

POTENTIAL OF CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM PRODUCTS IN RURAL DESTINATIONS: PERCEPTIONS OF RAVNI KOTARI RESIDENTS (CROATIA)

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Abstract

Purpose – The goal of this study is to examine the potential of the development course in Zadar hinterlands, i.e., the Ravni kotari area that represents a rural type of destination. For the purpose of this study, it was important to assess the awareness and familiarity of the residents in Ravni kotari with their cultural heritage, but also to evaluate their perceptions regarding the importance and potential of said cultural heritage in the development of tourism products. This paper provides an answer to the question of Ravni kotari residents' perception regarding the potential of their cultural heritage with the purpose of tourism product development in their area.

Methodology – In total 500 respondents (n=500) over 18 years of age, who own a real estate or live and work in the Ravni kotari area, participated in the survey. The survey was conducted through the semi-structured questionnaire with a presence of an interviewer in the period between June and October 2020.

Findings – The Ravni Kotari residents do not recognise its cultural heritage sufficiently and they cannot see a single heritage element as a possible umbrella brand of the destination. The highest number of respondents recognised the most significant tangible heritage cultural attractions under protection. Unfortunately, the UNESCO protected intangible heritage remained unmentioned by respondents.

Contribution – The rich cultural heritage in the Ravni kotari area is not sufficient *per se* without the commitment of its residents, given that without their involvement in the presentation and interpretation, cultural heritage decays and disappears. Therefore, the involvement of the residents in their cultural heritage possesses the exceptional importance in its preservation for future generations as well as for its presentation and valorisation through tourism. The lack of the residents' awareness about the valuable heritage attractions in their area results with their slower inclusion in the tourism offer and valorisation in tourism value chains.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, tourism products, tourism destination, tourism development, Ravni Kotari, Croatia.

INTRODUCTION

A number of surveys examines the tourism in rural areas, starting with the intention of its definition and the overview of its development (Lane 1994; Roberts, Hall, and Morag

2017; Lane and Kastenholz 2015; Rosalina et al. 2021) as well as the influence of each particular stakeholder on its development (Verbole 2000; Komppula 2014; Liu et al. 2020). The importance of a local community is unquestionable in the process of rural tourism development, as their culture and their way of life represent the basis of attractiveness for the development of rural tourism. At the same time, it constitutes a major share of the tourism offer in rural areas through hospitality services. However, a local community is often unaware of possibilities for the development of rural tourism in their area, or they are not willing to make part of the tourism development course.

This paper examines the development course of the Zadar hinterlands, i.e., the Ravni kotari area in Croatia, an area that represents a destination at the initial stage of tourism development (Ministry of Tourism and Sport of the Republic of Croatia, 2020). It is located in the Zadar County which is a highly developed tourism destination considering the number of tourist arrivals (1,751,741) and overnight stays (9,868,704). The Ravni kotari area reached 13,302 tourist arrivals and 129,812 overnight stays in 2019, which represents only a small share of total tourist traffic reached in the Zadar County.

As this destination is exceptionally rich in cultural heritage, the paper evaluates the importance of recognition for the cultural heritage development potential within the local population. Therefore, this paper aims to answer to the basic research question: Does the population of Ravni kotari area recognize their cultural heritage and how do they estimate its tourist potential?

The Zadar County boasts with the urban complex recognised as tangible heritage and four elements of intangible heritage under UNESCO protection (Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Croatia, n.d.). In addition, there are 305 more elements of tangible (movable and immovable) and intangible heritage phenomena under some form of protection in the Zadar County. The study is based on a survey whose aim was to determine to what extent the local population acknowledge the heritage potential for the development of tourism products, growth of tourism traffic and sustainable development of tourism in this destination.

1. RURAL AREAS AS RURAL DESTINATIONS

In order to define the concept of the rural tourism destinations, it is necessary to define the rural areas first. Rosalina et al. (2021) made a conclusion based on the system analysis of previous scientific papers where they state that rural areas are being defined by notions such as a “distant,” “sparsely populated” areas that possess rural functions within its social structures. A rural tourism destination is therefore defined as a set of institutions and participants located in a sparsely populated geographical and/or administrative area, where tourist transactions and activities are being conducted (Saraniemi and Kylänen 2010; Komppula 2014). They often develop as supportive destinations for neighbouring mass tourism destinations, usually coastal ones (Barke 2004; Loureiro 2012; Komppula 2014). The aim of tourism development in rural areas is to reduce negative side-effects, such as depopulation and prevention of agricultural activities decrease in such areas (Barke 2004). As a matter of fact, this type of tourism represents an untraditional strategy

of development which encourages entrepreneurial activity in those areas (Luloff et al. 1994; Nooripoor et al. 2021).

