

## QUALITATIVE IMPROVEMENT OF TOURIST DESTINATIONS THROUGH A HOLISTIC APPROACH: ON THE CASE OF “BIOS GARDEN”

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to elaborate holistic strategies in the formation of products and services that provide an opportunity for active engagement of visitors in development of tourist destination.

**Design / Methodology / Approach** – This paper is designed as a business plan that offers strategic and operative guidelines for implementation of the holistic approach. By combining holistic paradigm with the design science research methodology, this article explains how to develop holistic projects in tourism and why such projects represent a smart investment.

**Findings** – Involvement of visitors in qualitative improvement of their destination creates strong emotional bond that increases return visits and boosts loyalty. The strategy of the visitor involvement can be applied in different types of the artistic, cultural, agricultural, historical and environmental projects. By forming a common framework in which many different individuals can participate and co-create, holistic projects may improve general quality of some eco-system. Holistic development represents an active, creative and social process that stimulates synergy within different industries in the local community.

**Originality of the research** – This is one of the first studies about the holistic gardens in the Republic of Croatia that explains how to create sustainable relationships between stakeholders in the tourist destination.

**Keywords** holism, synergy, garden, tourism, sustainability

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

These days, tourism operators are still struggling with identifying of sustainable business strategies that can provide a long term relationship with their customers. In addition, one of the main concerns of contemporary managers is how to provide an experience that will encourage guests to return to the specific destination. This problem becomes even bigger when the initial success and growth in the total number of arrivals start to degrade the natural environment (Koncul 2007; Ramadas and Mohamed 2014; Luttenberger and Luttenberger 2016). In highly populated areas such as mega cities, the situation is even worse since there are too many competitors. Even though they became standard parts of the tourism industry, many products and services such as hotels, pools, amusement parks, night clubs and big concert events (...), are not always beneficial for (and optimally embedded in) the community and the natural environment in which they operate. According to the empirical results from Ghobadi and Verdian (2016), the level of negative tourist impact in all aspects is beyond the acceptable level

for the local community. In order to overcome this problem, businesses are trying to reshape their offer by inventing new products and services that might create synergy between visitors and the local community. Given that competition and environmental impact of tourism are continuously growing, it becomes increasingly important to develop products and services that can encourage long-term emotional bonds between visitors and their destination without compromising the natural and social environment in which they operate.

In recent years holistic approach is becoming quite popular in the tourism industry. According to Smith (2003), holistic holidays are based on the opportunities to stimulate creative actions that enable the reconciliation of body, mind and spirit. Courtis and Mylonakis (2008) use the holistic approach in order to assess and improve competitiveness of tourism on Ionian Island in Greece, while Macleod and Gillespie (2010) explain how to use the holistic approach in the development of sustainable tourism in rural Europe. Seabra et al. (2014) find that contemporary tourists want to have the holistic contact with cultures, people, landscapes and places. For this reason, travelers search for the activities and programs that bring balance to their lives. An empirical research conducted by Rocha et al. (2016) shows that the main motivations for the holistic tourism are the desire to escape (the routine of work), the desire to achieve balance (to get away from everyday life stress) and the desire for well-being (to experience and learn something new in order to revitalize the individuals' personal identity).

The holistic approach creates a specific experience that provides balance between active participation and relaxation. According to Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) there are four different dimensions in the development of a certain brand: sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral. This means that the customer experience represents the cumulative impact – both emotional and practical (Soudagar, Iyer and Hildebrand 2011). Co-creation is an active, creative and social process based on collaboration between producers and users that is initiated by the business to generate value for customers (Piller, Ihl and Vossen 2010). Given that it demands expertise and increases cost, practical involvement of visitors in co-creating of some artifact is not simple and cheap, but it represents one of the best ways in the creation of strong emotional bonds between visitors and destination (Antón, Camarero and Garrido 2016).

While the principles of managing and measuring co-creation in the terms of consumer motivation and involvement are widely researched, little attempt has been made to identify critical factors and create models dealing with organizational capabilities and managerial implications of co-creation (Skaržauskaitė 2013). This paper tends to serve as a draft for creating of the cooperative platform that should allow ongoing interaction and communication among private and public organizations, customers and other stakeholders. According to Turkalj, Ham and Fosić (2013) there is a strong interdependence and the potential for the achieving synergistic effect between tourism, agriculture and food industry. Synergy represents the interaction of elements (activities, processes or subjects) that when combined produce a total effect that is greater than the sum of their individual contributions (Cetinski and Perić 2008).

