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## Host Perceptions of Rural Tour Marketing to Sustainable Tourism in Central Eastern Europe. The Case Study of Istria, Croatia

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### Abstract

The aim of the paper is the examination of the attitudes of the community, which incorporates the entrepreneurs of Istria, Croatia towards the promotion of rural and cultural tourism of the area and the examination of the factors, which formulate their attitudes. An isolated area as is Istria, would be expected that would be willing to open up itself to the world, to compete for tourism inflows and develop in a sustainable way since the region combines both cultural and natural elements as distinct characteristics. This research is part of a wider project called Rural Tour Marketing, which has the intention of promoting a model for the development of rural tourism, in sustainable and innovative ways and is applied in Central Eastern Europe to examine the host community's interest. Limited research has taken place in regard to the residents' attitudes on the promotion of tourism for this area. Residents filled in 350 questionnaires. It was found that residents who are also businessmen in the area are afraid that local culture is in danger to be distorted or destroyed due to tourism increase. It is suggested that partnerships and networks is a prerequisite for the acceptance of the sustainable tourist development of a community. The residents as part of the economic activity of the place need to be incorporated in the process of managing, communicating and advertising the region, realizing the benefits that may exist from such a process. By creating networks among the interested parties involved, the personal but also the common interest will be safeguarded and all activities will be more organized and coordinated.

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### 1. Introduction

The study of a community's attitudes towards tourism greatly contributes to maximize the positive impacts of tourism and minimize its negative impacts (Williams & Lawson, 2001). Host community's attitudes towards tourism change over different tourism development stages. Changes in character of interaction between locals and tourist depend on the numbers of latter; when tourism activities led to high volume mass tourism, impacts

might eventually reach a level that would annoy local community residents (Doxey, 1976). Greiner (2010) argues that while economic benefits, including increased business activity and employment, arise from the development of tourism in remote areas (see for example, mountainous areas as is Nafpaktia, Greece - (Bitsani, Kavoura & Kalomenidis, 2010) or remote ones-as is central west Queensland, Australia (Greiner, 2010: 2198) -, there can be social and environmental costs.

It is thus significant to appeal to these people in order to make them participants in all the phases of the tourism development of the region. When residents trust and are committed to a place, they may form such strong connections with it that it becomes reflective of their self-concept (Kemp, Childers & Williams, 2012). Limited research on the significant role of the communication with stakeholders in the planning process but also in the implementation stage though exists although collaboration and cooperation among stakeholders in order to bring about common good for the community and enhance their own interests, is an issue that should be sought (Karvelyte & Chiu, 2011; Ooi & Pedersen, 2010; Northover, 2010).

Residents need to find attractive the place they live, whether this is a city, a town or a neighborhood. Residents are an important target group, they are the 'insiders' to whom the place aims to promote its attractive and distinct elements that unite and bring them together; thus, policy makers in charge of regional tourism development and marketers who initiate communication and advertising strategies need to take into consideration that the inhabitants of a region are a significant target market that they need to approach and attract (Cassel, 2008). This then, can be a developmental tool, especially in peripheral and economically vulnerable regions across Europe where residents may realize the significance of cultural economic approaches to development (Cassel, 2008; Kemp, Childers & Williams, 2012). The paper aims to examine the residents' attitudes towards marketing Istria, Croatia for tourism purposes by promoting its cultural and natural distinct elements with the creation of networks.