Wilson et al. (2001) identified ten factors necessary for the transformation of a rural community into tourism destination, where a strong support of the local community represents one of crucial factors. The attractiveness of these areas is based on a certain mysticism which arises from the culture of living, spatial enchantment, and a range of different ethnographic elements that they possess (Wilson et al. 2001; Trukhachev 2015; Sadowski and Wojcieszak, 2019; Fang 2020). The most valuable competitive advantage of rural areas in comparison with the urban areas is a harmonious combination of cultural and natural values resulting with the unique combination of attractions (Trukhachev 2015). According to the survey conducted by Valencia, Cerio, and Biases (2022) tourists are more motivated to visit a rural area due to the “attractiveness factors” and its attributes, and they are especially motivated by the enjoyment in beautiful landscape, rather than by “push and pull factors”, or by the factor of a personal satisfaction. Often, the lack of tourism infrastructure represents the major problem for the intense development of tourism in those areas. Meanwhile, it is important to emphasize that all rural areas do not possess the potential for tourism valorisation *per se* based only on their mysticism, and that the investments in accommodation facilities are not sufficient (Sharpley 2002). It is rather necessary to strengthen the attraction basis that the area possess. Wilson et al. (2001) distinguishes successful and unsuccessful rural tourism destinations. According to him, unsuccessful community possesses “significant natural/cultural resources”, but they did not manage to reach, for any reason, a necessary economic, political, or infrastructural support for the tourism development. On the other hand, successful communities did manage to establish efficient infrastructure which represents a support to the tourism development. Rural areas occupy the largest part of the EU surface (90%) and 56% of residents are living in rural areas. This is even more pronounced in Croatia where rural areas occupy even bigger surface of its territory (97,5%) with 78,9% of residents (Čagalj et. al. 2021). Those areas also face the problem of continuous depopulation (Grgić et al. 2010), thus making it even more difficult to develop a rural tourism, as it represents a labour-intensive activity. Some authors estimate the capacity of rural tourism in terms of the number of family-run farms registered in the Republic of Croatia (Grgić et al. 2017), which cannot be considered as justified in the context of the rural area definition. Rural tourism is related to the area where it takes place, not to the type of hospitality facilities. Furthermore, according to the OECD definition of the rural tourism, it consists of small companies, characterised by the open space activities, accessibility of natural and cultural heritage, traditional customs related to local families, slow and organic growth and by a local sustainability control (OECD 1994).

2. THE POTENTIAL OF CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM PRODUCTS IN RURAL AREAS

A range of studies proves an unquestionable connection between the use of cultural heritage and the development of tourism (UNESCO 1996; UNWTO 2018; Du Cros and McKercher 2015; Timothy 2014). The concept of heritage might be interpreted differently, but for the purpose of this paper we will use the interpretation provided by