The main purpose of this paper is to offer strategic guidelines for development of the holistic cooperative platform that may enable synergy between tourism operators, ecosystem, local community and its complementary industries, such as education, art, culture, ecology, agriculture and the food industry. Additional goal of this research is widening of the qualitative discussion about the specific ways in which holistic products and services may be applicable to enhance emotional bonds between visitors and destinations. In order to fulfill its purpose, this article tries to provide answers on these three questions:

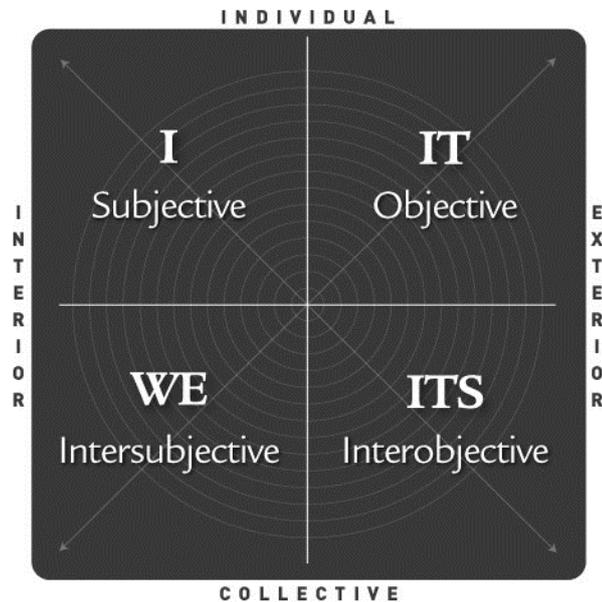
- How to develop the holistic products and services in tourism?
- How to increase return visits and boost visitor's loyalty by using the holistic approach in product development?
- What are the main benefits of the project Bios garden?

The conducted analysis suggests that active participation of visitors in holistic projects is not beneficial only in boosting of loyalty and return visits, but even in qualitative improvement of tourist destinations. Project Bios garden represents the holistic retreat that offers many different types of involvement and active vacation opportunities including workshops about various topics and gardening. Even though holistic projects may include gathering of funds for some special purpose, their main focus is on the practical involvement of visitors in some specific activity (e.g. creation of some artifact). The first part named introduction, explains the problem, objects and purpose of this research. The second part explains methodology and outlines important steps in the development of the presented project. The third part shows how to develop this type of products and services in the holistic garden. The fourth part is the conclusion, which brings final remarks and discussion.

## **2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Theoretical part of this research is based on the holistic paradigm. According to Wilber (2001), everything we experience in our world is mutually interconnected and can be seen from at least four different perspectives. As the figure 1 explains, these are: individual subjective, individual objective, collective subjective and collective objective perspective. Holistic products and services in tourism are trying to create synergy between all stakeholders and achieve its purpose through the four specific quadrants of holistic approach: individual subjective (dispositions of mind and heart); individual objective (individual behavior); collective inter-subjective (organizational culture, shared values and morale); and collective inter-objective (socio-economic systems and processes). The holistic projects in tourism are trying to create benefits not only for investors and guests, but even for local community in which they operate.

Figure 1: The four quadrants of the holistic approach



Source: Adapted from [www.integralhealthresources.com](http://www.integralhealthresources.com) (02.03.2017)

Practical realization of the case study named “Bios garden” is based on the Design Science Research (DSR) methodology. The creation and evaluation of artifacts represents an essential part in the DSR process (Hevner et al. 2004) in which everything is revolving around “build and evaluate” approach (March and Storey 2008). DSR artifacts can broadly include: models, methods, constructs, instantiations and design theories (Gregor and Hevner 2013), social innovations, new or previously unknown properties of technical/social/informational resources (March and Storey 2008), new explanatory theories, new design and developments models and implementation processes or methods (Ellis and Levy 2010). The main goal of this project is the development of holistic products and services in tourism. The DSR methodology prescribes conducting of this research through six elementary steps (Hevner and Chatterjee 2010):