## **2. The role of networks for sustainable tourism development of a region for the promotion of its distinct characteristics**

Butler's Tourism Destination Lifecycle Model suggested that the impacts of tourism on the host community are different over different stages of tourism development (Butler in Zhang, 2008: 18). In addition, economic contribution from tourism has been treated as an important benefit of the industry offering another way to the residents to positively react to the development of the tourism industry since there is stimulation of tourism infrastructure, there is stimulation of tourism supply industries, there is job creation and business opportunities (Zhang, 2008: 21; Bitsani, Kavoura and Kalomenidis, 2010; Katsoni, 2011). Furthermore, Haralambopoulos and Pizam (1996) reported that among the factors influencing the positive attitude of the community towards tourism is education, -well educated people in the context of a Greek island, Samos, for example, were more correlated with positive tourism attitudes-. When tourism develops, the accessibility of an area is improved and development projects are encouraged which benefit the local community (Bitsani and Panagou, 2003; Cano and Mysyk, 2004; Smith, 2004). One can realize this long-term financial sustainability if, subsequent to an initial investment, the tourist initiatives are capable of generating a positive flow of funds to ensure an enduring success of the initiative itself. Alternatively, environmental sustainability is connected with the capability of increasing the economic value of the natural and cultural patrimony by adopting a tourism proposal that does not damage this same patrimony. We can have high revenues both by directing a greater number of tourists to the interested regions and by protracting their presence in the low season. Length of residence was another variable that has been examined in the literature related to residential status; studies reported that those residents who lived more years in the area were more negative toward tourism in relation to residents who live in the region fewer years (Williams and Lawson, 2001) although a study of ten rural towns in Colorado by Allen et al. (cited in Zhang, 2008: 26) indicated that length of residence had no significant effect on resident attitudes toward tourism.

Thus, the effort needs to be made towards the promotion of the region not only to outsiders such as tourists, but rather to residents themselves, the inhabitants of the place, who need to see the attractiveness of the region;

then, they may realize that the tourism development can take place in a sustainable way and be part of it (Cassel, 2008). Residents are also stakeholders of a region who want their businesses to be successful and viable; their primary work is many times associated with tourism. By creating networks where residents -who are at the same time businessmen of the region- cooperate together for the personal but also for the common interest, emotional attachment and relationship maintenance is enhanced (Lee, Lee, Taylor & Lee, 2011). Such attachment to the community, may contribute so that residents may view the tourism development as a channel of growth in a sustainable way where decisions will be collectively taken, minimizing potential second thoughts residents may have. On the one hand, benefits can be summarized as an increase in recreational facilities and entertainment, improved police and fire protection, the community becomes well known and here is a sense of pride (Williams and Lawson, 2001) while on the other, negative impacts and fear for raising children in an unsafe environment with an increase in crime rate, pollution, traffic congestion may exist (Zhang, 2008: 23). It is thus, worthwhile to examine hosts' attitudes of tourism impact related to areas where a combination of elements for the sustainable development exists-since little research has taken place. The issue that is raised is whether residents as stakeholders have realized the significant role they play and whether networks have been implemented to incorporate them for a successful development and communication of the region.

Coordination of activities is necessary to implement the marketing plan and the communication message of the area and its distinctive characteristics in order to safeguard commitment, avoid conflicting actions from within the place itself as well as the procedure of doing the same things and duplicating actions (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008; Sartori, Mottironi and Antonioli, 2012). Networks reinforce the bonding -it is associated with cooperations inside the enterprises of the community- while the word 'bridging' is associated with external cooperations, as is for example the coordination of activities between entrepreneurs in a region as well as the contribution of an external cooperation such as an advisor from another country or a private sector stakeholder who has experience in the related issues (Jones in McGehee et al., 2010: 489). Social network theory argues that the attributes of individuals are less important than their relationships and ties with other actors within the network (<http://www.istheory.yorku.ca/socialnetworktheory.htm>). These groups need to develop dynamic relations, cooperating and collaborating rather than compete.