Timothy (2014) who does not limit the concept of heritage only on something old or tangible, but he considers the intangible heritage equally value in comparison to the tangible heritage. Furthermore, the age of cultural heritage does not contribute to the possibility of its valorisation. Culture and heritage are especially well preserved from one generation to another in rural areas. Therefore, especially in crisis times, culture and tourism become resources for socioeconomical development in rural and peripheral communities (MacDonald and Jolliffe 2003). Cultural heritage represents a competitive advantage for a community in the process of tourism product creation, because due to its uniqueness, it differentiates itself from tourism products in other destinations (Wanda George 2010). Considering all the above it is extremely important to recognize it, to protect it from commodification and to valorise it in adequate way to preserve its degradation through the process of the inclusion in tourism courses. Tourism development in rural areas has an important social impact, given that it sustains a historical and cultural diversity, as well as the tradition at the regional level (McGehee and Andereck 2004; Wall, 1996). In their survey, Carneiro et al. (2015) identifies the landscape as a major attractiveness factor of a rural area, while other factors include scents, sounds, contact with the local community and rich cultural heritage of the area. It is important to emphasize that, in this context, in most cases, the local community who is the creator of a heritage, especially of the intangible heritage, insufficiently benefits from its valorisation regarding tourism purposes (Wanda George 2010). At the same time, some heritage elements are being lost forever without their valorisation through the tourism (Gilbert and Clark 1997). Ismagilova, Safiullin, and Gafurov (2015) state that cultural and historical centres do not only bring income to the region, but they also contribute to the sense of pride among local population due to their unique heritage which motivates them to share it with tourists. Within the heritage management plan for the town of Benkovac (Karzen 2018) thirty locations are mentioned to be inscribed in the National Cultural Heritage Register along with over 100 cultural heritage locations listed in the Spatial arrangement planning in the town of Benkovac. The intangible heritage of the exceptional value should be added to the list, given the fact that it is related to the wider Dalmatian hinterland area, which also includes the Ravni kotari area. This intangible heritage includes a particular musical expression of *ojkanje*, the art of decorative embroidery craft *grada/četverokuk*, a silent circle dance (*nijemo kolo*) traditional for Dalmatian hinterland, as well as the art of dry-stone wall building. This plan also envisages the development of cultural and creative tourism, based on the existing heritage which still has not been sufficiently valorised, nor protected such as the adequate resources for the tourism development (Karzen 2018). At the same time, Zadar County Tourism Masterplan 2013-2023 (Matassi et al. 2013) recognises exceptionally rich tangible and intangible cultural heritage as the basis for the development of different types of tourism, such as the cultural, creative, wine tourism and gastro-tourism.

3. THE ROLE OF LOCAL COMMUNITY IN THE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Sometimes, the local residents are not even aware of the cultural values that are present in their communities, and the development of the heritage-based tourism products that attract tourists can lead to increased awareness of these values and enhancement of the community identity (Richards 2018; Urošević 2012).

Different authors have come to different conclusions regarding the local population's concerns for sustainable managing of the heritage. While some authors deem that the citizens of Europe who live in the close vicinity of cultural landmarks are less concerned with excessive tourism that looms threatening cultural heritage (Adie et al. 2020), others resonate with the previous studies (Belisle and Hoy 1980) inferring that some residents living in close vicinity of the locations where tourism movement is intense show a more negative attitude to tourism in comparison to those who live further away from those places (Litvin et al. 2020; Pearce 1980; Rasoolimanesh et al. 2019). Researchers explain this by a stronger negative economic and social impact of the developed cultural tourism in the place of residence (Rasoolimanesh et al. 2019). Finally, research has also shown that urban dwellers are much more concerned about excessive development of tourism and its potential threat to the heritage than those who live in rural areas (Adie et al. 2020).

Pedford (1996) recognises the role of a local community for tourism development in rural areas as a living proof of the history, i.e., as the living cultural treasure of an area (Du Cros and McKercher 2015) that contributes to the authentic tourist experience, due to their tradition and folklore without jeopardizing the resources in question. The development of tourism in rural areas usually consists of several stages. According to MacDonald and Jolliffe (2003), the process of tourism development in rural area starts slowly with the arrival of a few tourists in a community, where some residents recognise the opportunity to develop individual tourist offers. The second phase is planning and implementation of a strategy that all the regions might benefit from. In the third phase, more formal plans are being developed based on the cooperation of residents, organisations and companies, partnerships between local and regional groups, such as national organisations or different government levels.

4. RESERCH METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this study the Ravni kotari region was chosen. The area is located in the interior part of the Zadar County, i.e., in the hinterland of two attractive coastal tourist destinations, the towns of Zadar and Biograd. This is a rural area in the full sense of the word which possess an important tangible and intangible heritage. Blaće (2015), in a narrower sense, defines the region of Ravni kotari as a central area between the coastal line and Bukovica region, located mostly at 200 m above sea level. In this paper, the Ravni kotari region is observed through the Ravni kotari Tourist Board, which might be considered as a rural tourism destination connected through the unique attractive basis. This area includes municipalities of Zemunik Donji, Škabrnja, Galovac, Polača, Stankovci, Lišane Ostrovičke and the town of Benkovac, located in the Zadar County in the Republic of Croatia. The study examined the attitudes and perceptions of the local residents on tourism in the destination and the opportunities for its development by a semi structured questionnaire which included the presence of the interviewer. The total number of respondents was 500 (n=500) over the age of 18, who own real estate or live and work in the Ravni kotari area. This survey was conducted in the period between June and October 2020.