1. Problem identification and motivation – specification of the research problem and motivation. Defined problem is used to develop an artifact that provides the solution;
2. Define the objectives for the solution – objectives can be quantitative and/or qualitative. Objectives are defined based on problem definition;
3. Design and development – creation of the artifact. This phase includes specification of artifact’s functionality and its architecture, which is followed by the creation of the actual artifact;
4. Demonstration – demonstration of created artifact resolves the problems identified in phase 1. This phase involves experimentation, simulation, case study and proof or other appropriate activity;

5. Evaluation – observation and measurement of how well this artifact supports the solution of the problem. This phase involves comparing the objectives of the solution (phase 2) to actual observed results from use of the artifact in the demonstration (phase 4).
6. Communication – communicate the results of the research – the problem and its importance, the artifact, its utility and novelty, the rigor of its design and its effectiveness.

The presented project is currently in the third phase of the DSR methodology. As briefly as possible the results can be described as follows:

1. Problem identification and motivation: the main problem is the creation of the strong emotional bonds between visitors and destinations that encourage their returns and boost loyalty;
2. Definition of the objectives for the solution: the author finds a solution to this problem in the application of the “involvement strategies” that can be achieved through cultural, educational, agricultural, historical, ecological and leisure projects that motivate visitors to participate in their realization and development;
3. Design and development: the author has developed conceptual business model of the holistic garden that effectively explains its basic functions, goals and information exchange.

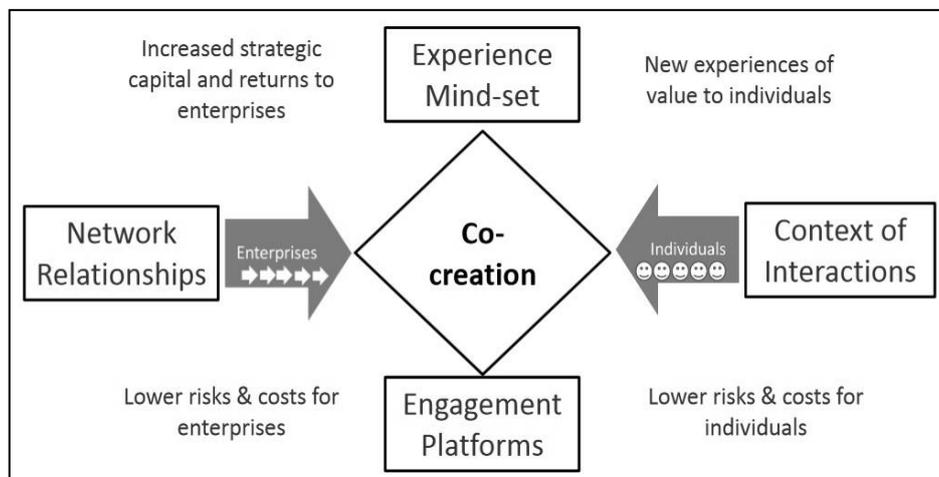
The next step is searching for interested investors and the creation of the holistic garden. Even though application of different types of gardens in tourism industry is not a novelty, the holistic gardens are still not adequately valorized. Despite the fact that the Republic of Croatia has a great potential for development of holistic gardens, minus its regular city parks and national parks, only the island Lošinj and Istria have started to develop (aromatic) gardens that can be seen as an attempt of the proposed activities. Something similar can be found in Slovenia under the name „Park Istra“. By using the holistic methodology tourism operators have an opportunity to qualitatively improve their offer and support the development of remote areas (e.g. islands) by creating new jobs that will enable the balanced development of the local community.

### **3. HOW TO DEVELOP A HOLISTIC PRODUCTS AND SERVICES?**

Holistic approach in tourism implies synergy among all involved stakeholders. Holistic products and services can be based on different artistic, educational, cultural, historical, scientific and environmental foundations. The best possible option is the one in which all or at least several of these factors are used in the combination. Managing of the holistic project may be complex and demanding. But if management ensures timely feedback, public acknowledgments and tangible benefits for all involved parties this will certainly intensify success of such multilateral projects. Involvement strategies are closely related to the community-based tourism (CBT) projects that act in the best interest of the local population and lead to community development. CBT projects are focused on the community development through tourism (Jones 2005) and the development of the tourism venture (Clifton and Benson 2006) in order to promote long term relationships between service providers and clients. In its basic sense CBT

follows the holistic approach that views tourism as an economic driver which enables each community member to have an equal access to the improved quality of life (Harwood 2010). According to Lindström and Larson (2016) there are four basic phases in every CBT project: step 1, formation of a representative project group and negotiation of community-based approach; step 2, consulting local stakeholders and employing a mixed-methods approach; step 3, elaborating results with local stakeholders; step 4, increased community collaboration.