Among the contributing factors for the tourist development of locations are the organizational complexity and control and the management of partnerships (Hankinson, 2001). Based on social exchange theory, which explains social change and stability as a process of negotiated exchanges between parties, people calculate the overall worth of a particular relationship by subtracting its costs from the rewards it provides (Monge & Contractor, 2003). In order to create and implement a total strategic marketing plan and advertising of the respective area, a holistic identity of the area with specific dimensions and characteristics is necessary with the contribution of the residents' participation, provided that they realize the rewards they may have. Especially in the current condition of economic recession and high unemployment, the possibility of the contribution of entrepreneurship to the reinforcement of employment renders it as an important parameter of economic policy. The creation of new jobs and the reinforcement of employment of groups of the population, which are mostly affected (youth, women, people with special needs) may attract their positive contribution. Beside, the lesser engagement of the state to the active involvement in the economy, the more the responsibilities and expectations are placed on the market. Not only financial but social benefits are expected as well from the market (Hirshmann, 2002; Parolin, 2002: 27). This is where the role of networks can play a significant role.

Which can then be the distinct characteristics of a region worthy to be promoted from such a network? Agricultural lands, forested regions, mountain zones and coastal areas, natural parks, the countryside, nature reserves, wilderness areas and activities undertaken by rural tourists (such as visiting a beach, a lake, a riverfront, fishing or hunting) are considered to be part of rural tourism activities; these can be also combined with cultural and heritage tourism (such as visits to archaeological sites in North America related to Native Americans and Canadians, Dallen, 2005: 43, 51). Heritage resources have the potential to regenerate rural areas (Dallen, 2005: 51) and contribute to the marketing of rural tourism. Thus, a competitive advantage may be a combination of

elements of natural and cultural interest. There lies the danger that the rural area may lose its unique differential point if there is combination of heritage attractions and rural/ nature activities (Clarke, 2005: 93).

### **3. Description of the area: Case Study of Istria, Croatia**

The area under study is Istria, the largest peninsula in the Adriatic Sea, juts into the sea looking to the eternally sunny Southwest. The mild Mediterranean climate, the indented coast and the beautiful landscapes in the hinterland have made Istria one of the rare destinations, which have preserved a country feel and the rural environment. What is it that makes the examination of this area worthwhile? It is the combination of rural with cultural tourism present in the region that makes it worthwhile to be examined. The Rural Tour project, financed within the European program of transnational cooperation, INTERREG IIIB CADSES, began in June 2006 with the intention of promoting a model for the development, (in sustainable and innovative ways), of an integrated rural tourism in Central Eastern Europe promoting those rural tourist resources by affirming cultural identity ([http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/index\\_el.htm](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/index_el.htm) Rural Tour Forum, 2010). Istria, Croatia, according to Tourism Croatia and the Central Bureau of Statistics, the tourist traffic till the end of 2009 shows an increasing tendency; in 2010 there were 10.604.116-both foreign and domestic-, in 2009 there were 10.270.490 arrivals, in 2008 the arrivals were 11.260.807, in 2007 they were 11.162.406, in 2006 they were 10.384.921, in 2005 9.995.070, in 2004 9.412.276, in 2003, 8.877.981, in 2002, they were 8.320.203 and in 2001, they were 7.859.757 (Ministarstvo turizma, 2010). That is why we need to expand our knowledge towards the attitudes of the population for the development of alternative forms of tourism in their area. How does the host community perceive such an increase? We sought to examine the residents' attitudes in relation to the influence of tourism in the host community, taking into consideration that residents are also businessmen in the area who develop entrepreneurial activities.

### **4. Methodology**

Data gathering technique for the research took place with a questionnaire, which was filled in via personal interviews (July-August 2008). The sample was gathered from the three municipalities of Istria (Umag, Bujepazin and Novigrad) and 350 respondents filled it. The questionnaire is consisted of two units. The first unit had questions related to demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the population of Istria (sex, age, marital status, educational status, professional activity, monthly family income, reasons and duration of stay in the area etc), one member from each tourist business filled in the questionnaire while the second unit included questions related to the attitudes of the inhabitants towards rural tourism and its influences in the area. The dependent variable was defined to be "Istria may attract a bigger number of tourists with the advanced elevation of all its elements which are in synergy among them". The independent variables which were incorporated in the model were age and professional activity of the respondent, the duration of stay in the area, the personal benefits and the benefits for the family from tourism and the existence of under age children in the family (Table 1).

