy makers and researchers.

As Maramures slowly transforms into a more competitive destination, this research offers valuable insight and guidance for improving specific areas that require closer examination and customized approaches.

Future research can bring more comprehensive results when enhancing the assessment of the competitiveness of rural destinations with measurements of visitors perception.

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