Figure 2: **The core principles of co-creation**



Source: Adapted from Ramaswamy and Gouillart, 2010b

As the figure 2 shows, an engagement (cooperative) platform (founded by experts and strategic partners) should enable individuals and enterprises to co-create products, services and experiences that will provide new values with simultaneous reduction of risk and costs. If such projects are not managed optimally, the risk of causing interest conflicts and exclusion, rather than harmony and inclusion, becomes imminent. On the other hand, when the fusion of local knowhow and expert knowledge about tourism is successfully applied, final results are fruitful ideas of tourist products and services and increased mutual understanding (Harwood 2010). These days, destinations tend to be designed as generators of experience while tourism providers are trying to create “experience environments” by integrating available resources in order to co-create high value experience for potential visitors (Majdoub 2014). For the same reason, modern companies invite customers and other stakeholders to assist them in the development and design of their products and services. By focusing on improving the experiences of everyone involved, such firms are achieving breakthrough insights, lower costs, new revenues, and new business models (Ramaswamy and Gouillart 2010a).

The benefits of co-creation do not come without challenges (Bolton and Saxena-Iyer 2009). According to Hoyer et al. (2010) the empowerment of consumers increases complexity of managing firm’s objectives and interests of diverse stakeholders (employees, shareholders, co-creators and other types of consumers). Besides,

customers may not exhibit the necessary knowledge and skills to successfully accept the supplier’s value proposition and therefore value may not be created (Terblanche 2014). Furthermore, extended legislation may inhibit value co-creation from taking place (Etgar 2008). Coordination requirements, constraints and other types of nonmonetary costs increase with the number of co-creators included (Blazevic and Lievens 2008). How co-creation works in practice will be explained with the example of the holistic garden named “Bios”. In this garden people can learn about the principles of organic gardening, discuss about philosophy or any other subject and meditate in the balance with nature. By using different sustainable solutions that minimally disturb the Earth’s natural balance this garden is designed as a holistic retreat. Holistic retreats tend to offer combinations of therapies and counseling, pathways to spiritual development, creative enhancement, and many other routes to the reconciliation of body, mind and spirit (Smith and Kelly 2006). For this reason, the project goes beyond organic gardening by considering the interaction of all functions of life and how they mutually interact. In other words, holistic gardening means not only growing the healthy food but also creating an ambiance where sight, sound, smell and touch are in balance (Organic products Company 2010). It means working with nature to create an area where plants, animals and people are working together to provide the healthy environment.

Figure 3: Strategic business model of the Bios holistic garden

Key Partners 	Key Activities 	Value Proposition 	Customer Relationship	Customer Segments
Hotel chain	Management	Contact with nature	Help desk (email, web, phone)	Hotel & campsite guests
Local farmers	Gardening	Relaxation	Directly in the garden	Workshop participants
Tourist board	Marketing	Healthy food & life	Channels	
Education partners	Workshops		Collaborate with local farmers	Awareness
Bio - shop	Key Resources 	Learn to live sustainable	Evaluation	Local people (in low season)
Logistic operator (delivery)		Discover magic of nature	Purchase	Customers in plant your tree activity
Universities & EU funds			Delivery	
	Equipment		After sales	
Cost Structure	Land & water		Revenue Streams	
Equipment	Administration		Sale of plants & herbs	%
Human resources	Marketing		Sale of fruit, vegetables & smoothies	
	Interest	Workshops and bio shop		
	Web & other costs			