Table 1: Description of variables

Variable	Determination of Variable
Cultural	Istria may attract a bigger number of tourists with the advanced elevation of all its elements: 1=not at all, 2=little, 3=moderately, 4=much, 5=a lot
Age	Age (in years)
Years	Period of stay in the area (in years)
Benefit	Personal or family benefit from tourism
Occupation	Professional activity: 1=Economic active, 0= not economically active
Minorchild	Existence of under age children in the family

## 5. Results

In regard to the sample's profile, the majority of the sample was men (52%). The average age of the respondents were 41,4 years old with the majority of the sample to be between the age of 31-40 years old (23%). The biggest percentage of the sample were married (63%) with an average of 1,8 children. In relation to the educational level of the sample, the biggest percentage was high school graduates (38%). The employees of the sample were mainly working in the private sector (33%) or had a personal business (25%). The majority of the respondents lived close to the tourist area (68%), came from Istria (79%), personally benefited or at least one member of their family from tourism (41%) and had a monthly family income €1.000-2.000 (36%). Only 13% of those participating in the research, were not permanent residents of the area, while most of the respondents are characterised as residents with an average of permanent stay 25 years. Among the main reasons of permanent stay in the area were the escape from urban centres (45%), for professional reasons (37%), the appropriateness of the area as a place for raising children (36%) and the proximity with Trieste and Slovenia (25%).

The residents expressed the point of view for the influences of rural tourism in sectors such as economy, culture and society. Rural tourism has moderately contributed to its development and the quality of life of the residents (Table 2).

Table 2: Residents' attitudes in relation to the influence of rural tourism

Variable	Average**	S.d Deviation
Opportunities of employment are provided	3,1	1,12
Istria is well known	3,4	0,88
Residents know the natural and cultural capital of the area	2,9	0,87
Residents enjoy increased cultural activities	2,8	0,96
Local culture is elevated touristically	2,8	0,86
Istria develops in fast beats	2,7	0,93

Rural tourism has created new opportunities of employment, mainly for women and younger people, offering solution to the tourist seasonality (average=3,1). In addition, respondents, believe that rural tourism has positively contributed to the area's image (average=3,4). Istria has become a famous tourist destination and more attractive not only to the visitors but also to the residents. In regard to other variables, such as the increasing number of local cultural activities, the increasing knowledge of the residents in relation to the culture and the environment and the tourist elevation of local tourism it is found that, according to the residents of the sample, the level of the

cultural tourism has not influenced them to a big degree. The residents of Istria, consider that cultural tourism has contributed to a relatively moderate degree to the offer of special cultural activities, since they take place only during the summer months and in relation to the effort made from the municipalities of the area for the organisation of different cultural activities. Furthermore, even if many efforts have taken place for the restoration of the churches and the traditional pathways, historical buildings in the area and mainly in the seaside cities, nevertheless, the protection of archaeological sites is considered to be one of the most serious problems in the area. According to the previous facts, it becomes clear, as the sample of the residents shows, cultural tourism has influenced to a relatively moderate degree (average=2,7) their speedy development.

In regard to the residents' attitudes towards cultural tourism, Istria's cultural capital and all its historic buildings make it a live museum and is considered to be a very important factor of formulating tourist demand for the area, which is recognized by the residents, since 83,4% of the sample considers that the cultural capital of Istria may consist of a pole of attraction for visitors to a big degree. According to the results of multiple regression analysis, variables which influence to a statistically important level the residents' attitudes towards the development of cultural tourism in Istria is the age, the duration of living in the area, personal or family benefit from tourism, professional activity and the existence of under age children in the family (Table 3).