The aim of this survey was to determine the current involvement of the residents in tourism offer of the destination, as well as their intention of future involvement in tourism

courses. The power of the destination's heritage in the local community was examined by the TOMA (Top-of-mind awareness) method. This method is commonly applied in marketing research on product brand awareness. Regarding the implementation of this method in the context of tourism destinations, it seems that there are three open questions that could encompass the different aspects of associations to the destination brand (Stepchenkova and Li 2014): the first question refers to the pictures and characteristics that come to mind when the destination is mentioned and are expressed by different brand attributes; the second question tackles the atmosphere or the disposition to travel to the destination and essentially encompasses the total value of the destination's brand; and the third question concerns the typical or unique tourism attractions in the destination that represent the 'roof brand'. The research proposed to establish whether there is awareness about the important of cultural attractions connected to Ravni kotari that could become the roof brand with the destination pull power in the future.

Based on the literature overview (Mitchell and Reid 2001), it has been stated that a local community wants to be included in tourism courses to increase their revenues. The inclusion might take the direct form through the opening of a new tourism offer, or indirectly through their inclusion in different cultural activities, etc. The tendency for the inclusion has been evaluated with Likert scale with 5 particles, where -2 stood for their definite absence of interest for the inclusion and 2 stood for their definite inclusion into particular segment of tourism activity. Based on relevant literature (Tosun 2002; Gilbert and Clark 1997); Zhuang et al. 2019; Marušić 2020) a set of satisfaction/dissatisfaction particles with specific elements of tourism development in the tourist destination has been established. The degree of satisfaction has been evaluated through the Likert scale from 2 to -2, where -2 stood for complete dissatisfaction, and 0 stood for the neutral attitude. Limitations of this study consists of relatively low share of the older population who participated in the research, time frame of the research conduction, given that respondents actively participate in tourism activity in concerned time, therefore they show low interest for participation in the survey. Provided geographical definition of the Ravni kotari area may also result with the issue in interpretation of the cultural heritage.

5. RESEARCH RESULTS – THE PERCEPTIONS OF LOCAL RESIDENTS ON THE POTENTIAL OF CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM PRODUCTS IN RAVNI KOTARI REGION

5.1. Respondents' characteristics

The research of the attitudes and perceptions of the local population on tourism and the opportunities of its development in the Ravni kotari destination involved 52.08 % of female and 47.92% of male respondents mostly between 18 and 25 years of age (37.59%), then between 26 and 35 years (21.16%) and 36 to 45 (16.39%), while those over 55 belonged to the smallest group (11.83%). Such age structure represents a limitation, because the number of respondents older than 55 years of age is low. Most respondents had completed secondary school education (46.56%), while 38.75 % graduated from university/college, 10.44 % had elementary school education, while 3.97% of them had master's and doctor's degrees. Over a half of the respondents live with their families of four of five members. In accordance with the age structure of the

participants, the share of the secondary school and university students who do not have monthly incomes was 27.64%. The share of those employed in the public and private sectors was almost the same while those employed in agriculture and as independent entrepreneurs accounted for only 2.47 and 3.95 % respectively. Most commonly, the respondents' net monthly income was in the range of 700 – 1000 euros.

The residents engage in tourism activities from time to time. Thus, while 19.5% consider it as an additional income, only 3.41% of the population generate their basic income from tourism. Of the total respondents, 5.69% of them rent accommodation venues, 2.65% offer other tourism services, 2.03% own a hospitality facility, 2.44% work in the accommodation facility, 14.24% own a family farm that is commonly disassociated from tourism activity, while other respondents do not participate in the destination's tourism activities. This is an indicator of the initial stage of the destination development as the involvement of the inhabitants in tourism activities is extremely low. In the future 49.58% of them stated that they plan to get involved in some form of tourism offer in the destination, but almost half of them are not certain about the type of activity they want to engage in.