Source: made by author

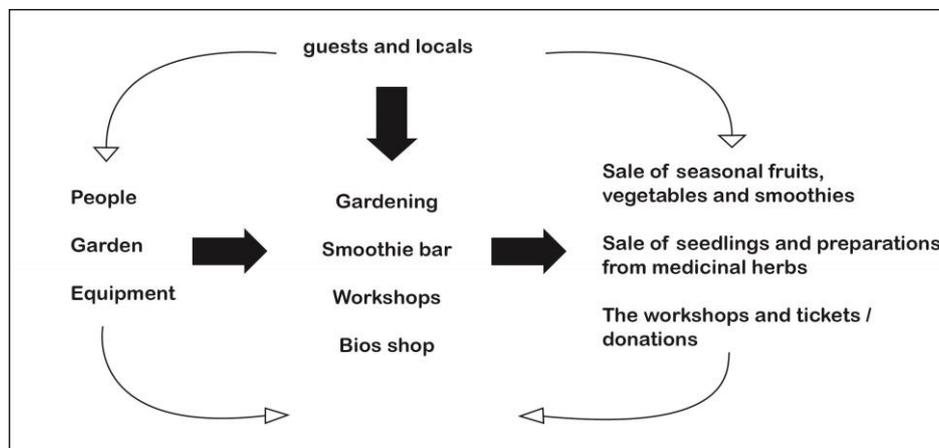
Figure 3 explains strategic business model of the proposed holistic garden. Besides the purpose of serving as a holistic retreat, this garden offers a "plant your tree" activity that can be performed in collaboration with local farmers. The basic idea is that visitors can plant a tree or shrub in a designated area. This will initiate creation of the lasting emotional connection between its visitors and destination. In forthcoming period, garden management will inform these visitors about the progress of joint efforts, call them to participate in further actions (pruning trees) and send them one part of jointly produced products (fruits, spices, jam, herbs, oil). Such strategy will probably lead to additional purchases of other products that are produced within the project and destination. In the figure 3, it can be seen how holistic projects try to connect all interested parties at some destination. In this specific case, main strategic partners are hotels, tourist board, local workers and producers, educational partners and universities. In order to develop its full potential this garden should offer a variety of compatible content such as: many different species of plants, a windmill, an observatory or some similar services as well as places for meditation, reading and education. Moreover, all plants in the garden should be labeled for easy identification. For this purpose, it is even possible to create e-guides in several foreign languages. Furthermore, this project may include smoothie bar and bio shop that are offering jams, honey, tea, fruits, vegetables, herbs and other things that were grown or created at this destination. Finally, this holistic garden represents an ideal location for workshops that can be organized in many different subjects such as: growth of medicinal plants, organic farming, music school, philosophy, HR management, astronomy, drawing and painting, meditation, school of breathing, anti-stress programs, creation of ecological jewelry, healthy diet, forest cuisine and others.

In the last few years, revenue for "wellness tourism," which includes meditation and other spiritual retreats, increased by 14 percent, from \$494.1 billion in 2013 to \$563.2 billion in 2015, with a growth rate more than twice as fast as overall tourism expenditures (Lamothe 2017). Parallel to the fact that they represent one of the fastest rising niches in tourism industry, a particular interest for this type of projects arises from their contribution in quality improvement of the tourist experience. By focusing on the health, active vacation, education and use of the holistic methods in the production of seedlings, spices, herbs, vegetables and fruits, this type of projects significantly improve the well being of all participants. Through this project guests may participate in planting and gardening, which ensures contact with nature. Besides, this project offers educational workshops for children and adults (e.g. medical plants) that try to educate people how to live in sustainable manner. Importance of such projects arises from the fact that they teach visitors about environmental sustainability and holistic life. By producing healthy seeds, herbs, fruits and vegetables for all visitors and residents, such projects qualitatively improve destinations in which they operate. Additional benefits of selective forms of tourism (such as cultural, educational and ecological) are consisted in the fact that they increase return visits and boost loyalty by attracting guests even in low season (Ćorluka, Matošević-Radić and Geić 2013).