Table 3: Estimation results for the possibility of attracting more tourists with the elevation of cultural elements of Istria

Variable	t-ratio factor	
Constant	4,265***	18,759
Age	-0,251***	-8,036
Years	0,115***	4,646
Benefit	0,316***	3,457
Occupation	0,280***	2,677
Minorchild	-0,190**	-1,998
Adjusted R-squared statistic	0,253	
F-statistic	24,703	

\*\*\*p<0,01, \*\*p<0,05

More specifically, the residents' age of the sample, negatively influences the supportive attitudes of the residents in relation to the development of cultural tourism via the elevation of the cultural elements of area. Elderly residents are afraid that local culture is in danger to be distorted or destroyed due to tourism. Their concern is due to the perspective of the increase of tourist demand via the promotion of local cultural capital. Haralambopoulos and Pizam (1996) reached a similar conclusion. On the contrary, duration of residency has a positive effect, since the more the duration of residency raises, the more residents support tourist development of the area with the elevation of local culture. Permanent residents consider that tourist development is the source of improvement of local standard of living through the infrastructure projects, encouragement of entrepreneurship, decrease of isolation. Therefore, permanent residents are positive in regard to the increase of tourist demand as the studies of Brunt and Courtney (1999) or Allen et al. (in Zhang, 2008: 26) showed while Williams and Lawson (2001) reported that those residents who live more years in an area were more negative toward tourism, a result that may be further examined and verified or not in other studies. The satisfaction of benefits from the activity of the residents or the members of the family in the tourist industry gives way to the important role for the support and participation of the population to the efforts and activities for the rejuvenation of the local tourist sector with the elevation of cultural elements of the area. The projects of Haralambopoulos and Pizam (1996), Bachleitner

and Zins (1999), Brunt and Courtney (1999), Gursory, Jurowski and Uysay (2002) and Tosum (2002) concluded to the same result.

Economically active residents, contrary to the economic non-active, agree with the further development of tourism through the elevation of local tourism, results with which Bachleitner and Zins (1999) and Greiner (2010) found in their study. Residents who are parents of under age children express their objection for the development of tourism and in fact, every aspect of tourist development. More specifically, parents of under age children are sceptical towards the further development of tourism, due to the reason that they consider that tourist development may lead to an area that is not suitable for raising children. Besides, such an attitude, according to Tosum (2002), is due to the sojourn at the house -mainly of the women-for many hours, due to the children, having as a result to be opposed to every kind of development.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper examined the attitudes of residents as businessmen and residents of the region of Istria, Croatia, towards the promotion of the area via cultural and rural tourism. It was found that the residents' point of view towards rural tourism has moderately contributed to its development and the quality of life of the residents. Another discovery is that although the host community agrees that rural tourism has created new opportunities of employment, in regard to cultural tourism the findings illustrated that the host community believes that it has contributed to a relatively moderate degree to the offer of special cultural activities. Those who have small children and live for many years in the area believe that the touristic development of the region may destroy its cultural capital. These findings allow us to make inferences on the necessity of the involvement in networking from the host community's point of view. There is inexistence of networks, which would bring all stakeholders involved for the promotion of the region together. The realization of the benefits for sustainable tourism development via the creation of a network has not taken place; thus, the local community and all its residents, the public sector, businesses and entrepreneurs operating in the region -associated with agricultural co-ops or cultural associations-, need to cooperate in order to create a network that would bring sustainable tourism development and cooperation among the agents involved. It is thus, necessary that partnerships and networks between and within the community will be reinforced for the acceptance of the sustainable tourist development of the community. Povilanskas and Armaitiene (2010) argue that the key to tourism competitiveness for a region, a country, a place is the power actor-networks have for marketing the region. The "consumption and construction of place are simultaneous processes in which both tourists and locals play an active role" (Rakić and Chambers, 2012). Rural tourism and the local cultural phenomenon is an alternative strategy of development at local and wider field, the aim of which is the transformation of the areas of cultural interest in combination with the extraordinary nature and to make these places ideal for vacation, permanent residency, employment and attraction of investments.

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