5.2. Residents' familiarity with the cultural heritage of the Ravni kotari area

The rich cultural heritage in the Ravni kotari area *per se* is not sufficient as without the commitment of the local community and its involvement in the presentation and interpretation, cultural heritage decays and disappears. Therefore, the elements of the involvement of the local community in its cultural heritage are of exceptional importance for its preservation for the future generations as well as for its presentation and valorisation through tourism. Using the TOMA method to find out from the residents the first image when they hear the term "Ravni kotari", the respondents denied knowing any cultural attraction connected to this area but associated it only with the geographic sites. The same method was used to seek the residents' first association from the administrative centre of Benkovac. In this case the ideas linked to the material cultural heritage of the area appear, specifically for the material heritage of Kaštel Benković, which is a fortress dating back from mid-15th century that dominates the landscape. It is classified as the protected cultural asset, or the cultural asset of national significance (Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Croatia, n.d.). Considering 43 sites that are located in this area and enjoy some form of national protection, the exceptionally low level of awareness in the local community is evident. The residents' first association about the area did not include even the UNESCO protected intangible heritage, such as the *ojkanje* singing or the dry stonewall construction, which shows a relatively low level of cohabitation with the recognised heritage. On the other hand, the analysis has proved a high recognition of the unprotected intangible heritage of this destination, the Benkovac Fair whose decade-long tradition has been profiled into an event of traditional trade every 10th in the month. When obtained results are put in the context of the County and local centre vision contained in their strategic documents where this cultural heritage is clearly defined along with possibilities of their tourism valorisation, a question arises why continuous educations of local population have not been conducted, because it is evident that they would contribute to the valorisation of the cultural heritage in tourist purposes.

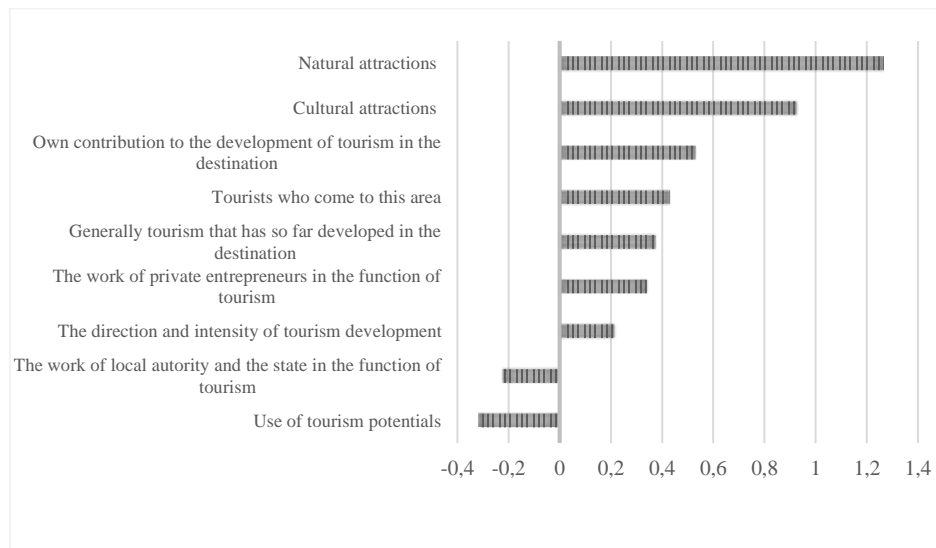
Answering an open question to name the main advantage of Ravni kotari in terms of attraction as a base for developing tourism, only 3.94 % of all respondents quoted cultural heritage. As for the dominant advantages of the area, they recognised its transport position and natural heritage.

The lack of the local residents' awareness about owning a significant heritage attraction, which constitutes the basis for the said development, leads to its slower inclusion in the tourism offer and valorisation in tourism value chains.

5.3. Satisfaction with tourism development in the Ravni kotari area and willingness of population's inclusion in tourism activity

The residents are particularly dissatisfied with the use of the destination's potentials for tourism development, which is evident in the average marks of -0.32 on a scale from -2 to 2 (where -2 signified exceptional dissatisfaction and 2 stood for exceptional satisfaction, while the central point was neutral).