By exploring the relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty Mendes et al. (2010) have found that the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty is stronger among tourists who are older, domestic and highly educated. However, the problem of loyalty in tourism is not an easy one. Even the most satisfied tourist can get

similar experiences and satisfaction by visiting other destinations. That is why managers continue to devise new approaches that will encourage the return of guests and their loyalty. Besides high quality products, after-sales services and memorable experiences, one of the best ways to encourage additional visits and returns is to enable tourists to participate in some activity that will create lasting emotional bond. Many different authors have already confirmed that leisure activity involvement is positive related to place attachment (Gross and Brown 2008, Bricker and Kerstetter 2000). Campon, Alves and Hernandez (2013) claim that correct operationalization of loyalty in tourism should include revisit and recommendation. Place attachment has demonstrated integral relations with leisure satisfaction and loyalty (Alexandris, Kouthouris and Meligdis 2006). According to Pryag and Ryan (2011) destination image, personal involvement and place attachment are antecedents of visitors' loyalty but this relationship is mediated by satisfaction levels. Mostafavi-Shirazi and Mat-Som (2013) find that overall satisfaction is significant for the revisit intention and recommendation. The complexity arises from the fact that the general satisfaction of tourists usually depends on large set of different variables such as traffic connections, infrastructure and number of available activities that are not always under direct control of the tourism operators. As Kyle et al. (2003, p. 268) claim in their article: „An examination of the relationship between leisure activity involvement and place attachment among hikers along the Appalachian trail has shown that the self expression component of activity involvement was the strongest predictor of place identity and place dependence.“.

Figure 4: Operative business scheme of the holistic garden “Bios”



Source: made by author

Figure 4 shows the operative business scheme of the Bios holistic garden. The total number of the people that will be engaged on this project, as well as the cost of human resources and equipment that will be needed to run it on sustainable basis may substantial vary since they depend on the size of the garden and the number of local partners involved. Besides the fact that is aimed toward all existing guests, this project has a potential to attract new guests year round. The regular users of this project are

people of all age. The main customer segments are those who seek a healthy diet (athletes, retirees, ...), nature lovers (biologists, botanists), hotel and camp guests, hikers, workshop participants and all other tourists who are interested in sustainable development, organic agriculture, medicinal plants, culture, history, philosophy and art. Potential partners in this project are local farmers and cooperatives in surrounding area, as well as organizers of the workshops, artists, tourist board and universities.

Figure 5: Return of investment for the project “Bios garden”

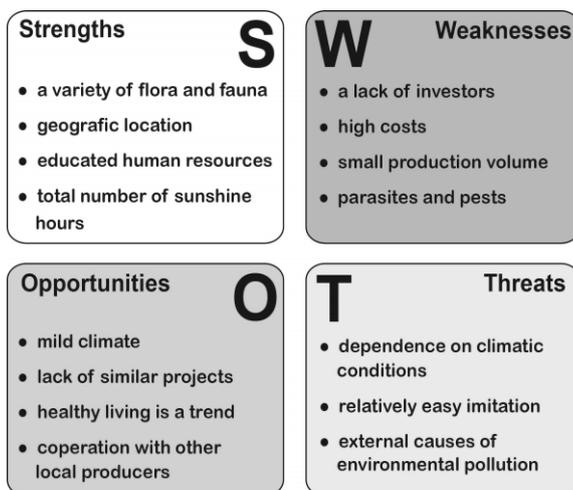
RETURN OF INVESTMENT(ROI)	
COSTS	BENEFITS
MANAGEMENT	<b>Non-financial:</b> ✓ The development of the brand - a unique product and offer; ✓ The image of the company - experts lead our workshops. ✓ Promotion of sustainable development;  <b>Financial:</b> • Increasing the number of guests out of season • Smoothie bar • Bio shop • Workshops • Sale of seedlings • Souvenirs and books • Donations - tickets
GARDENING	
Infrastructure (land, materials and objects)	
Suprastructures (plants, seedlings,..)	
Equipment (tools, moto-cultivator shovels,..)	
HUMAN RESOURCES (high season & off season)	
MARKETING	
OTHER (electricity, water, ....)	

Source: made by author

Promotion of this holistic project will be based on arrangement of the most beautiful garden in the specific destination that offers high quality herbs, fruits and vegetables and other educational services. The main challenges of this project are the compliance with the high environmental standards and the creation of the synergy with the local community. However, if the management successfully succeeds to comprehend these obstacles, this project may substantially improve the image and popularity of the whole destination. This garden represents an example of integrated sustainable development and a place where theory and practice merge into one. Additional customers and visitors can be attracted through connecting with other eco-producers in the region and through creation of a recognizable brand, which offers high quality products (such as honey, oil, spices and tea) and services.