Graph 1: The satisfaction of local residents with tourism development in the Ravni kotari destination



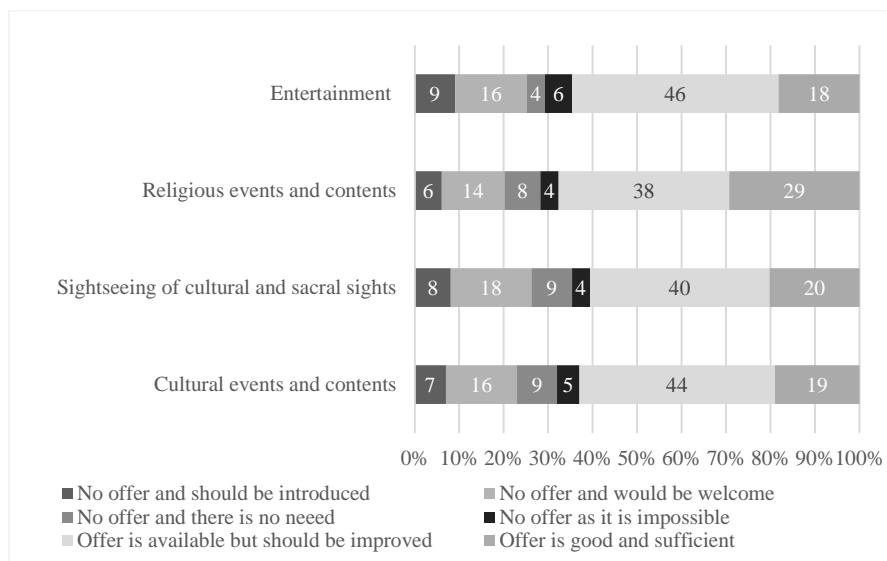
Source: authors' elaboration

Apart from (dis)satisfaction with the development of the destination, the respondents were asked to express their satisfaction with the elements of the destination's offer on the same scale -2 to 2 (where -2 indicated absolute dissatisfaction and 2 stood for total satisfaction). The highest average mark of 1.20 was awarded to natural attractions, while satisfaction with the social attraction in the nature destination was marked 0.93. Apart from dissatisfaction with the use of the potentials, they also expressed negative attitude to the activities of the local bodies of public administration and the government's serving

the development of tourism. Satisfaction with the direction and intensity of tourism development and own contribution to it were also rated low (0.21).

Apropos the tourist offer that would involve visiting cultural and sacral sights, as many as 20.49 % of the respondents believed that it was sufficiently developed, while 13.32 % did not see the need or possibilities for creating any such activities. The development of cultural events offer was rated as sufficient by 18.46 % of the respondents, while 13.82 % did not see the need or possibilities for these activities.

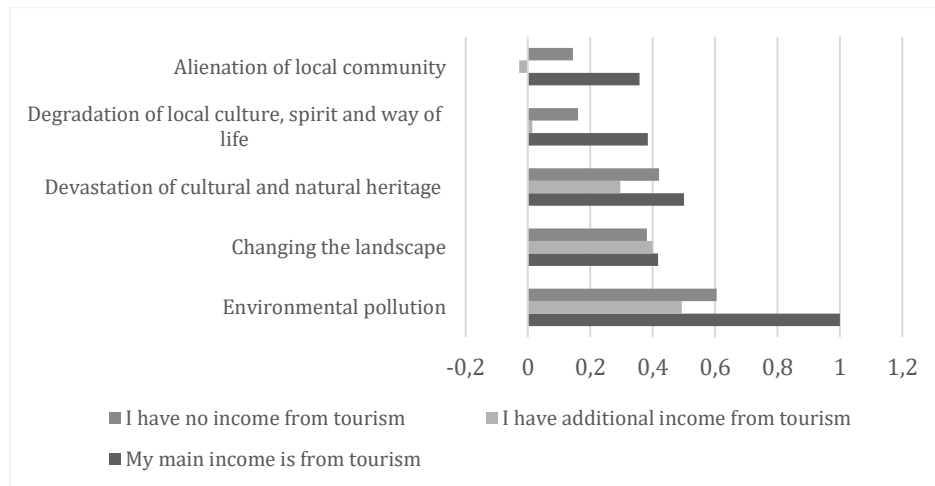
Graph 2: Estimate of opportunities for developing cultural tourism products founded on resource basis



Source: authors' elaboration

Respondents also estimated the influence of tourism on the community and the area in which it takes place. Chosen particles for the evaluation of the influence are based on the literature and they included basic attractiveness elements in rural area, beauty of the landscape and the culture of local community. All respondent groups noticed the influence of tourism on the area of the Ravni kotari region, as well as on its local community and its cultural heritage. Meanwhile, there are differences in the perception of the influence. Respondents notice the biggest tourism impact through the pollution of the environment. Those respondents who generate their basic income from tourism estimate that influence is more significant (1 on the scale -2 to 2) than two other groups who do not generate the income from tourism (0.6052 on the scale -2 to 2) or those for whom tourism represents additional income (0.4929 on the scale -2 to 2). The group of respondents for whom tourism represents additional income showed the lowest level of concern for the tourism influence on individual attraction segments in destination.

Graph 3: Estimate of tourism impact on the Ravni kotari region regarding the income generated through tourism



Source: authors' elaboration

When asked directly about the most important cultural attractions in the destinations, the highest number of respondents recognised the most significant tangible heritage cultural attractions under protection (Asseria, Kličevica and the Benković Castle are archaeological sites). Of the intangible heritage, they recognised the gastronomy mentioning the most important autochthonous dishes (prsnac, lamb, olive oil, wine). Unfortunately, the UNESCO protected intangible heritage (*ojkanje* and dry wall construction) remained unmentioned.

The biggest part of respondents (50.42%) do not plan to get involved in tourism offer in future, while 23.85% plans to get involved, but still did not decide how. Those who expressed their intention to involve in tourism activity, mostly plan to do it through the rental of different types of accommodation facilities (17.7%). Meanwhile, their wish to improve the tourism offer in the area reflects in a relatively high desire to contribute through the involvement in different activities, but again, the desire to get involved in destination's cultural activities remains low. On the scale from -2 (I do not want to get involved) to 2 (I will definitely get involved), respondents provided the lowest rate regarding their interest to get involved in the work of folklore associations (0.22), to participate in cultural manifestations (0.50), to participate in manifestations and demonstrations of old crafts (0.6). The showed the highest interest to take part in the enhancement of environmental elements, such as the arrangement of the village (0.85) and landscaping of their garden plots (0.75).

CONCLUSION

Rural areas find most often their attractiveness basis in the connection of preserved landscape and natural beauties on the one hand, and in the lifestyle and preserved heritage on the other hand. Their special attractiveness is, in most cases, the result of the preserved intangible heritage in a closely connected local community in comparison with the urban areas. The area of the Ravni Kotari region abounds in natural beauties and preserved landscapes, as well as in tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Intangible heritage, such as the music, language, dance, religion, folklore, different artistic forms, crafts, gastronomic tradition, social relations, rituals, etc. has been recognized as equally valuable elements in creation of the tourism product (Akagawa and Smith 2018). Unfortunately, the local population of Ravni Kotari region does not recognize the most valuable part of their intangible heritage, which was classified by UNESCO as an important element, which reduces the potential of its valorisation in tourism purposes. The involvement of the local population in tourism offer is extremely low, but they showed the interest in future involvement, although without a clear vision so far. Their lack of recognition of the attractiveness basis for the involvement contributes to such results. Through the TOMA method, the local community did not connect the area of Ravni Kotari with any cultural attraction, but only with natural resources and geographical locations. Furthermore, as the administrative centre of the area they recognize only one of 43 protected locations, but that location is not even the dominant first association. Therefore, it was expected that only a small part of residents will recognize the cultural heritage as the major advantage for the development of tourism in the Ravni Kotari region. Although we are speaking about the early phase of tourism development with a low level of the involvement, the respondents recognise negative impacts of tourism on the area, and again they notice it to a higher extent within the natural, rather than cultural heritage level of the Ravni Kotari region. According to strategic documents on heritage management and tourism development in the Ravni kotari area, it is necessary to actively work with the aim to raise awareness of local population on the local heritage that their area possesses. This is achievable through the educational workshops, promotional activities, free guided tours for local population. In this paper the intention of local population for the direct or indirect inclusion in tourism activities is evident. Therefore, it is necessary to create models for the indirect inclusion, in example, through the actions such as the spatial arrangement, but also to simplify their direct inclusion through the empowerment of entrepreneurial ecosystem in order to encourage entrepreneurial venture in tourism. The recommendation for future research is to expand the survey area and to conduct a comparative analysis of different rural areas. Further recommendation concerns the conduction of the same survey upon the provided educations. Furthermore, it would be useful in future surveys to conduct a comparative analysis of the familiarity with the cultural heritage of the Ravni kotari area within all stakeholders in the field of tourism.

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