Of course, there is one more question to be answered and that is: Can this project be economically feasible? The answer to this question as well as finding the “break even” point in this type of investment strongly depends on every specific project, its main goals, market potential of its location and the willingness of investors and locals to participate in such project. Within discussions about potential benefits, it is extremely important to comprehend all direct and indirect benefits of these projects. As the figure 5 shows, project Bios garden has a potential to substantially improve the brand and image of the whole destination. Direct financial benefits may be expected from accommodation bookings and revenues from the smoothie bar, bio shop, sales of seedlings, souvenirs and books, workshop tickets and donations that are connected with this project. Moreover, financial benefits may arise from sales of the products produced by local farmers that are connected with this project. In addition, the direct benefits can also be expected from local producers who will pay the membership fee to be part of this project. The indirect financial benefits include boosting of the guest loyalty, popularity of the brand that provides such products and services, ecological sustainability and creation of new jobs at some specific location. Such projects can generate new jobs for educators, farmers, lecturers, botanists, biologists, artists, scientists, philosophers, psychologists, craftsmen, cooks, waiters, retailers, tour guides, musicians and ecologists.

Figure 6: SWOT analysis of the project “Bios garden”



Source: made by author

Even though this type of projects can be developed even in urban areas and within closed facilities, the ideal geographic location for development of holistic garden are regions with warm and mid-warm climate, such as Mediterranean area. The figure 6 shows the SWOT analysis for the project “Bios garden” that is aimed to be implemented on the Adriatic coast and islands. The main strengths in development of this specific project on the Croatian side of Adriatic coast are a variety of flora and fauna, geographic location that is in vicinity of emitting markets, availability of the educated human resources and high number of actual visitors who are interested in new

experiences. At this stage of the project development, the main weaknesses are: the lack of investors, high costs and relatively small production volume. The main external opportunities in development of this project are: the mild climate, low competition and lack of similar projects, popularity of holistic retreats that represent the newest tourist trend (Lamothe 2017) and possibilities for collaboration with local partners. Among most important external threats is possible to include: dependence on climate conditions (cold winters), relatively easy imitation, high taxes and other external threats such as environmental pollution or forest fires.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The holistic approach in tourism implies intelligent integration of available resources in order to create synergy between visitors and tourist destinations. Strategy of active involvement of guest and visitors in holistic projects is a specific approach in tourism industry that enhances visitor loyalty and substantially increases a possibility of return visits. By creating an opportunity for active participation and collaboration between all interested parties, these projects are in position to produce many tangible and intangible benefits not only for visitors, but also for the local community and the natural environment in which they operate. This article demonstrates how to create holistic products and services on the case of the holistic garden named Bios. While selecting the right geographic location for this project, investors should focus themselves on the following parameters: availability of water at a reasonable price, availability of the arable land, quality of the transport infrastructure and mid climate with large number of sunny days per annum.

The conducted analysis suggests that tourist destinations could attain significant benefits if they create possibilities through which their guests and visitors can co-create and co-finance the gardens that will produce fruits, herbs and olive oil for them and their families. Of course, co-creation is not a free and simple. In order to achieve optimal results, the management should set the overall strategic direction and define the boundaries between what can and cannot be co-created (Terblanche 2014). Co-creation results in economic gains and strengthens the customer emotional bond to the firm, but at the same time it increases complexity and brings large set of risks if it is not organized properly (Terblanche 2014). Even though the relative share of involved visitors in the total amount of products may remain symbolic, their active participation will enhance the possibility for building of the long-term relationship between them and these destinations (Gross and Brown 2008; Bricker and Kerstetter 2000; Kyle et al. 2003).

The main limit of presented research is the lack of profound financial analysis that can be done only in relation to the specific location. Although empirical evidences of similar projects in tourism suggest that almost every type of involvement activity in tourism increases return visits and boosts loyalty (Antón, Camarero and Garrido 2016; Gross and Brown 2008) the total positive impact of this project regarding these two variables will be possible to measure only when this project will be implemented in its full scale. Given that the share of tourism in Croatian GDP in 2012 was 19.3 percent (Ćorlučka, Matošević-Radić and Geić 2013), this project has a potential to become one

of the main catalysts in development of Republic of Croatia. By creating a lot of new jobs (in tourism, agriculture and education) and by promoting sustainable cultivation of unused arable land, this project can become the key factor in revitalization of the Croatian islands and hinterland.

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